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# Matrilineality and Matriarchy in Africa: an Advancement for Gender Equality or Utopia for Western Democracies?

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# **Matrilineality and matriarchy in Africa, an advancement for gender equality or utopia for western democracies?**

## **Introduction**

According to the ranking of the majority of the African countries in the Global Gender Gap Index 2021 of the World Economic Forum<sup>1</sup>, gender parity conditions in Africa are far from acceptable. Because of the data from the Global Gender Gap Index 2021<sup>2</sup> and the international call for action in the subject of gender equality, there is a conspicuous need to find solutions that could help the achievement of this task. The conditions of women vary greatly from one country to another. Nowadays, many States are still struggling with the attainment of the ambition to eliminate gender gap. Moreover, the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic have affected the improvements obtained lately. According to the report on the progress of goal five of the sustainable development goals of the 2030 agenda: “[...] violence against women and girls has intensified; child marriage, the decline in recent years, is also expected to increase; whilst increased care work at home is affecting woman disproportionately.”<sup>3</sup> The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a resolution adopted by the United Nations Member States in 2015. The ambition is to “end poverty and other deprivations [...] improve health and education, reduce inequality and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests”<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, the status of women in several countries is unregulated by the legislation: “Discriminatory laws and legal gaps continue to prevent women from enjoying their human rights. Based on 2020 data from 95 countries and territories, more than half of them lacked quotas for women in national parliament; while 83% of the countries included budgetary commitments to implement legislation addressing violence against women, 63% continued to lack rape laws based on the principle of consent; although over 90% of countries and territories mandate nondiscrimination on basis of gender in employment, almost half of them continued to restrict women from working in certain jobs or industries; and almost a quarter of countries and territories, did not grant women equal rights with men to enter marriage and initiate divorce.”<sup>5</sup> All of these problems are proof of the urgency for a change of course on this subject matter.

For this reason, the ambition of this paper is to find some alternative societies around the world that can help in some way the achievement of the ultimate goal: gender equality. The societies chosen to help with this accomplishment are matrilineal and matriarchal societies in Africa. This script’s task is to analyse how the matriarchal or matrilineal societies develop in the continent, what are their strengths and weaknesses and what does the African political gender theory present in support for these positive aspects and in contrasting

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<sup>1</sup> World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap index 2021. Insight Report, March 2021  
[http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2021.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem

<sup>3</sup> United Nations. “Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment – United Nations Sustainable Development.” United Nations. United Nations, 2015.  
<https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5>

<sup>4</sup> United Nations. “THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development.” United Nations. 2015.  
<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations. “Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment – United Nations Sustainable Development.” United Nations. United Nations, 2015.  
<https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5>

the fallacies. The conclusive analysis will concern the theory, based on African politicians, sociologists and anthropologists' ideas, according to which matrilineality or matriarchy, could improve gender equality. To organise this analysis, the paper will be divided in three chapters. The first section will present the characteristics defining what are matrilineal and what are matriarchal societies under the African perspective. Subsequently, an analysis of the attributes of these societies will take place, mapping them throughout the continent and explaining the features of these. Thereafter, the second section will analyse how those matrilineal and matriarchal societies could help in the achievement of the targets of goal five of the SDG. In this section there will also be a description of the roles of women in these societies. The core of the chapter will be dedicated to the African Gender Theories, that are the explanations hidden behind the power of these societies in the gender equality discourse. The section will end with an analysis on Marx and Engels' theories on the origin of the State, seen as an explanation of why western, as well as other societies, have developed into patriarchal structures. Finally, the third chapter will be dedicated to the reasoning on how can matrilineal and matriarchal cultures help the cause of gender parity. This will occur through a confrontation of the ideologies behind the structure of these societies with those at the rear end of western cultures. This interpretation will be further explored taking into account other countries rather than western States, and in the end, evidence in support of the fact that gender equality is a worldwide issue will be presented.

# Chapter I – Meaning and Presence of Matrilineality and Matriarchy

## 1.1 Is Africa so far behind in Gender Equality?

Point five of the Sustainable Development Goals is entirely focused on gender equality. The ambition of achieving “gender equality and empowerment of women and girls”, which is the official title of the Goal, is thought to be attained through the following targets:

- “5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere.
- 5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation.
- 5.3 Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.
- 5.4 Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate.
- 5.5 Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.
- 5.6 Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences.
- 5.A Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws.
- 5.B Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women.
- 5.C Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.”<sup>6</sup>

All of these targets and generally the need for a gender equality Goal in the 2030 agenda, are caused by the continuous offenses made to women in patriarchal societies or in western democracies developed from past patriarchates. The realization of the Sustainable Development Goals is the target of all the United Nations Member States by 2030. Around the world, however, there still are some matrilineal or matriarchal societies following a totally different structure from the one western states are used to conceive. Those cultures with matrilineal or matriarchal frameworks, which found their social structure on the female figures of their society, are in many cases settled inside those Member States.

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<sup>6</sup> United Nations. “Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment – United Nations Sustainable Development.” United Nations. United Nations, 2015.  
<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>.

Tarikhu Farrar, in writing about the Afrocentric views of scholars addressing the issue of female power in ancient Africa, such as Clarke (1984), Van Sentirma (1984) and Williams & Finch (1984), discusses: “[...] matriarchy is the most ancient or primordial family form and [...] is older in Africa than anywhere else in the world”<sup>7</sup>. The African continent is not the most advanced continent for what concerns gender equality and women empowerment. In their 2019 report “The power of parity. Advancing women’s equality in Africa”, the McKinsey Global Institute states: “Africa has not done a good job of providing essential services such as healthcare and education. The continent has the highest average rates of maternal mortality and unmet need for family planning in the world. One key to unlocking economic opportunities for women is ensuring that they have access to finance, but that access has actually declined over the past four years. Some African countries have made some progress on getting women into influential positions in politics, but even here gender inequality remains extremely high as it is around the world.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, through the overall data provided by the McKinsey Global Institute, the percentages reporting the level of child marriage, violence against women, financial exclusion and maternal mortality are alarming<sup>9</sup>. Many women in the Continent are still exploited and mistreated, but some countries are working on the advancement of women’s situation in the workplace and in the society. One striking data in favour of this is the percentage of female representation in the political sphere. The most distinct example is the composition of the Rwandese government. Currently, 61% of the national parliament is composed by female politician<sup>10</sup>. In order to explain this Rwandese phenomenon, we have to trace back the steps of the evolution of the country after the 1994 genocide. The new leaders included a gender quota in the amended constitution. Providing women at least 30% of the political seats available, Rwanda became the country with the second highest gender quota in the world.

Women occupying important political roles are not a novelty for African countries. The continent has had a long history of matriarchs, queens, fighters and other female leaders: from the well-known Egyptian queen Nefertiti up to Yaa Asantewaa, Queen of the Ashanti Empire, that led the War of the Golden Stool against British colonialism in 1900. After the 1885 Berlin Conference, renowned for the division of the continent by European powers, a new era begun known as the colonial epoch. This period was influenced by western customs and had an impact also on the power roles women previously held in Africa. As Doreen Nakasaga Lwanga Writes in her review of the book *Women in African colonial histories* by Jean Allman, Susan Geiger and Nakanyike Musisi, “African Women were drawn unwittingly into the domination of ‘Euro-civilisation’ while at the same time often contesting its presence and the explicit content of its world view”<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Farrar, Tarikhu. "The Queenmother, Matriarchy, and the Question of Female Political Authority in Precolonial West African Monarchy." *Journal of Black Studies* 27, no. 5 (1997): pg. 580.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2784870> .

<sup>8</sup> McKinsey Global institute, *The power of parity. Advancing women’s equality in Africa*, November 2019, Pg.23  
<https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Featured%20Insights/Gender%20Equality/The%20power%20of%20parity%20Advancing%20womens%20equality%20in%20Africa/MGI-The-power-of-parity%20Advancing%20womens%20equality%20in%20Africa.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Ivi, Pg. 24

<sup>10</sup> Government, Rwanda of. “Government of Rwanda: Governance.” Republic of Rwanda, 2018.  
<https://www.gov.rw/highlights/governance>.

<sup>11</sup> Doreen Nakasaga Lwanga. "Women in African Colonial Histories." *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 58 (2003): 118.

A noticeable example of the contestation mentioned by Doreen Nakasaga Lwanga can be seen in the rebellion of Yaa Asantewaa, military leader previously cited.

Even though women fought for independence and freedom, the evolution of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the many different stages African countries have encountered during this colonial period has had downsizing effects on the political role of female leaders. Nowadays, as previously seen, African countries are thought to be some of the least advanced countries in the world in the gender equality field. Nevertheless, it is important to underline that there still are many countries in which the highest powers are performed by female leaders. As an example, we can mention Sagle-Work Zewde, first female Ethiopian president, or Victoire Tomegah Dogbé, Togo's Prime Minister since 2020. In addition, there are some societies in the continent that do not have female rulers in the sense we are used to intend them. In Africa there still are some cultures pursuing a matriarchal or a matrilineal structure, and each of these follow different systems and rules.

## 1.2 What are matrilineal and matriarchal societies

Before presenting the actual societies, it is important to define the difference between matriarchal and matrilineal societies. In order to understand the first concept, western ideology must be overthrown. From Henry Maine's patriarchal theory, European philosophical and political thought were driven by this paradigm. In the introduction to his work "Ancient Law" Henry Maine states: "This evidence establishes that view of the race which is known as the patriarchal theory. This theory is based on the scriptural history of the Hebrew patriarchs. All known societies were originally organized on this model. The eldest male parent is absolutely supreme in his household. His domination extends to life and death, and is as unqualified over his children as over his slaves."<sup>12</sup> His theory however cannot be applied globally. African systems, which were not conceived as state systems, were cut out from the process according to which Maine's theory became a worldwide explanation of patriarchy. In opposition to these ideals, Ifi Amadiume, in a chapter of the book "African Gender Studies", outlines famous Senegalese historian and anthropologist Cheikh Anta Diop's theory. In fact, "he traced the origin of patriarchy to nomadic proto Indo-Europeans (the Krugans) [...]. Diop attributed to them all inequities of a violent sociocultural formation, namely nomadism, patriarchy [...]. It was the nomads who, in 3400 BC, invaded and wiped out the ancient European civilization [...]."<sup>13</sup> In 1989 Diop theorised four histories of gender and lineage, according to the regions of the world. Africa was seen as agricultural matriarchal south, Europe as the nomadic patriarchal north, the Mediterranean basin as the place where patriarchy succeeded matriarchy and West Asia as a zone of confluence.

If we intend matriarchy as the exact opposition of patriarchy which is "a society in which the oldest male is the leader of the family or a society controlled by men in which they use their power to their own

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<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4548104>.

<sup>12</sup> Powell, J. W. "The Patriarchal Theory." *Science* 5, no. 116 (1885): 345-46.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1761318>.

<sup>13</sup> Oyèrónké Oyèwùmi et al., *African Gender Studies. A reader*, (New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2005), Pg. 85

advantage”<sup>14</sup>, there probably wouldn’t be any historical example of such society. African Matriarchy has to be understood under a non-western perspective. Diop argued that “in precolonial Africa there was no transition from matriarchy to patriarchy, since the social structure was essentially matriarchal in the sense of female rule, female transmission of property and descent, and man being the mobile element in marriage or sexual union.”<sup>15</sup> He refers to precolonial Africa, and since then some societies have made this transition to patriarchy, especially influenced by the colonial era. Nonetheless, some other cultures kept their matriarchal structure. The Nigerian anthropologist Ifi Amadiume has written many essays and books on the definition of matriarchy under an African understanding. She disproves Diop’s definition of matriarchy, accusing him of being incomplete. Linda Hogan, in her review of Ifi Amadiume’s work “Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture” writes: “She argues for a deeper matriarchal structure, located in *mpuke* (the female mother-focused matricentric unit) and its ideology of *umunne* (the spirit of common motherhood). This she claims is a female generated cultural construct that demolishes the generalised theory that man is culture and that woman is nature.”<sup>16</sup> Her definition of matriarchy is further explored in her chapter of the book “African Gender Studies”. She separates the *Mpuke* societies from the *Obi* organization in order to describe the characteristics and then she focuses on a third concept: *Nmadu*. *Mpuke* are mother-focused units and their economy is generally driven by agricultural products and horticulture. These cultures tend to have common ideologies: moral force as opposed to jural force of the *Obi* society, collectivism and ideals of compassion, love and peace<sup>17</sup>. The definition of the expression *Obi* is “ancestral or family house which is male”<sup>18</sup>. The third system, *Nmadu* is defined as “the nongendered collective humanity, [...] which again is based on non-discriminatory matriarchal collectivism, as unifying moral code and culture generating affective relationships as opposed to the political culture of patriarchy, imperialism and violence”.<sup>19</sup> These terms were applied by the anthropologist to the *Igbo* rural village of *Nnobi*. The conclusion of her case study was a dual- sex political system where titled women represented the goddesses worshipped by the entire population, and held veto rights in village assemblies. Thus, the *Nnobi* village had *Nmadu* structure. From these definitions, it is clear that matriarchy in the African ideology and history is a complex notion and has many different shades which are hard to grasp holding a western-centred viewpoint.

From Amadiume’s rationale, we can derive the second definition needed, matrilineality. These are societies where kinship and lineage depend on the mothers rather than on the fathers. In matrilineal societies, the descent is traced through the mother’s side of the family<sup>20</sup>. It is of utmost relevance to emphasize this

<sup>14</sup> Cambridge, Dictionary, Patriarchy.

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/patriarchy>.

<sup>15</sup> Oyèrónké Oyèwùmi et al., African Gender Studies. A reader, (New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2005), Pg. 85

<sup>16</sup> Hogan, Linda. Journal of Religion in Africa 30, no. 4 (2000): 492. doi:10.2307/1581587.

<sup>17</sup> Oyèrónké Oyèwùmi et al., African Gender Studies. A reader, (New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2005), Pg. 94

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem

<sup>19</sup> Ivi, Pg. 95

<sup>20</sup> Oxford Reference, Matrilineal.

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100140319>



difference, because matrilineal societies are not necessarily matriarchal ones too, male figures can hold the primary power positions, but women's kinship is the key of the lineage.

### 1.3 Queenmothers, an example of Matriarchs

Even though apparently the definition of matrilineality does not seem to concern power in any way, some of these African societies, which are defined and thought to be kingdoms, are instead "queendoms", where the truly important decisions are taken by the figure of the "*Queenmother*" which will shortly be explained. This happens because in some matrilineal societies, even though the regent is officially a male king or general ruler, it is through the mothers' lineages that the inheritance of the royal offices will happen. The mothers can have powers to preside over the decision-making process and in some cases, they can even benefit from veto powers. Lastly, an explanation on who a "*Queenmother*" is and why can she be considered the effective ruler in some "kingdoms" is required. As the term "*Queen-Mother*" suggests, this figure is represented by the mother, or in some cases by the sister, of the official king or ruler. The role of this latter in many societies however, is just representative, and in practice, he holds no reserved authority in the decision-making process. In pre-colonial epoch, societies having the figure of a Queenmother were abundant in the African continent. Yoruba tradition, between Nigeria and Benin, The Kingdom of Kush in Sudan, the Krobo population and the Fon people of Dahomey are just a few traditional societies having Queenmothers as rulers.

Nowadays, cultures who still rely on the figure of the *Queenmother* are not numerous. In this regard, the first to mention are the *Akan* ethnolinguistic groups, mainly living in Ghana and Ivory Coast. In the past all followed a matrilineal structure, but after the colonial era, many groups have made a transition to a patriarchal structure. All of these groups speak the Akan languages, which include dialects from different regions such as Akyem, Anyi, Ashanti, Attié, Baule, Brong, Chakosi, Fanti and Guag<sup>21</sup>. Of all these ethnolinguistic groups, mostly the Ashanti people have maintained the matrilineal original structure. Some others are now following the Ashanti example. Professor Wilhelmina Josephine Donkoh, teacher of History at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology and PhD at the University of Birmingham, held a speech at the second world congress on Matriarchal Studies, at the Texas State University in 2005. There she presented the characteristics of the Ashanti people<sup>22</sup>. Firstly, she explains that Ashanti follow a matrilineal structure, but it is not enough to address to these societies as matriarchal ones. They are not matriarchies in a strict sense, insofar as male Ashanti can occupy the highest power office. Nonetheless, being a woman in Ashanti, and still in other Akan societies, implies having greater responsibilities than their male co-habitants. They are in fact expected to "ensure the perpetuation of their lineage and identify who qualifies to be a member"<sup>23</sup>, and are treated with great respect and concern. In this regard, they are granted the decision

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<sup>21</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Akan." Encyclopedia Britannica, October 6, 2010. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Akan>.

<sup>22</sup> Wilhelmina Josephine Donkoh, Second World Congress on Matriarchal Studies, Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas, sept. 29 - Oct. 2, 2005.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cP5IMkGxRdE>

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem

power of when to reproduce without the need for a marriage. “Once puberty rights have been performed for her to acknowledge her maturity, then she has every right to go out and have children”<sup>24</sup>. Secondly, professor Donkoh underlines the important religious function of female figures. Akan people are extremely religious, and the origins of their lineage is thought to come from a Goddess, mother of all. The functions in Ashanti societies are performed by female mothers, and through this role, they are also considered to be the healers of the body and of the soul. Furthermore, the most striking example of why the Akan societies can be considered to be more female centred concerns ownership of property. “Ashanti woman have the power to control resources such as nourishment, both for the husband and other members of her family” states professor Donkoh in her presentation<sup>25</sup>, while the fathers must provide the meat for the mother and the rest of the family.

As mentioned earlier, Ashanti leaders can be both women and men. The female leaders can have different roles depending on their sphere of competence. Queen mothers are generally considered to be the mothers of the whole society, and as such they have many responsibilities and powers. Heide Göttner-Abendroth, in her book *Matriarchal Studies*, presents a clear picture of these functions: “An Akan realm could not be established without a queen mother, or ‘*Ohemma*’; but this could be done in the absence of a King, or ‘*Ohene*’. [...] In times of crises – for example, if the king were still a minor, or was absent, or the collapse of a realm forced an immediate exodus – the queen mother ruled alone”<sup>26</sup>. This quote helps us to understand that in the past, Akan societies could have been governed through co-regency, with the queen ruling the world of women, and the King having power over men. Nowadays, the figure of the “*Ohene*” is not essential for the existence of a functioning society, but the queen mother is still responsible for the placement of the male leader of the community and in some cases, she even has the competency to unseat him. This power comes from her maternal figure, and just like a mother does with her family, she is supposed to make the best possible decision. In public, it is the male leader who has the role of speaker; however, the decisions are taken by the council, chaired by the female leader. Professor Donkoh defines her as “the power behind the scenes”<sup>27</sup>. Ashanti societies, are a clear example of a group where women have a predominant role inside the society’s system even though they do not represent the official rulers. Typically, Queenmothers do not hold the highest political offices in their societies. The usually is a king who has the duty of representing the community. This king however is chosen by the mother herself, and she has the right to place whoever she sees suitable for the job. Moreover, the king has no power in the decision-making process. The Queenmother has to preside over the council and has the final word. As a matter of fact, the role of the king is more superficial than that of the Queen, who holds power over the nourishment for all the community and over the decisions.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibidem

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem

<sup>26</sup> Göttner-Abendroth, H. (2012). *Matriarchal Societies: Studies on Indigenous Cultures Across the Globe*. [eBook] Peter Lang, pp. 398.

<https://www.perlego.com/book/1991240/>

<sup>27</sup> Wilhelmina Josephine Donkoh, Second World Congress on Matriarchal Studies, Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas, sept. 29 - Oct. 2, 2005.

## 1.4 Matrilineal and Matriarchal societies around the continent

The following example of peoples following matrilineal structures are the Bantu populations. They go way back in time, up to the early Neolithic era, around 3200 B. C. E. Over time, these populations have moved around the continent and up to date, they have divided into western central Bantu, eastern central Bantu, southwestern Bantu and south-eastern Bantu. Only the eastern central Bantu people have kept the original matrilineal structure. The latter now inhabit an immense region, which includes some parts of the following countries: The Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Zambia and Malawi. Each one of these countries has some small matriarchal societies inhabiting various parts of their territory, but most of these are still unresearched. As far as the Democratic Republic of Congo is concerned, the matrilineal societies located inside it are named Yombe, Songo and Congo. In Angola Ondonga, Okavango and Mubunda are present. In Zambia we find Bemba, Luapula, Bisa, Lamba, Lele, Kaonde, Ila, Tonga and others. And finally, Malawi is populated by Nyanja, Yao and Cewa. The following is a map from Heide Göttner-Abendroth's book "Matriarchal Studies" which shows the displacement of these societies around the continent's region<sup>28</sup>.



Figure 1.1. Map indicating Matrilineal and Matriarchal Bantu peoples in Central Africa

Of all these Bantu societies, hardly any have captured the attention of anthropologists, but the most studied are the Bemba and the Luapula peoples of Zambia.

The Bemba society gives particular importance to the relationship between mothers and their daughters. Since their formation centuries ago, the Bemba peoples have been mainly focused on agriculture. Essentially, their development has brought to a hunters and gatherers society. However, the territories they inhabit are not the best for hunting, and their main source of nourishment is through agriculture. Bemba women are in charge of horticulture; thus, they provide food for their family. As mentioned for the Akan peoples, families in societies following matrilineality tend to be extremely big, they could be imagined as small clans. The size of the particular family in Bemba tradition depends on the mother's gardening ability and the size of her stores. Female parents of these families, have to provide food for the rest of the clan, and because of this fundamental role, they guide the relationships in the whole society. Bemba mothers have to pass their

<sup>28</sup> Göttner-Abendroth, H. (2012). *Matriarchal Societies: Studies on Indigenous Cultures Across the Globe*. [eBook] Peter Lang, pp. 368.

<https://www.perlego.com/book/1991240/>

knowledge to their daughters, which then will have to marry and continue the legacy. Agriculture in Bemba societies is made in a very peculiar way. In order to keep the soil as fertile as possible, they move their crops every five years, and this requires the displacement of the whole village, through a method known as slash-and-burn agriculture. A Bemba woman, once she has had a satisfying number of daughters and has educated them to continue the agricultural needs, can leave the village and start her own one someplace else. One important event that denotes how matrilineality impacts on these societies is in the event a daughter is about to marry. For starters, the mother has to give the ultimate consent in order for the marriage to even take place. Secondly, for the first years of marriage, the wife cooks food to send to the husband's hut. The husband, which must leave his family to join the wife's one, will have to stay in the new clan and work for his new household. In return, they will provide food and a shelter for him. After several years of training, the wife will finally receive her own garden and she can move with her husband. The decision on where to live starts when the couple has a child. Many weddings fail because of this discussion, but seeing a daughter leave her family to join her husband's is an uncommon event. Having many daughters is a very important goal for Bemba families: the mother would therefore have many students to which she could teach her gardening abilities, while the father would enjoy many sons-in-law that could work for him. Furthermore, it is important to state the fact that all Bantu societies do not have a chief in the western sense. These cultures are based on the respect for ancestors and the older figures. All women are seen as daughters of mother nature, and as such, once they pass away, they are thought to reincarnate in new-borns. Their memory however stays an important part of the family since the ancestors are worshipped and respected. In Bemba societies, but as a matter of fact in every African matriarchal society, [works this way.] the female body is given a great amount of care and importance. For starters, clitoridectomy is never performed on women from matriarchal or matrilineal cultures. This is the procedure of female genitalia mutilation, which on the other hand, is quite frequent in African patriarchal societies. Secondly, in the traditional art, female symbolism is very present, regardless if the artwork is a religious piece or simply a painting in the house. For Bemba population, art is frequently used in religious rituals and generally is a way to represent the ancestors of the clan. Houses in Bemba tradition are the embodiment of the woman herself. At the threshold and near the marriage bed, figures representing women are a good omen for fertility and warmth. These are the characteristics that are considered fundamental for a Bemba family.

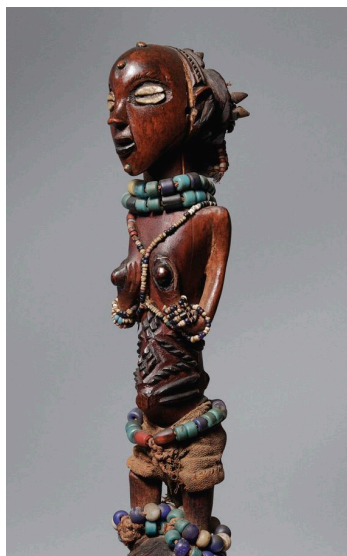


Figure 1.2. Typical female figure to be found in the houses' threshold as symbol of fertility and warmth.

All of these attributes, that are founding principles of the Bemba culture, are to be considered those of a matriarchal society. This structure does not coincide with the western conception of a matriarchy, since women do not occupy exclusively a high political office. However, in African indigenous societies, the concept of political office is very different, often irrelevant. Bemba society, relying on Ifi Amadiume's previously mentioned definition, is undeniably matriarchal, since women take active part in the society, as food providers and legacy holders.

The Luapula population, as the Bemba and all of the eastern central Bantu societies, follow a matrilineal structure. There are however some substantial differences from the society previously described, the main one being that these societies have a differentiated social organization for men and women. The latter have total control over the crops they produce and over the land they own, while men control their own economy, mainly composed by what they fish in the lake or the river of the valley. The economies of the genders interact through trade, but there is no sharing of goods. Women organise the female part of the society, while men control men.

Moving north east, from Zambia to Kenya, we can find another matriarchal society, following stricter rules than the previously cited. The Umoja village was established by 15 women, escaping from sexual violence, in the Samburu County as an only female community in 1990. This society has the only scope of protecting women from abusive marriages, female genitalia mutilation, rapes and other forms of maltreatments. The Samburu region is known for its strong patriarchal structure, where women are used merely for their reproductive function, even at very young ages. In an interview for "Womana", Rebecca Lolosoli, one of the founders of the Umoja village explains how [do] they manage to survive<sup>29</sup>: women make enough money crafting jewellery and through tourism to finance an education system for children and to generally improve each woman's life conditions. They also receive food and medical and financial aid from non-governmental organisations and some international organisations which strongly support their cause.

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<sup>29</sup> Womana, Umoja: A safe haven for women where men aren't allowed, February, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FLG9aLd0IX8>

The main focus of this society is education. The community is composed momentarily of only 48 women, and thanks to this small number, they can manage to focus their resources on the development of younger generations. They firmly believe that through education, of both young girls and boys, a greater consciousness can prevail and gender equality could effectively be achieved.

In the Bijagos Archipelago, right in front of Guinea-Bissau, several islands follow matriarchal structures. Many islands have both a Queen and a King, which are not necessarily married, and both of them rule as they do in the Luapula society. The households however, are managed by women. They can decide to end their marriages at any time and have the freedom of choosing a suitable husband once they reach puberty. This decision is made through a specific ritual: young men must present themselves with the biggest quantity of goods they can afford and hope to be the best pretender possible. Usually, men stay in the household for as long as it takes to the woman to bear a child, but if this does not happen within one year, she has every right to choose another partner.

Matrilineality is a common practice among African societies. All of the previously mentioned have left their social construction unchanged and thus have kept the bond between the kinship and the mothers of the society. The Tuareg people in northern Africa follow a similar structure. Many European writers who have studied Tuareg culture, remained impressed by how advanced the society was in terms of women empowerment. As a matter of fact, Tuareg have a very complex system, which is matrilineal in some areas and patrilineal in some others. Firstly, it is important to mention that Tuareg women, even though the society is strongly Arab, “took part in the discussions of men and, unlike their Arab counterparts, were neither veiled nor secluded”<sup>30</sup>. This quote comes from René Gardi, a Swiss writer who has travelled with the Kel Ahaggar, a Tuareg confederation, in the 1950s. In those years, no country, not even western democracies, raised awareness on themes such as gender equality. For this reason, René Gardi and the authors that followed were impressed by the Tuareg’s progresses. During his period among the society, René Gardi noted that Tuareg women “had a lot to say in the affairs of the tribe. [...] They owned slaves and livestock in their own right; the camp was their domain and they were responsible for most of its affairs – the management of the goat herds, the preparation of food, the education of children, and many other aspects of its organisation”<sup>31</sup>. In all matrilineal societies, as the name suggests, inheritance is made through the maternal line. Tuaregs can indeed be defined as such, nevertheless, they follow some slightly different rules. The descent group, or *tawsit* in the original *Tamahaq* language of the Kel Ahaggar confederation, depends on the equivalent of the idea of “social class” of western societies. The more “noble” class inherits descent from matrilineal lineage, while the vassals, or *Kel Ull*, follow patrilineality. This is still true for what concerns the Kel Ahaggar confederation, but in many other organisations, the social distinction has no longer any impact on the political sphere. The lands and the goods they provide are conferred through the mother’s kinship, even though the Tuaregs are not mainly

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<sup>30</sup> (2003) The end of the Matriline? The changing roles of women and descent amongst the Algerian Tuareg, *The Journal of North African Studies*, 8:3-4, 121,  
DOI: 10.1080/13629380308718519

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*

agricultural people because of the desert lands they inhabit, and because of their nomadic lifestyle. In recent times though they are shifting to a more sedentary lifestyle. Some other aspects of the Tuareg lifestyle, such as the inheritance of other goods rather than land and the idea of residency after marriage, are based on patrilineal premises. In the Tuareg tradition, newly wedded wives stayed in their home camp and received visits from their husbands for the first months, or in some cases even years. After this first period, during which the recently espoused couple also have their first children, the whole family moves to the father's camp. This transfer is what in the Tuareg tradition is known as residency, which, as seen, follows the father's lineage. In earlier times, after the Algerian independence of 1962, Tuareg populations have faced numerous changes. Various wars begun since then, most of them begun during the 1980s and most of them ended during the 1990s or the early 2000s. These bore down on the previous social construction, and the preceding matrilineal society is now moving towards a more typical Islamic system.

### **1.5 Are these societies truly matriarchies?**

All the societies analysed up to this point have been labelled as matrilineal in the sense that inheritance follows the maternal axis and kinship. Ifi Amadiume, in her chapter in the book "African Gender Studies", tries to theorize matriarchy under an African point of view, thus interpreting the words she uses with a non-European mentality. She states "the main problem in these theories of kinship is the construction of woman as an object to be moved or owned."<sup>32</sup> Here she refers to Levi-Strauss' alliance theory, "which saw woman as an exchangeable and stealable object"<sup>33</sup>. The focus of her discourse is on the idea that the alliance theory formulates a process. According to this, from the idea that women are an exchangeable good, a more complex marriage system took place. She presents J. M. McLennan's study on "wide-ranging primitive people and Indian polyandry" and from his theory she states: "With the practice of polyandry, society was getting close to the recognition of fatherhood. Then finally with levirate, fatherhood became recognized, since this implied ownership. There then followed the development of economic property and rules of inheritance and, therefore, agnation"<sup>34</sup>. According to Ifi Amadiume this process brought to the end of the family, while McLennan's original objective was to defend the Patriarchal Theory's viewpoint. Her aim is to overthrow the idea behind the alliance theory, because it appears too western-centric. She states: "If kinship is determined through the one constant and certain person – the mother – and if we remove the concept of collectivism and usufruct access to land, we are back to the basic matriarchal tripartite structure or what I might call the matriarchal triangle consisting of mother daughter and son. These kinship terms should be seen as classifications in a grouped collective sense and not in the European individualistic sense."<sup>35</sup>

This explanation on how to intend kinship and inheritance, slightly shifts the focal point in the previous analysis of the matrilineal societies. The idea is not to give women importance because in those societies they

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<sup>32</sup> Oyèrónké Oyèwùmi et al., *African Gender Studies. A reader*, (New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2005), Pg. 87

<sup>33</sup> Ivi, Pg. 86

<sup>34</sup> Ivi, Pg. 87

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*

can pass their goods to the kinship per se. Their power lies behind the tripartite sharing system that the idea of matrilineality carries inherently. In many of the cultures previously mentioned, the mother chooses the male king or ruler, presides over the decision-making process with him, and teaches her daughters the abilities to provide food and create new households. In this picture, what Ifi Amadiume refers to as the “tripartite structure or [...] matriarchal triangle consisting of mother daughter and son”, is indisputable.



## Chapter II – Role of women and gender theories, the keys to unlock the issue

### 2.1 Matriarchies as an answer to the 2030 agenda

As seen, many African societies still follow matrilineal structures. Despite the differences due to the basis of the economies, the social structures of these societies are akin. Great importance is given to the mother which plays the role of the head of the family and of the provider of sources and goods. In western social conception there is an evident separation between family and economy. Historically Northern American and European cultures are used to think of the mother as the family caretaker, while the father provides food, income and is also believed to be the head of the household as direct consequence of his jobholder role. It is true that in modern days this distinction is progressively blurring. However, as seen in goal five of the previously mentioned 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>36</sup>, this discrepancy still needs to be eradicated completely. In order to present the positive and negative features of matrilineal and matriarchal societies it is convenient to compare their social structures with the targets mentioned in the fifth sustainable development goal. In cultures such as the Ashanti or the Bemba, women provide nourishment for the whole family, are responsible for the perpetuation of their lineage and have a big influence on the political sphere. Women therefore maintain a privileged position and discrimination would not be supported by any means as it would be counterproductive for their societies.

Secondly, violence and trafficking are a unique characteristic of patriarchal societies. In no matriarchal society can we find practices such as female genitalia mutilation, or women sold in markets. These procedures are mainly carried out in African countries which have strong patriarchal political and social structures. Task 5.4. of the Agenda<sup>37</sup> refers to inherent features of matrilineal and matriarchal cultures. Most of their social structure is based around the family system, and great importance is given to the household. The mothers represent the highest authorities because of their domestic duties and of the responsibilities they hold towards their household. Families in the African culture are different than the ones western societies are used to conceive. For starters, many communities are not entirely monogamous. Many of them practice polygamy in both forms: polygyny and polyandry. Secondly, as seen in the previous chapter, in matrilineal societies the family is not composed by two parents and their children, but of the parents and their married daughters with their partners and children. Because of this, every household needs a lot of work and maintenance under female management, and therefore women are the most important figures in the social structure of the community.

For what concerns the last two tasks of goal five of the 2030 Agenda<sup>38</sup>, matrilineal societies are not seen as an appropriate solution. For what concerns health rights for women, the situation in the African continent is tragic. As seen in the 2021 Global gender gap Index<sup>39</sup>, it is the continent with the highest mortality

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<sup>36</sup> United Nations. "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment – United Nations Sustainable Development." United Nations. United Nations, 2015.

<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem

<sup>39</sup> World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap index 2021. Insight Report, March 2021

rate during birth and in many countries female genitalia mutilation is frequently practised. As far as matrilineal and matriarchal societies are concerned, many of the procedures that are frequent in the continent are not exercised. However, the data available on the spread of the different diseases is often not distinguished from the general statistics of the country. For this reason, it is hard to verify how matrilineal societies can help the achievement of target 5.6.

The task 5.5<sup>40</sup>, concerning leadership, is also a controversial aspect in matriarchal societies. The idea behind leadership in the political and economic life is different in African cultures than the one in the western conception. The administration of the economy is already achieved, since women control the agriculture of the community, and political life is frequently separated between men and women. In order for matrilineal societies to be useful in the achievement of this target, a radical shift in the whole western perception of how politics and economics should work inside a society is required.

## 2.2 Importance of women in African matrilineal and matriarchal societies

Matrilineal and matriarchal societies have many common features and could be the key to some aspects of gender equality. On this subject, there are some features of these cultures that unquestionably are sign of women empowerment and leading towards gender equality. Primarily, the role women have in the agriculture of the societies, which often is the main food source and sometimes it is even the main economic wealth. In matrilineal societies, women are in charge of the lands used to cultivate. In a research published on “The Thrive” discussion of the CGIAR research program on Water, Land and Ecosystems, Barbara Van Koppen et al. analysed that “152 irrigated plots and irrigation practices in Nyandira and Tchenzema”<sup>41</sup>. There, they found that the collaboration between women is a fundamental aspect in the management of the production. “In trying to disentangle intra-household access to and control over land; labour and decision-making about cultivation; and decision-making about the use of the produce, local community members tell us again and again that ‘after marriage we are one’ so the answers lie in looking at ‘joint’ responsibilities.”<sup>42</sup> Moreover, they also found out important aspects on the inheritance of the land: “Daughters inherit plots from their mothers’ clan and stay at their parents’ place at marriage. Sons move to their new wives’ clans and cultivate their in-laws’ land. This matrilineal culture provides married, single and divorced women and widows with guaranteed access to plots. But this culture also works for men. Sons also inherit land in their mother’s clans albeit typically smaller portions than what their sisters inherit. In addition, men have access to the land of their wives’ clans as long as they are married.”<sup>43</sup> Through this finding, we can see how the mothers’ role is important not only as food

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[http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2021.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf)

<sup>40</sup> United Nations. “Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment – United Nations Sustainable Development.” United Nations. United Nations, 2015.

<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>.

<sup>41</sup> Van Koppen, Barbara, Helena Mkoba, and Katrien van Krieken. “Land Rights and Productivity in Matrilineal Societies.” Water, Land and Ecosystems, May 10, 2016.

<https://wle.cgiar.org/thrive/big-questions/what-would-it-take-strengthen-womens-land-rights/land-rights-and-productivity>.

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem

providers, but also in the economic sphere of the community. The daughters for a short period of time after their marriage, stay at home and learn all the duties and the talents the mother has to teach. The older women are, the greater importance they have in the society.

Secondly, women in matrilineal and matriarchal cultures have also important roles in the political sphere of their community. It is often argued that women in matrilineal societies do not hold any form of power. Richards in 1950 coined the concept of matrilineal puzzle, according to which these societies follow descent through female line, but are controlled by men. If this were the case, the difference with patrilineal cultures would be a shift of who is controlled by the father of the household, either the wife and children or the sisters and the nephews. Some others have held the opposite position, according to which matrilineality empowered women giving them direct access to influential roles. The truth lies in the middle of these two poles. In an article by Amanda Lea Robinson and Jessica Gottlieb published in the *British Journal of Political Science*, they analyse how matrilineality can help women to participate more in the political sphere. To do so, they inspect such cultures located in Africa. With their research on political behaviours of women and men in matrilineal groups compared to patrilineal ones, they state: “We find evidence that matrilineality is indeed associated with substantially better gender equality: the gender gaps in political engagement, political participation and civic participation are significantly smaller in matrilineal compared to patrilineal groups.”<sup>44</sup> Women have direct access and possess agricultural and other useful resources, and for this reason, they are less dependent on their husbands. On the contrary, these latter often have to rely on their spouses for support. Their power is not only given by their possessions, but also from their position in the household. Many matrilineal societies follow a complex structure when it comes to newly wedded couples. The pattern they pursue is based on the concept of uxorilocal marriages, also known as matrilocality. In this system, the groom locates in his wife’s parents’ household, or in the case of African societies, in the wife’s parents’ village. The sons, on the other hand, are bound to leave their household to join his wife’s once maturity is reached. For this reason, if a marriage fails – practice not uncommon in matrilineal societies – it is the woman who stays in the household, while the former husband must leave everything behind.

Amanda Lea Robinson and Jessica Gottlieb, to explain more in depth why they have come to the previously cited conclusion, have analysed data across nations through statistical inquiry using a hybrid of two different instruments of measurement. From this cross-national data, they managed to find evidence that “matrilineality is systematically related to women participating in public life at rates more equivalent to their male counterparts than women in patrilineal groups.”<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, for this finding to be generalised into the idea that matrilineality could be a means for an advancement in gender equality, some further elements have to be taken into consideration. In matrilineal societies, as repeatedly mentioned, women have control over resources. The reduction of gender inequality has to occur through the correct distribution of those resources

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<sup>44</sup> Robinson, Amanda Lea, and Jessica Gottlieb. 2021. “How to Close the Gender Gap in Political Participation: Lessons from Matrilineal Societies in Africa.” *British Journal of Political Science* 51 (1). Cambridge University Press: 69  
doi:10.1017/S0007123418000650.

<sup>45</sup> Ivi, pg. 76

held by women in these communities and be generalised as possible in each matrilineal society. Amanda Lea Robinson and Jessica Gottlieb formulate some hypotheses that could make the assumption possible. The first one is: “If matrilineality is working through its conferral of resources (land) on women, then women with land should participate in politics more than those without land, irrespective of whether they inherit it through the matriline or acquire it through other means.”<sup>46</sup> Secondly, they formulate: “If matrilineality is working through its more equal conferral of education across genders, then we should observe a smaller gender gap in education among daughters and sons in matrilineal families relative to patrilineal families.”<sup>47</sup> As far as this second hypothesis is concerned, a further explanation is needed. Education is a powerful tool that can be used to affect the behaviours a whole population in a society. The growth of young girls and boys is heavily influenced by the notions and experiences made through the educational process. The third and final assumption is made after some further explanations. If women own land and the whole household is centred in her family unit, they will have authority in the local decision-making process. Even in the event that these factors do not induce directly to an increase activity in the public sphere, their intervention inside their own household will still have influences in the society. Moreover, the fact that inheritance occurs through the mother’s lineage, affects the expectations of the society on female children’s present and future behaviour. For this reason, other families can adjust their behaviours and their relations with one another accordingly. According to these premises, the authors formulated a third hypothesis: “If matrilineality is working through its conferral of more gender-equal norms, then we should observe more progressive gender norms in localities where a higher proportion of people is practicing matrilineality, and that women participate at higher rates in such communities, even if they do not personally follow matrilineal customs.”<sup>48</sup> All these assumptions have been tested through a study of matrilineal societies in Malawi, the African country having the highest rate of these latter in the whole continent. Malawi has been studied by numerous European anthropologists and sociologists, which even in early times, were struck by the role of women in the societies. In particular, Malawi is composed by six matrilineal major ethnic groups, namely the Chewa, Lomwe, Mang’anja, Sena, Toga and Yao, and two patrilineal, the Ngoni and Tumbuka. Henry Rowley in his report from a mission in Central Africa in 1867, reported his “struck with the regard which the men had for the women, whose position seemed to be in no way inferior to that of men [...]”<sup>49</sup>. Through their statistical analysis of these ethnic groups, Amanda Lea Robinson and Jessica Gottlieb found out that “both men and women express much more progressive gender attitudes when a woman in the household has inherited land matrilineally and when they reside with the wife’s kin”<sup>50</sup>. In the following figure, they show the effects of both residence and land on the advancement of gender norms.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibidem

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem

<sup>48</sup> Ivi, Pg. 78

<sup>49</sup> Rowley H (1867) *Twenty Years in Central Africa: Being the Story of the Universities’ Mission to Central Africa*. London, UK: Wells Gardner, Darton, and Company.

<sup>50</sup> Robinson, Amanda Lea, and Jessica Gottlieb. 2021. “How to Close the Gender Gap in Political Participation: Lessons from Matrilineal Societies in Africa.” *British Journal of Political Science* 51 (1). Cambridge University Press: 81  
doi:10.1017/S0007123418000650.

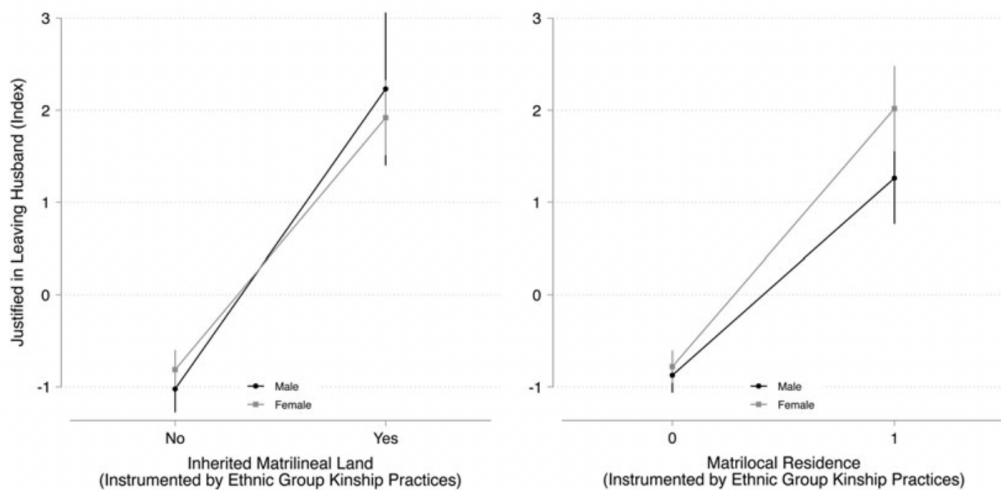


Figure 2.1. Matrilineal practices and gender norms by gender

Inheritance of land has a correlation with the reduction of gender norms, but it does not seem to affect directly political participation. Moreover, their evidence in relation to the second hypothesis, proves the same outcome. In fact, there is no increasing investment in the daughter’s education since their main concern is the inheritance of land, while young boys receive education for their subsistence. On the other hand, data concerning the third hypothesis – namely “[...] the expectation that, if matrilineality increases women’s political participation by conferring more gender equal norms, we should observe more progressive gender norms in localities where a higher proportion of people are practicing matrilineality, and that these positive effects of a high concentration of matrilineality should extend even to those who do not practice matrilineal kinship themselves”<sup>51</sup>, show a positive correlation. The various land inherited through the mother’s lineage has an evident closing effect on the gender gap, even though it does not affect the individuals directly, as seen in the outcome of the test on the previous hypotheses.

This test has shown how matrilineality has a positive effect on the reduction of gender inequality. The important aspect to mention is the role of men in these societies. Matrilineality, as well as matriarchy, does not have an inverse impact on the importance of women and male in the society. In African matrilineal cultures, men often hold the high political offices and are also important figures inside the household. Fathers are in charge of the workforce which is composed by their sons-in-law, the husbands of their daughters. While the ladies of the family are busy learning the agricultural techniques and how to manage a family from their mothers, fathers can rely on the workforce of his sons-in-law to carry on other tasks. In these communities, there is a clear division in labour force and in management in general between genders. This puts female and male heads of the household on the same level of authority, and even though male figures tend to have more power in the political sphere, inheritance stays an important feature in the social structure which matches the importance of the men’s counter position of prestige.

<sup>51</sup> Ivi, pg. 83

The importance of women in African matriarchal and matrilineal societies is visible also in their role in the religious sphere. Some practical examples can be found in the Bemba and the Akan communities, which have been previously analysed. In Bemba religion, great importance is given to the ancestors of the family. The first Grandmother who founded the family, or the lineage, is the first to be venerated with her brother simultaneously. Every birth is thought to be a reincarnation of an ancestor, and coincidence is not contemplated in this culture, everything happens thanks to the magic of the ancient family members. Also in this case, gender equality seems to be in place, since women are in charge of the rituals for the female forbears and men administer rituals for male ancestors. Usually, these ceremonies are performed by the eldest women and by her brothers. The most important feature in Bemba religion is the fertility of young women. Every year in Bemba villages the “*Chisungu*” ritual is performed, namely a ritual for young girls entering adulthood. Female fertility is the reason for this festival, and dances, music and banquets are held. Heide Göttner-Abendroth, in the book “Matriarchal Societies”, writes: “The Chisungu celebration is meant to protect youth from any possible dangers associated with the significant life change to follow: menarche and the first sexual act.”<sup>52</sup> During this bash, elder women impart their knowledge to the younger girls through rituals accessible exclusively to Bemba women, no men nor non-Bemba women can approach. Female fertility is not praised only through this ritual, but also through the artwork of Bemba tradition. All objects have spiritual meaning, and most of these are related to the concept of fecundity. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the threshold of the houses represents the mother’s womb, where in the inside children are protected while on the outside, they face the dangers of the world. For this reason, the entrance of each house is ornate with female wooden figures or paintings, and it is also the place where ancestors are praised through food offerings. Women usually also hang fruits above the door, a good omen for each year’s harvest. Women’s importance is not only through her fertility and her role as mother and caretaker, they also have the role of “possession priestess”. Heide Göttner-Abendroth defines them as “[...] sciamans calling for nature spirits and ancestor spirits to come through, and they dance until the spirits ‘ride’ them, speaking prophesy through them in their ecstatic state. Only women can contact the spirits in this way, according to the tradition of these peoples, as they alone have the capacity to “rebirth” the ancestors”<sup>53</sup>. In this case, only women hold figures of priestess and can perform religious acts. These characteristics are not exclusive of Bemba tradition. Many other Bantu populations, such as the Luapula, Kaonde, Shila, the Nsenga and many others follow the same religious structure and have the same characteristics. Moving west, towards the regions of the Akan ethnolinguistic groups, we find another typical religious structure of matrilineal societies. For starters, the highest divinity for these communities is *Nyame*, a goddess. She gave birth to children, who founded the Akan lineages. She is thought to be the Great Mother, creator of everything. Heide Göttner-Abendroth compares her to the ancient Egyptian goddess *Nut*. She states: “Nyame carries within herself both the female and the male [...]. Her double nature is symbolised by the

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<sup>52</sup> Göttner-Abendroth, H. (2012). *Matriarchal Societies: Studies on Indigenous Cultures Across the Globe*. Pg. 373 [eBook] Peter Lang.

<https://www.perlego.com/book/1991240/>

<sup>53</sup> Ivi, Pg. 376

elements of fire and water. Out of fire she created the sun, and out of water, life and humans. At night – for she is gentle, like the moon – she pours a mellow glow, and moisture, down from heaven, allowing vegetation to grow. In the daytime she shoots out arrows of life [...].”<sup>54</sup> As we clearly understand, she is believed to be the instigator of all. The Queen mother is the high priestess, she is believed to be the human incarnation of *Nyame*. Every female figure of the Akan society is a representation of the goddess, and each woman is honoured for this reason. Akan Kings are also relevant figures in the religious sphere, they occupy the role of first priests. The role of Queens and Kings is to preserve the cult of the ancestors, in order to secure the heavenly light on the realm. They are seen as the incarnation on earth of *Nyame* and *Nyankopon*, the male counterpart. Because of this role they have, they are required to act as the God ideally would. For this reason, Queen mothers must express the gentleness, graciousness, patience and the loving nature characteristics of the Goddess.

As we have seen, women in matrilineal and matriarchal societies are believed to be the most wise and sapient figures in the society. Since they have to ensure the perpetuation of their lineage and for their importance in the political sphere and in the religious domain, they hold a fundamental role in the social structure. Moreover, many of the previous examples have proven that in matrilineal and matriarchal communities, the idea of gender inequality is non-existent. Women often have power over the female part of the population, and men control the male part. Often matriarchies are thought to be unequal for men, but as we have analysed, this does not happen.

### 2.3 Gender theories, an African perspective

Many African anthropologists and sociologists have analysed the concept of gender under the African perspective. The conclusion that gender inequality is reduced, or even devoid in matrilineal and matriarchal African societies complies with the theories on gender and more in general, with African sociological theories. Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, professor at the Stony University, New York, in her book “African gender studies”, formulates a reasoning opposing the western concept of body to the African ideas on subjects. She uses J. Edward Chamberlain and Sander Gilman’s ideas on degeneration in European thought. In their view: “degeneration brought together two notions of difference, one scientific – a deviation from an original type – and the other moral, a deviation from a norm of behaviour. But they were essentially the same notion, of all from grace, *a deviation from the original type*.”<sup>55</sup> The expression of difference intended as degeneration brings to a conclusion in which those who hold the power, are likely to impose their biology. The societies that develop from this theory are focused on the concept of “body” in Oyèrónké Oyewùmí’s view. She states: “I am using the word ‘body’ in two ways: first, as a metonymy for biology and, second, to draw attention to the sheer physicality that seems to attend being in Western culture.”<sup>56</sup> The importance western world attributes to

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<sup>54</sup> Ivi, Pg. 406

<sup>55</sup> J. Edward Chamberlain and Sander Gilman, *Degeneration: The Darker Side of Progress* (New York. Columbia University Press, 1985), 292

<sup>56</sup> Oyèrónké Oyewùmí et al., *African Gender Studies. A reader*, (New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2005), Pg. 3

the body is a consequence of the perception of the world, which is mainly through sight. In the west, the world is perceived through the eyes and importance is given to aspects such as skin colour and gender. Oyèrónké Oyewùmi explains this idea through a simple example: “The term ‘worldview’ which is used in the West to sum up the cultural logic of a society, captures the West’s privileging of the visual.”<sup>57</sup> The body has a central role in western social thought and system. It has been central in philosophy for centuries, and many have also theorized this pivotal role. For example, Cartesian dualism was exactly the separation of this idea, on the one hand, *res cogitans* represented the spirituality of things, while the *res extensa*, the body, the physically visible aspects. R. W. Connell, Australian sociologist, confirms the excessive focus on the physicality in the West by stating: “In our culture, at least, the physical sense of maleness and femaleness is central to the cultural interpretation of gender. Masculine gender is (among other things) a certain feel to the skin, certain muscular shapes and tensions, certain postures and ways of moving, certain possibilities in sex.”<sup>58</sup> These words written by a western sociologist are symbolic of the transition the feminist discourse, and more in general a part of the sociological theorist sphere, are making towards a more detached interpretation of the role of the body. Clearly, overthrowing a category which has shaped the social structure for centuries is not a target that can be reached in an immediate way. The idea behind this theory is that gender is a category which is based on the importance the West gives to the body. Other non-western societies do not value sight as the sense that guides their social construction. These cultures, as for example the Yoruba peoples, tend to believe that gender is a social construction rather than a biological inevitable distinction. The idea behind this theory, which became a relevant argument for feminist theorists, is that biology is used as an argument to explain discriminatory behaviours. Oyèrónké Oyewùmi takes this theory one step further: “The debate in feminism about what role and which identities are natural and what aspects are constructed only has meaning in a culture where social categories are conceived as having no independent logic of their own.”<sup>59</sup> In her view, the debate on gender is not relevant, or has no reason to take place in societies where these problems do not exist. The reasons why colonialism has had an impact on the societies which previously had matriarchal tendencies is because western world has brought the social construction of gender in places where there was no such difference. Initially, in western thought, sex was seen as the biological distinction, while gender as a superstructure. Nowadays, feminist theorists are trying to demonstrate that sex has some socially constructed aspects too. Susanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna tried to focus on other cultures to find out that the idea of woman and man is different even in those aspects western societies believe to be natural distinctions due to biological reasons. They state: “[...] by viewing gender as a social construction, it is possible to see descriptions of other cultures as evidence for alternative but equally real conceptions of what it means to be woman or man.”<sup>60</sup> The idea behind all these theories is that different societies have different conceptions of what are the roles of men and women in their societies and what the differences between these two categories are. For this reason, the

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<sup>57</sup> Ivi, Pg. 4

<sup>58</sup> R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (London: Polity Press, 1995), pg. 53.

<sup>59</sup> Oyèrónké Oyewùmi et al., *African Gender Studies. A reader*, (New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2005), Pg. 10

<sup>60</sup> Susan J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna, *Gender: an ethnomethodological approach*, 1985.



conception of gender in the African and a part of the feminist theory can be determined as socially constructed. Western ideas on gender are imposed to non-western societies. Once this was made through colonialism, while nowadays this occurs thanks to the means of communication, which interconnects the whole world. However, as mentioned earlier, some societies are constructed differently, and social relations are not guided by the biological differences. Oyerónké Oyèwùmi takes as example the Yoruba society, and she states “The bare biological facts of pregnancy and parturition count only in regard to procreation, where they must. Biological facts do not determine who can become the monarch or who can trade in the market.”<sup>61</sup> The social structure in the Yoruba community follows a non-biological structure, which could be a different concept for western sociologists to analyse since the focus on gender has built the society they are used to conceive, provoking an involuntary bias in their social research. This concept has been developed by Kathy E. Ferguson in her book *The man questioned: Visions of subjectivity in Feminist theory*. There she states: “the questions we can ask about the world are enabled, and other questions disabled, by the frame that orders the questioning. *When we are busy arguing about the questions that appear within a certain frame, the frame itself becomes invisible; we become enframed within it.*”<sup>62</sup> Feminist western theorists, to grasp the wider focus on gender construction for African sociologists, must eliminate from their minds all the Western discourses. For example, in the Yoruba culture, social structure is built on seniority rather than gender. The body is never an important aspect for the society. For instance, the same body, could perform the duties of the *aláwo*, which is the religious priest; the *oba*, a ruler; *oko*, *aya*, *iyá*, three ways of calling a mother; and also, of *omo*, the offspring. The main difference between the Yoruba culture and western societies is the sense that is preferred. As opposed to the vision, the Yoruba peoples, because of the language they speak, have a tendency to value more the auditory sense. This happens because of the Yoruba tradition, where people believe that the real understanding of the world goes further what is perceptible visually. Amadou Hampate Ba, the well-known Malian writer, in addressing the Yoruba’s conception of reality, he states that it concerns “[...] a particular presence in the world – a world conceived of as a whole in which all things are linked together.”<sup>63</sup> Overcoming the importance of sight as a sense, and surmounting the idea that gender is always present in every society, is crucial for western sociologists and feminist theorists willing to understand why matrilineal and matriarchal societies are functional to the reduction of gender gap.

African feminists have criticized at length western feminists for being too concentrated on the idea of gender. This happened because African cultures have developed a cultural unity differently from the one western societies have. The second reason explaining the absence of the gender gap in matrilineal societies lies behind this strong cultural unity. Women and men in these culture work together in every sphere of social organisation. Males and females are complementary in every aspect of the community, and great respect is brought in regard to the mothers for the role and the job they have to fulfil, but also to the father, which is in

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<sup>61</sup> Oyerónké Oyèwùmi et al., *African Gender Studies. A reader*, (New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2005), Pg. 13

<sup>62</sup> Kathy E. Ferguson, *The man questioned: Visions of subjectivity in Feminist theory* (Berkeley, University of California Press), Pg. 7

<sup>63</sup> Amadou Hampate Ba, “Approaching Africa”, in *African Films: The Context of Production* ed. Angela Martin (London British Film Institute, 1982), pg. 9

charge of many other fundamental aspects of the management. This cultural unity, a fundamental aspect for gender equality, was the basis of the structure on which these societies were built. Colonial dominance has been the cause of the destruction of this identity and unity; thus, many countries have shifted towards western-centred ideologies and an increase in gender disparity took place.

From the picture painted in this theoretical framework, matrilineal and matriarchal cultures seem to be structurally different from western societies. It is clear that these societies are functional in themselves to reduce the gender gap, however it is important to understand the way in which these can also help western societies and other countries to reach this goal. The first idea is that the west could never shift back to a matrilineal or matriarchal structure. This could not occur in neither of the three main fields: on the social, the political nor the economic level.

On the social level, mothers are the core of the society. As seen previously, mothers pass through their lineage all titles and the social position, and families are composed differently, since marriages follow the concept of matrilocality. Because of the family construction, Heide Göttner-Abendroth defines matriarchies and matrilineal cultures as “[...] nonhierarchical, horizontal societies of matrilineal kinship.”<sup>64</sup>

For what concerns the political sphere, matriarchal societies all follow the consensus principle, where decision-making occurs through unanimity. All women and men meet in a council to discuss the household matters, and no person has more decisional power than the others. This occurs in the household, as it does with matters concerning the whole village. In the second case, not all individuals participate, but some delegates, which usually are the matriarchs or their brothers or sons. However, they are sent to represent their household, so no decision can be taken in the village council, but everything said in the bigger meeting must be reported and accepted in following inter-family councils by every household of the clan. This is the pattern that occurs also for regional decisions, where the delegates will have to move back and forth until a fully accepted decision is taken. Heide Göttner-Abendroth states: “Of course, the foundations for this political system are economy of reciprocity, based on gift giving and the ‘big family’ of a society of matrilineal kinship. [...] These political patterns do not allow the accumulation of political power. In exactly this sense, they are free of domination: They have no class of rulers and no class of suppressed people [...]”<sup>65</sup>

On the economic level, matriarchal and matrilineal societies are usually agricultural societies. The economies in these societies are extremely peculiar since the goods are often used as gifts. With this system, one person hardly possesses the majority of goods and a form of good distribution is always in place. Heide Göttner-Abendroth explains how this system takes place. “For example, at the village festivals, wealthy clans invite all the inhabitants to be their guests. These wealthy clan members organize the banquet, the rituals, the music and dances of one of the annual festivals, and they give away their wealth as a pure gift to all their neighbors. They don’t gain anything by it but honor. At the next festival another lucky clan will outdo itself

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<sup>64</sup> Göttner-Abendroth, Heide, and Karen P. Smith. "Matriarchies as Societies of Peace: Re-thinking Matriarchy." *Off Our Backs* 38, no. 1 (2008): Pg. 50  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20838925>

<sup>65</sup> Ivi, Pg. 51

by inviting everybody [...].”<sup>66</sup> These cultures have balanced economies, where the concept of reciprocity is central.

## 2.4 The impossible application of matriarchy and matrilineality in western societies

These three aspects of matriarchal and matrilineal societies could never be implemented in the developed or less developed countries. The reasons in favour of this statement are exposed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ theories on the development of western societies and their economic doctrine. Western societies have all shifted to patriarchal systems in their past. According to Marx, this occurred with the development of private property. Friedrich Engels, later, formulated a theory to explain this development in the west. To do so, he tackled the premises of Lewis Henry Morgan. In particular, Morgan in his theories left unanswered two main questions which Engels tried to resolve. The first one was whether monogamy is the best institution for gender parity, and the second one concerns the reasons behind Marx’s hypothesis that private property developed patriarchal societies. To answer the first question, Engels presents four different steps that would eventually bring to the concept of family in the western conception of the term.

The first approach to the final idea is what he refers to as the “consanguine family”. In his words: “Here the marriage groups are arranged by generations: all the grand-fathers and grand-mothers within a certain family are mutually husbands and wives; an equally their children, the father and mother, whose children form a third cycle of mutual mates.”<sup>67</sup> Its existence was confirmed by some Hawaiian societies, but this family form is now thought to be extinct.

Secondly, the “Punaluan family” is the first to build a barrier between sisters and brothers. The marriage between these two components of the family was prohibited and this brought to the separation of the household that, in the previous form, was a whole unique family. This is the first step that recognises the nieces and nephews as are now conceived. Further in time, during the period of development where the punaluan family was the main form, a first intention to prohibit marriage between people from the same family took place.

The third family form is defined as “Pairing”. In this case, a woman and a man both had a principal husband or wife, among others. Here, consanguine marriage, was frowned upon. Occasional adultery and polygamy however occurred frequently among men, since the couples started living together. Women, on the other hand, were required to be faithful and adultery would be punished.

The latter development of these steps is the “monogamous family”. According to Engels, “It is founded on male supremacy for the pronounced purpose of breeding children of indisputable paternal lineage.”<sup>68</sup> In the monogamous family, the wedlock cannot be dissolved for pleasure, as opposed to the three previous forms, however, only the male can leave his wife. The more the society develops, the greater the power to dissolve

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<sup>66</sup> Ivi, Pg. 50

<sup>67</sup> Engels, F. (2019). *The Origin of the Family Private Property and the State*. [eBook] Studium Legis. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1377869/>

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*

the marriage men have. Engels employs Marx's idea on women in Ancient Greece to underline his idea. Male supremacy was already in place since women were seen as trophies won at war, or as slaves. The Greek example is made to understand the origin of monogamy. "Monogamy was the first form of the family not founded on natural, but on economic conditions, viz.: the victory of private property over primitive and natural collectivism."<sup>69</sup> It is indeed true that monogamy was not as unequal for women and men as it was in Greece, then everywhere else in the world. In Rome, for example, women were treated with more respect. Nonetheless, the fact that this family form is based on economic resources, implies this cannot bring to full equality between sexes. Even in Rome, the *pater familias* had power over his wife, sometimes even over her life. Societies which did not develop with the monogamous family form have proven more incline to gender parity. In the western world, the majority of the countries have started their expansion with families following monogamy, or changed to this form along the way.

In this answer to Morgan's first point, a clear relation can be made with the question regarding whether matrilineal or matriarchal societies could exist in the west. Clearly, the development from ancient times shows some strong patriarchal aspects due to the monogamous families as centre of the social structure in western societies. Monogamous families have an evident vertical and hierarchical structure, the exact opposite of Heide Göttner-Abendroth's definition of social structure in African matrilineal and matriarchal societies.

The differences between the political and economic sphere previously mentioned and those of western societies lie in Marx and Engels' theories on private property as the main cause of the development of patriarchy. Engels' argument on the societies at the early stage of their development is "Whatever was produced and used collectively, was regarded as common property: the house, the garden, the long boat."<sup>70</sup> Women and men divided their sphere of competence, where the former worked in the house, while the latter were in charge of war, hunting, and the provision of resources. This structure was quickly driven towards a variation due to the introduction of the idea of trade. These societies, through a raise in agriculture, domestic work and increasing of a stock of resources, changed their structure. Winning wars brought an increase in the labour force, since the losers were forced to work as servants, thus a new division of the society in classes took place: the owners and the slaves. Men were in charge of the workforce, and this brought to a new concept of property ownership. "All the surplus now resulting from production fell to the share of the man. The woman shared in its fruition, but she could not claim its ownership. [...] The division of labor in the family had regulated the distribution of property between man and wife."<sup>71</sup> This new social structure was the clear sign of the shift of power in the hands of the male property owners. These societies have developed from this stage of evolution, however, the patriarchal structure developed as such, and no further shift has taken place since then. For this reason, patriarchal ideologies are inherently present as the solid foundation of the cultural mindset of the communities which followed these development stages.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibidem

<sup>70</sup> Ivi, Chapter IX

<sup>71</sup> Ibidem

Furthermore, we could analyse the different relations that matriarchal and matrilineal societies have with private property and with development. There is a great difference between the way these are conceived in these societies and how the western world is used to intend them. In the first case, private property is an element which has founded western societies. In matriarchal and matrilineal structure, on the other hand, private property is a much broader concept, and it is given much less relevance. The main idea is that the communities are much more tied to the idea of sharing, and private possessions are not some divisive elements, but on the other hand, as seen making the example of the religious rituals in the previous section of the chapter, being wealthy is an occasion to share with the others. The wealthiest individuals tend to host the main religious rituals, providing the rest of the community with food and other goods. The host of this event changes every year, especially because being wealthy in these societies is volatile, and it depends on the year's harvest and on some factors which may change with time. On the other hand, matrilineal and matriarchal societies have a peculiar relationship with development to in comparison to the way western cultures are used to conceive. The first important element to underline, is the fact that the majority of these cultures are mainly agricultural. None of them have complex economies nor incomes coming from the industrial sector, and few of them actually make exchanges of goods with other societies. For this reason, they tend to be solitary cultures, even in the relations with the nation they live in. They generally keep their own decision-making council and follow the rules of their own clans, without bothering the rest of the national population. The majority of these societies are not uniquely sedentary, but their movements are restricted to small areas, that can assure the provision of crops. From their agricultural skill, they provide not only food for the entire community, but also the few resources they might need to participate in economic exchanges with some other neighbour. These two elements are further examples of why in practical terms, matriarchal and matrilineal societies could not be applied as a whole structure in the west or even in the rest of the world. The economic advancement and complexity the rest of the world have reached, is now deeply rooted in the structural foundations, and a step back is extremely unlikely to take place.

## **2.5 Feminists and Marxists: a troubled relationship**

Engels in this analysis has provided the explanation of why some societies have developed as patriarchal cultures. Since the origin of patriarchal ideas is now an inherent characteristic of the social development and structure, an implementation of a matriarchate or of a matrilineal system as a whole structure in western societies is an impossible task. In this regard, we can see the extremely controversial relationship between Feminism and Marxism. The grounds of these two schools of thought are the same. Catherine MacKinnon provides an explanation of this complex relation in her book "Toward a Feminist Theory of the State". There she writes: "Both are theories of power, its social derivation and its maldistribution. Both are theories of social inequality."<sup>72</sup> Through these words, we can see how the ultimate goal of these two schools

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<sup>72</sup> MacKinnon, C.A. (1991). *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. [eBook] Harvard University Press. Ch. 1  
<https://www.perlego.com/book/2094996/>

of thought is no so distant. Nonetheless, feminist and Marxist theorists had always a controversial relationship. On the one hand, feminists' critiques to Marx's theories concern the fact that he took gender as naturally defined, with no influences from social constructions. In his thesis, those who took class as caused by natural laws were people justifying the inequality. Catherine MacKinnon's critique of Marx is that he treats gender in the same way. "Even when women produced commodities as waged labor, Marx wrote about them primarily as mothers, housekeepers, and members of the weaker sex. His work shares with liberal theory the view that women naturally belong where they are socially placed."<sup>73</sup> Moreover, feminists have critiques to Engels' further analysis too. In their opinion he did try to give an explanation for the women's status, instead of taking it for granted, however, he failed in his explanation. Catherine MacKinnon accuses them of taking "for granted crucial features of relations between the sexes: Marx because woman is nature and nature is given, Engels because woman is the family and he is largely uncritical of woman's work and sexual role within it."<sup>74</sup>

On the other hand, Engels's theory in "The Origin of the Family Private Property and the State" can be considered the bond between Marxism and feminism, and some argue it gave birth to a sphere of feminist Marxism. Marx in his theory was more anchored to the traditional idea of family, with women holding specific roles in the household. Engels' insight provided material for the development of new theories on feminism and Marxism. Examples are Juliet Mitchell and Shulamith Firestone, which believed that patriarchy was not strictly an economical feature, so the fight against capitalism is not the ultimate goal for feminists. Overcoming the idea that gender inequality is tied uniquely to the economic situation, feminist Marxism developed the theory, seeing in the reproductive role of women the causes of the oppression.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibidem

<sup>74</sup> Ibidem

## **Chapter III – Matrilineality and Matriarchy really are useful**

As seen in the conclusion of the previous chapter, clearly matriarchal and matrilineal societies are not the solution to the reduction of gender gap in themselves, however, some aspects of these are useful tools that can be reported, though modifications and as broader concepts, in the structure of all countries; developed, less developed and least developed. In order to see how can matrilineal and matriarchal societies help the reduction of the gender gap in western countries, a meeting point between these two cultures is needed. In order to understand this connection between the cultures, it is important to retrace the steps of the history of the feminist movements and of female emancipation.

### **3.1 Brief history of the female emancipation movements**

In the western societies' evolution, gender gap and gender equality are a relatively recent debate words that are now part of our moral consciousness. If we were to trace back the beginning of the now international call for action in favour of gender equality, we could see that the starting point was recent, related to the whole evolution time period. Suffragette movements were well-known during the 18<sup>th</sup> century in France, which culminated with the French Revolution, where women played an important role. In 1893, Kate Sheppard, an activist from New Zealand, presented a petition to grant women's suffrage. New Zealand became the first self-governed country to grant voting rights to women, in 1893. This was the trigger for the well-known suffragist movements all around the western world. From the final part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where women started to feel the need for a change of their social status and thanks to the changes in the life of the populations with the advent of the industrial revolution, women began to demonstrate their dissatisfaction. The goals behind the female emancipation movements have varied greatly from the beginning of the last century until today. The right to vote in western countries was given by the States during the whole 20<sup>th</sup> century, this occurred only thanks to female rallies which initiated the ascent towards what is now known as the reduction and, finally, to the complete eradication of the gender gap. After having obtained the voting rights, first big milestone towards gender parity, the goals of the female movements got narrower. Later, from the female emancipation movements and rallies, a new category of philosophy gained importance, the feminist theorists. The importance of this theoretical field of research was that finally women had gained the rights to do sociological and scientific research for the objective of the reduction of the gender gap. Feminism as a philosophical current was born in the 1960s in the United States, and later in Europe this arrived with the social rallies of the end of the decade. In Italy, where the universal suffrage was granted in 1946, the following years have been the perfect example of the speed of the transition. After many centuries of building up inequality from the initial status of patriarchates as shown by Engels, in less than 50 years the situation has been completely overturned. In 1975 the family rights reform abolished the figure of the father as the head of the household. In the 1970s, several laws built up to the 1974 referendum of that confirmed the legality of the previous divorce law. In 1981 the law that permitted the "delitto d'onore" was abolished. According to this law, crimes driven by hatred determined by an offense to the honour of the person, in particular male, or his family could enjoy a reduction

of the punishment. These are just examples of the years of female emancipation to fight these inequalities. Globalisation, has had a positive effect in favour of gender gap reduction under some aspects. The world, as interconnected as it is now, have brought to an international call for action. The 2030 agenda on the sustainable development goals is the evidence. The examples previously mentioned show that from an individual battle, this is now an international recognized problem. In 2015, 193 countries, composing the United Nations organization, have promised to eradicate the disparity in 2030. This constitutes evidence that the problem is changed in approximately one century and a half. The societies, which had silently and unconsciously evolved with a stable patriarchal structure, feel this situation can be overturned in less than 200 years.

### 3.2 The fundamental rights have been gained, now an ideological shift is required

In tracing back the battles fought for female emancipation, the first goals that have been achieved are fundamental rights in three main fields: the political sphere, work related rights, and in the domestic and the household realm. Grating rights for the separation of the marriage, voting rights and the withdrawal of the “delitto d’onore” previously mentioned are a few examples of the first victories gained from the rallies to demolish discriminations. The struggle for gender equality is still not complete. The evidence of this statement not only comes from the international need for a goal in the 2030 agenda, but is also proved by the data regarding female quota in politics and the gender pay gap. In the United States, the Pew Research Center has developed a statistical analysis on the differences in wages for men and women. In the report, they stated: “The gender pay gap has remained relatively stable in the United States over the past 15 years or so. In 2020, women earned 84% of what men earned, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of median hourly earnings both full- and part-time workers. Based on this estimate, it would take an extra 42 days of work for women to earn what men did in 2020.”<sup>75</sup> This statement has been made on the basis of the data shown in the following figure.

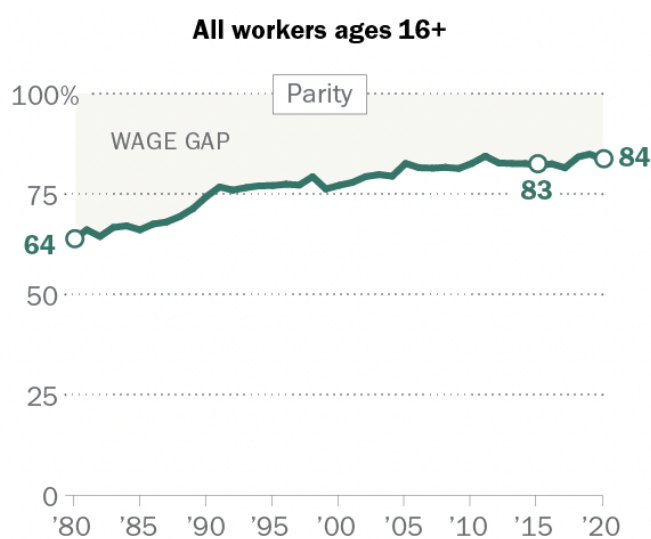


Figure 3.1. Median hourly earnings of U.S. women as percentage of men’s median among all workers ages 16+.

<sup>75</sup> Barroso, Amanda, and Anna Brown. “Gender Pay Gap in U.S. Held Steady in 2020.” Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center, May 25, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/05/25/gender-pay-gap-facts/>.



Moreover, this disparity is not evident solely in the United States. In the European Union countries, the differences in wages according to gender are even more marked. “For the economy as a whole, in 2019, women’s gross hourly earnings were on average 14.1% below those of men in the European Union (EU-27) and 14.9% in the euro area (EA-19).”<sup>76</sup> In this report of the Eurostat, the first statement of the European economy’s pay gap as a whole is followed by a statistical analysis on the single member states, and it is shown that the levels of disparity vary significantly across the Union.

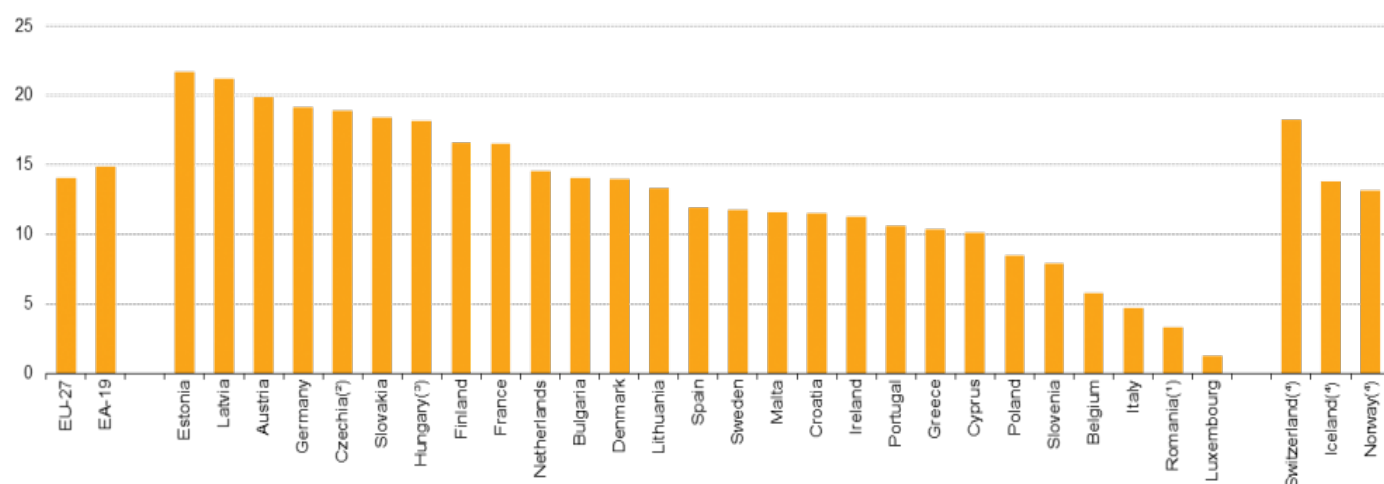


Figure 3.2. The unadjusted gender pay gap, 2019. Difference between average gross hourly earnings of male and female employees as % of male gross earnings.

Source: Eurostat

In this figure, the difference between Estonia, country with the highest disparity and Luxembourg, country with the lower level of inequality is the evidence of the statement of the article according to which the differences in wages vary greatly throughout the European Union Member States.

Data on the gender pay gap are not the only evidence of the ongoing struggle for equality. In analysing the percentage of female participation in the political sphere, a statistical analysis of the Inter-parliamentary Union on the percentage of women in national parliaments has shown that in no western country this percentage is above 50%.<sup>77</sup>

However, the data on female leadership has increased in some fields over the last decades, as a demonstration of the fact that the previously mentioned struggles, rallies and battles have actually brought a greater emancipation. The main domain where this is visible is the leadership of the international organizations. The first example is Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission. However, many other high offices are held by women. For example, Christine Lagarde is now head of the European Central Bank, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala is the Nigerian president of the World Trade Organization and Kristalina

<sup>76</sup> Eurostat. “Gender Pay Gap Statistics.” Gender pay gap statistics - Statistics Explained, February 2021.

[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Gender\\_pay\\_gap\\_statistics#Gender\\_pay\\_gap\\_levels\\_vary\\_significantly\\_across\\_EU](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Gender_pay_gap_statistics#Gender_pay_gap_levels_vary_significantly_across_EU).

<sup>77</sup> Inter-parliamentary Organization “Monthly Ranking of Women in National Parliaments.” Parline: the IPU's Open Data Platform, January 2021.

<https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=10&year=2020>.

Georgieva, the managing director of the International Monetary Fund are just a few examples of this increasing female leadership.

The political and economic spheres are not the only domains where gender inequality is present. The Parliament of a country being composed by 50% of women is not a sign of an achievement of gender equality. The evidence of a fully accepted equality should be witnessed in more subtle cues, such as in the right of being owner of one's own body and in the vocabulary of a language. As far as this second example is concerned, in today's use of the vocabulary its often issued a stereotypical image of women, which is tied to past cultural portraits, as a proof of a tendency to resist to development in some domains. Language represents a strong tool for inclusion and integration, and it is important in order to help both general cultural adjustments and those bind specifically to the status of women. In an article published by the Canadian Center of Science and Education, Xiang Xu wrote: "English treats everyone as a male except for special explanation. If somebody's sex is not known, he, his, him can be used to mention the human being. This is a common rule in English."<sup>78</sup> Moreover, she states: "Some words are about profession, such as doctor, lawyer, reporter, attendant, etc. Although they are natural words, people only connected them with men owing to longtime habits. When women work in these fields, woman, lady, girl, female are added on purpose. Then, woman doctor, lady lawyer, girl reporter, female attendant, etc. come into being."<sup>79</sup> This happens because vocabulary is strictly related to history, and for a complete evolution to take place a long time and work is required. To these struggles for a fully accepted condition of equality between sexes, there are many others that could be mentioned. In order for these adjustments to take place, western societies must work on an alteration of the whole structure on which societies have been built. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Engels' theory on the origin of the State found that societies have been built from patriarchal structures, and this has brought to the modern condition.

### **3.3 Two foundational characteristics of matrilineal and matriarchal societies that can help**

Moreover, it is important to detect how these final steps the societies must take in order to eradicate the gender gap, are trying to reach those goals that have been the foundational structure of matrilineal societies. The first argument seen in favour of this theory was the centrality of the body in western mindset, as basis on which the societies developed. The impact of social media in the now interconnected world has shown the urge to see female bodies in an equal way. Target 5.2 of the fifth sustainable development goal is "Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in public and private spheres, including female trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation"<sup>80</sup>. The indicators of this target help to understand even better the correlation it has with the focus on the body in western ideology. Indicators 5.2.1 and 5.2.2 show that the

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<sup>78</sup> Xu, Xiang. "The Sexism in English and Its Rebuilding." Canadian Center of Science and Education, November 2008. Pg. 101, 102. <https://doi.org/https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1065466.pdf>.

<sup>79</sup> Ibidem

<sup>80</sup> United Nations. "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment – United Nations Sustainable Development." United Nations. United Nations, 2015. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>.

aspects to monitor are: “proportion of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15 years and older subjected to physical, sexual or psychological violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months, by form of violence and by age” and “Proportion of women and girls aged 15 years and older subjected to violence by persons other than an intimate partner in the previous 12 months, by age and place of occurrence”<sup>81</sup>. Part of the causes for which monitoring these aspects is necessary is caused by the image built around the female body. Body images are one of the main debates in western societies as an argument strictly related to gender equality. In the feminist movements, which in western world are associated with the 1968 rallies, many slogans in this regard became representative of the female emancipation movements. One of the most well-known is “my body, my choice”. This issue has incurred many evolutions and de-evolutions. The goal seemed to be close during the 1970s, but then some other effects have widened the already reduced gap. Nowadays, female “models” have gained a central role in the gender equality discourse. Many brands are now choosing models with different bodies in order to send a message. Their goal is to dismantle the idea that the body must have standard measurements or a precise shape and to show that there is beauty in the differences. This is only an example of one of the main battles western societies are fighting for gender equality, namely the normalization of the body. If this objective is one of the keys to the final outcome of full gender equality, then there is evidence that in some way matrilineal and matriarchal societies have foreseen this aspect, since it is intrinsic in their social structure as seen in the previous chapter. The path that the female emancipation movements and the feminist theories and battles are walking through to gain full equality is bringing them to the ideological construction of African matrilineal societies. In order for them to be useful, a radical ideological change must take place in the western world. This does not mean that the solution to gender equality lies behind the kinship traced through the mother’s lineage, but that eliminating the centrality of the concept of the body, perceived as the main matter that differentiates human individuals, could be one considerable step towards the full equality goal.

The second theoretical aspect that hides the reasons for such gender equality in matrilineal and matriarchal societies is the cultural unity of the people. Interdependence is the key for the development of these cultures, and this occurs regardless of the gender or any other difference between individuals. In Cheikh Anta Diop’s words, women from the European perspective are considered not more than “a burden that the man dragged behind him. Outside her function of child-bearing, her role in nomadic society is nil.”<sup>82</sup> Western states have developed from previous nomadic communities, and this concept has now gained a different connotation thanks to the development of these societies and the achievements of female emancipation movements. However, this argument is still relevant to denote the different starting point from which societies have developed. On the one hand, nomadic communities with the previously mentioned gender separation have been the precursor of western societies. On the other hand, matriarchal societies were built around the respect and appreciation by and for every individual of the society. The cultural unity

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<sup>81</sup> Ibidem

<sup>82</sup> Diop, C. A. (1990). *The cultural unity of Black Africa* (Chicago: Third World Press, Original work published 1959), Pg. 29

developed from the latter societies is the second key to the reduction of gender gap in western societies. In taking once again the Sustainable development goals as main indicator of the need for gender equality in the world, the need for a cultural unity under the ideals of reciprocity is a second trait that matrilineal and matriarchal societies can teach as an intrinsic value of their culture.

Under these two aspects, matrilineal and matriarchal societies could be the guide to follow in the struggle for gender equality also for western societies. These two ideological foundations could represent the ultimate goal the west should achieve. It is a step-by-step process. The starting point is to put an end to the superstructural inequalities, such as the fundamental rights achieved in the 20<sup>th</sup> century emancipation movements, and the final outcome should be the eradication of the essence of the discrimination, which lies in the bedrock from which western societies have developed. The core of the problem is that the characteristics of the human being are determined by categories such as gender, and not by the traits of the person itself. Once gender will not be considered an aspect that can be used to define a person, a reversal of an ideology will have occurred, and a full gender equality reached.

### **3.4 Are developed and developing countries on the same page?**

The previous analysis has left out a considerable number of countries, which are not part of the western societies or the developed countries' category. The sustainable development goals are the same for the 193 United Nations Member States all around the world, and while western States are considerably ahead in the achievement of the goal, the majority of the countries are far behind. Remarkably, the process the developing countries are following resembles the steps developed societies have already undertaken in the previous decades. For starters, the international community is pressuring an increase in education as a means for reducing the gender gap. According to the data of the UNICEF: "around the world, 132 million girls are out of school [...]. In countries affected by conflict, girls are more than twice as likely to be out of school than girls living in non-affected countries".<sup>83</sup> The achievement of an increase in education would bring to a reduction in the skill gap that could be a consequence of more equality in wages. It could also result in a reduction of gender-based violence in schools, number of child marriages and female genital mutilation. Education is seen as one of the keys to an improvement for gender equality in all countries, especially those where gender inequality is higher. There seems to be a relation in the data regarding economic underdevelopment and the level of gender inequality. As far as the field of health is concerned, women are disadvantaged in these countries. The reasons are found in two main aspects, the mortality while giving birth, due to scarce resources applied for the birthing process, and the high number of people contracting HIV or AIDS diseases.

Clearly, developed and developing countries have different needs when tackling gender inequality. The former have to face problems which are less related to the fundamental rights and more leaning towards the

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<sup>83</sup> UNICEF, "Girls' Education." UNICEF, January 19, 2020. <https://www.unicef.org/education/girls-education>.

root of the problem, while the latter societies are still further back in the process. Nevertheless, the need for the achievement of gender parity is global, as shown by goal five of the 2030 agenda. Even though the means used by the various countries to achieve this objective are different, the various stages of the whole process are similar, regardless of the economic development of the society in question.

### 3.5. Indicators of the global need for gender equality

The 2030 agenda is not the only evidence that the world is in global need for an eradication of the gender gap. The first international agreement worth mentioning is the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This convention was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1979. In less than a decade, this became an international agreement with almost one hundred nations having granted the application of its provisions. Article one of the CEDAW provides a clear definition of the term “discrimination against women. The argument is: “[...] the term [...] shall mean any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality for men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.”<sup>84</sup> This convention has been ratified or acceded by the majority of the United Nations member states, with the exclusion of the United States, only developed country to sign but not to ratify the agreement, Palau, which did sign it as well, and five non-signatory states: Iran, Somalia, Sudan, Tonga and the Holy See.

Secondly, it is important to mention the 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW). The goal was the recognition of “[...] the urgent need for the universal application to women of the rights and principles with regard to equality, security, liberty, integrity and dignity of all human beings [...]”<sup>85</sup> The difference between this and the convention previously mentioned is the focus on violence, intended as verbal, physical, psychological and in assuring that “the International Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment [...]”<sup>86</sup> are respected and are granting rights to women equally.

The third important evidence of international call for action in the field of gender equality to mention is the Beijing Conference on women held in 1995 and its five-year reviews. The Beijing Conference was the fourth and last conference on women organized by the United Nations. The previous were held in Mexico City in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980 and in Nairobi in 1985. This conference produced “The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action” in 1995, which was adopted by 189 countries and is periodically reviewed every five

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<sup>84</sup> OHCHR. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. OHCHR, 1979.

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>.

<sup>85</sup> OHCHR. Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. OHCHR, December 1993

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/violenceagainstwomen.aspx>

<sup>86</sup> Ibidem

years. In the reprinted version of the declaration by UN Women in 2014, there is a description of the mission statement: “The Platform for Action is an agenda for women’s empowerment. It aims at accelerating the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women and at removing all the obstacles to women’s active participation in all spheres of public and private life through a full and equal share in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making.”<sup>87</sup> Moreover, “The Platform for Action covers 12 critical areas of concern that are as relevant today as 20 years ago: poverty; education and training; health; violence; armed conflict; economy; power and decision-making; institutional mechanisms; human rights; media; environment; and the girl child. For each critical area of concern, strategic objectives are identified, as well as a detailed catalogue of related actions to be taken by Governments and other stakeholders, at national, regional and international level.”<sup>88</sup>

These three examples are proof that gender equality is a global issue, and that every country is moving towards the achievement of the goal at different speeds. As mentioned earlier, matrilineal and matriarchal societies could be taken as an example for the achievement of this ambition insofar as they have based the foundations of their societies on the same grounds that the other countries in the world are now trying to achieve in order to eradicate the gender gap and to embrace a full parity of sexes.

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<sup>87</sup> UN, Women. “The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.” UN Women, 2014, Pg. 16.  
[https://doi.org/https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/pfa\\_e\\_final\\_web.pdf?la=en&vs=1203](https://doi.org/https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/pfa_e_final_web.pdf?la=en&vs=1203).

<sup>88</sup> *Ivi*. Pg. 3

## Conclusion

Matrilineal and matriarchal societies have been the main focus of the paper. The societies following these social structures are not many across the world, but their peculiar structure can help to the achievement of gender equality in the rest of the world too. In the previous chapters, we have seen several aspects of matrilineal and matriarchal societies, we have outlined the differences and the analogies and their presence in the African continent. Matrilineal societies are peculiar cultures which have as a distinctive feature the fact that succession is traced through the mother's lineage. There is not a direct relation between this concept and the idea that women hold high political offices, especially since in African political theory this is not the definition of a matriarchal society. These have been defined in a particular way instead. Many African theorists have debated on the subject, and most of them agree on the fact that African matriarchal societies hinge on a matricentric unit, where the main power is not held by politicians, but by members of the same society. Usually, every household holds meetings in a democratic way, and then a representative is sent to a meeting where every decision of each household is presented to a council. This latter has no decision-making power, since it stays in the hands of the society as a whole, structured through each family having its own power. Africa has had a long history of female important figures, which have ruled, fought and controlled land for many centuries. For this reason, those societies which did not suffer greatly the impacts of colonialism, kept this tradition and refused the shift towards patriarchal social structures, common in the western world. Nowadays, those societies who still trace the lineage from the mother's kinship have several common features. The first one to mention is the practices after a wedding of a member of the society. Matrilocality, a process also known as uxorilocal marriages, is a tradition which determines the construction of the households and the roles of each member of a society after it marries. The spouses, after their wedding, stay in their household, and after a period of adjustment, her husband is accepted in the village. While the mothers have to control the agriculture and have to take care of the household, the newly wedded husband must work for his father-in-law. Once this new couple starts to have a kinship of their own, they can move in their own house, staying in the clan of the daughter's mother. The husband will have his own sons-in-law once his daughters will have married, while the mother will have to take care of the future of the female youngsters. As we can see in this first example, the role of the female members of the society is fundamental in the structures of the families. The second common feature of the majority of matrilineal societies is the role of the mothers, and especially of the eldest women of the community. These have many fundamental roles in different aspects of the societies. They are central in the religious sphere of the cultures, which are generally strongly related to the spiritual connection; they are often chosen by the household as representatives of the decisions in the joint councils with the rest of the families or even in representation of a whole clan when a meeting with other societies in the geographical area are required; and they are also in charge of the supply of food for their own family or clan, since they control the agriculture, main source of resources of the society, both as a good for the whole community as well as an asset for a small economic exchange.

All of these characteristics are symptoms of the fact that matrilineal and matriarchal societies have a different conception of gender. As a matter of fact, many African theorists have debated on the centrality of gender as a concept under an African perspective. The result of this philosophy is a picture of societies where the concept of gender does not exist. It is not a feature that determines a characteristic on the individual, and it does not determine features of a person. This is the ultimate goal that every nation who have signed and ratified the 2030 agenda, or any other convention promoting gender equality, must achieve. Many African theorists condemn the western world for focusing too much on the external body of people. In many cases, western societies are incline to judge books by their covers, in the sense that the body is a representation of the person itself. Under this aspect, matrilineal and matriarchal societies' ideologies must be followed and reproduced, since their culture and the principles of the social and political structure are based on those very axioms that the rest of the world is trying to achieve in the battle for gender equality.

In conclusion, it is important to state that the goal of this paper is not to praise the level of gender equality in the African continent, which is far from being acceptable, nor to suggest that every society should turn towards a matrilineal or a matriarchal structure for the demolition of the gender gap. The goal is to find the way these societies can help the rest of the world to achieve this target. This can happen because the source of their culture is the focus on the identity of the individual and the essence of the person is found in the inner traits such as personality, character and qualities rather than on the body and the physical or biological appearance.



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## RIASSUNTO DELL'ELABORATO

La battaglia per l'uguaglianza di genere è una battaglia che ha superato diversi stadi prima di arrivare ad oggi. Tuttavia, le discriminazioni e le disuguaglianze persistono, e ormai il fatto che questo problema esista e vada affrontato è riconosciuto a livello internazionale. Un esempio lampante lo possiamo trovare nell'Agenda 2030 per gli Obiettivi di Sviluppo Sostenibile. L'obiettivo numero 5 è espressamente dedicato all'uguaglianza di genere. L'agenda 2030 è stata firmata da tutti gli Stati Membri dell'Organizzazione delle Nazioni Unite, e dunque questo traguardo è riconosciuto da tutta la comunità internazionale. Ogni nazione affronta questa problematica a modo proprio, e il livello di disuguaglianza cambia di stato in stato. Tuttavia, nel mondo, sono presenti numerose società che seguono una struttura sociale diversa dalle altre. Queste società che possono essere sia matrilineari che matriarcali, hanno la particolarità di non avere disuguaglianze di genere all'interno delle loro comunità. Lo scopo di questo elaborato è quello di analizzare queste culture, principalmente situate nel continente Africano, e di trovare una connessione tra la loro struttura sociale, e come questa possa servire agli altri Stati del mondo come esempio per combattere le disuguaglianze di genere. In particolare, questo scritto è diviso in tre capitoli. Il primo è dedicato alla descrizione delle società, come funzionano, quali sono le particolarità e in che modo si differenziano dalle culture non matrilineari o matriarcali. Successivamente, nella seconda sezione c'è un'analisi di come queste società possono rispondere alle richieste poste dalla comunità internazionale nell'obiettivo 5 dell'agenda 2030. La parte centrale del capitolo è dedicata invece alle Teorie Africane sul gender. Sono proprio queste la chiave per rispondere alla questione posta inizialmente. Inoltre, questa parte verrà conclusa con un'analisi sulle analogie e le differenze tra le teorie precedentemente menzionate e il rapporto tra il femminismo e il Marxismo, con un'osservazione dedicata alla teoria sull'origine dello Stato di Engels. Infine, il terzo capitolo è dedicato alla spiegazione di come queste culture matrilineari possano essere d'aiuto alle altre nazioni nella battaglia per la parità di genere.

Nella storia dello sviluppo delle società Africane sono presenti numerose donne che hanno ricoperto ruoli di punta, sia come guide ma anche come combattenti e guerriere. Tuttavia, il diciannovesimo e il ventesimo secolo sono stati caratterizzati dalla colonizzazione del mondo occidentale, e quindi di un'invasione anche a livello ideologico e culturale. Per questo motivo, numerose nazioni hanno acquisito la struttura occidentale che è storicamente una struttura costruita su società che inizialmente erano prevalentemente patriarcali. Ciò nonostante, all'interno del Continente sono rimaste numerose comunità che hanno mantenuto un'ideologia legata alle proprie origini, e hanno mantenuto una struttura sociale particolare, detta matrilineare o matriarcale. Innanzitutto, è fondamentale distinguere questi due termini. Le società matrilineari, sono culture che hanno la particolarità di trasferire l'eredità familiare attraverso la prole materna. Questo vuol dire che lo status sociale e i beni che vengono ereditati, seguono quelli della propria madre. Per quanto riguarda la definizione di matriarcato, per comprenderla è necessaria un'analisi fatta attraverso il punto di vista ideologico Africano. Molti studiosi e teorici si sono interrogati sulla questione di come definire una società matriarcale, e molti di questi concordano che questo termine si basi sul fatto che le unità familiari siano prevalentemente matricentriche. Infatti, le società matriarcali, così come quelle matrilineari, seguono una struttura ben precisa

nel processo decisionale. Inizialmente, ciascuna unità familiare si riunisce e prende la decisione all'unanimità. Dopodiché viene scelta una persona, che normalmente è la donna più anziana della famiglia, che svolge la funzione di ambasciatore in un consiglio formato da un individuo di ciascuna famiglia. In questo ultimo consiglio è vietato prendere decisioni, poiché il loro compito è semplicemente riportare il volere della propria unità familiare. Qualora ci dovesse essere qualche incongruenza, le famiglie si riuniranno ancora privatamente e ricomincia il processo. Questo andamento è ricorrente per la maggior parte delle società matrilineari e matriarcali in Africa. Queste società sono collocate in varie parti dell'Africa. Le prime da nominare sono culture situate nell'Africa occidentale, un gruppo etnico composto da diverse popolazioni chiamati gli *Akan*. Principalmente, questi occupano territori in Costa d'Avorio e in Ghana. La particolarità di alcune di queste popolazioni *Akan*, è la presenza di figure femminili riconosciute come Regine-Madri. Queste ricoprono un ruolo fondamentale all'interno della comunità in vari ambiti. Per quanto riguarda quello religioso, sono la rappresentazione in terra della divinità creatrice di tutto, *Nyame*. Nell'ambito politico, esse hanno il compito di scegliere una figura maschile che rappresenti la società all'esterno, questo però non gode di alcun potere decisionale, visto che ogni scelta deve passare attraverso un consiglio, presieduto dalla regina-madre stessa. Il gruppo *Akan* più numeroso che segue questa tradizione appena presentata è chiamato *Ashanti*. Le madri delle famiglie *Ashanti* hanno anche il controllo dell'agricoltura della comunità, principale fonte di risorse. Spostando geograficamente il fulcro del discorso verso l'Africa centrale, troviamo le popolazioni *Bantu*, che avendo uno stile di vita più nomadico che sedentario si sono dislocate successivamente anche nel resto del continente. Due di queste popolazioni Bantu sono degne di nota per la loro struttura matrilineare, e sotto alcuni aspetti anche matriarcale: i *Bemba* e i *Luapula*, presenti nelle regioni dello Zambia. Le caratteristiche di queste popolazioni sono simili a quelle degli *Ashanti*. Per queste due società è centrale la matrilocità. Questo è un processo che riguarda la composizione familiare e i ruoli degli individui di una comunità dopo il matrimonio. Una società matrilocale segue una struttura ben precisa. Subito dopo il matrimonio, la sposa resta nel proprio villaggio di appartenenza, e il marito è costretto a trasferirsi lì per rimanere vicino alla propria moglie. Dopo un primo periodo di assestamento, durante il quale la coppia comincia ad avere figli propri, gli sposi possono trasferirsi in una nuova casa, rimanendo nel villaggio della mamma della sposa. La moglie rimane in casa finché la madre non le concede un pezzo di terreno proprio da poter gestire in autonomia, mentre il marito dovrà lavorare per il padre della moglie finché non avrà dei generi propri che potranno lavorare per lui. Anche per questo avere una famiglia numerosa, in cui vi è una prevalenza di figlie femmine è un vantaggio per un nucleo. Questo sistema matrilocale è comune a molte società matriarcali e matrilineari, perché afferma la linea di successione nelle mani delle madri. Inoltre, tra le società matrilineari più celebri, troviamo le popolazioni Tuareg. Queste popolazioni nomadi del nord Africa, hanno storicamente seguito questa struttura sociale, tuttavia, in tempi più recenti, le nazioni abitate dai Tuareg hanno subito un rafforzamento del senso di appartenenza Arabo, e questo ha influito anche sul ruolo delle donne all'interno dei clan Tuareg. Infine, sono presenti varie società meno numerose in cui la definizione di matriarcato assume un significato più estremo. Un esempio è la comunità che vive nel villaggio *Umoja*, una congregazione di sole donne che si sono insediate

su un'isola dell'arcipelago delle *Bijagos* per sfuggire alle violenze. In questo villaggio la presenza degli uomini è proibita, tuttavia ogni individuo è libero di scegliere per quanto tempo vuole rimanere lì, anche in base alla volontà di avere una famiglia propria.

Nel paragrafo precedente sono state menzionate varie società matriarcali e matrilineari che seguono una struttura ben precisa. In queste culture, la donna ricopre un ruolo maggioritario all'interno della struttura sociale sotto vari aspetti. Il primo aspetto da citare è quello relativo all'agricoltura. La principale fonte di risorse delle comunità matriarcali e matrilineari è quella agricola. Tutti i campi e le coltivazioni sono nelle mani delle donne, e quindi sono loro le uniche ad avere accesso alla fornitura alimentare e anche economica della società. In secondo luogo, le figure femminili ricoprono un ruolo fondamentale nella sfera politica. Come accennato in precedenza il processo decisionale coinvolge spesso la popolazione intera, tuttavia in alcune comunità, come quella degli *Ashanti*, le donne presiedono sul consiglio e alle volte sono anche in possesso di diritto di veto su determinate decisioni. Inoltre, si occupano anche di decidere una figura che rappresenti la comunità al di fuori del proprio villaggio, e possono scegliere quando revocare questo potere e affidarlo ad altri individui. Il terzo ambito nel quale le donne ricoprono un ruolo fondamentale è quello religioso. Spesso nelle società matrilineari vi è una divisione netta nella gestione della parte maschile e della parte femminile della società. Quando questo avviene, sono figure femminili a controllare le donne e gli uomini a decidere per la parte maschile della popolazione. Questo accade anche nel mondo religioso. La figura femminile più anziana del villaggio e quella maschile, o alle volte la regina madre e il re nelle società in cui sono presenti questi ruoli, sono visti come le rappresentazioni sulla terra delle divinità. Inoltre, è importante sottolineare la centralità della figura degli antenati. Nelle case è presente uno spazio dedicato alla venerazione degli antenati, che portano protezione e fertilità alle famiglie. In generale le donne nelle società matrilineari e matriarcali sono le figure considerate le più sapienti e per questo sono punti di riferimento per la popolazione. Gli esempi citati sono la prova del fatto che nonostante le donne abbiano un'influenza notevole, questo non porta ad una disparità tra i sessi, e anche gli uomini nelle culture matrilineari e matriarcali hanno ruoli fondamentali. La spiegazione per cui questo accade risiede nelle Teorie Africane sul gender. Numerosi sociologi, antropologi e filosofi africani si sono interrogati sul perché in queste società non è presente la distinzione di genere che caratterizza i dibattiti in occidente e nel resto del mondo. La spiegazione principale con la quale molti concordano riguarda la centralità che il mondo occidentale dà al corpo. Il motivo dietro a questa forte distinzione risiede nel fatto che nel mondo occidentale, gli aspetti visibili del corpo di una persona vengono usati come caratteri per distinguere la persona stessa. Nelle società non occidentali, la vista intesa come senso, viene valorizzata meno. Per esempio, nella tradizione Yoruba la distinzione di genere viene intesa come una costruzione sociale, e non come una differenza biologica. Nel loro caso, una persona viene identificata attraverso dei tratti distintivi che non sono visibili, ma vengono valorizzati altri sensi, soprattutto l'udito. Inoltre, i teorici Africani si sono soffermati a lungo anche sul tema dell'identità culturale. A loro avviso, c'è una forte differenza nelle basi sulle quali si è costruita l'identità culturale delle società Africane e quella delle culture occidentali. Il fatto che sia le donne che gli uomini partecipino in tutti gli ambiti della società, politico,

economico, sociale, religioso etc. ha come conseguenza un sentimento di identità culturale molto forte, anche dovuto al fatto che tutte le parti in questione portino rispetto per gli altri e per il lavoro svolto in questi ambiti. Gli uomini e le donne sono complementari in ogni aspetto gestionale, e questo denota il fatto che all'interno della società non vi siano distinzioni di genere. Tuttavia, pensare di portare questa struttura sociale in occidente è impossibile. Questa teoria è supportata dalla teoria di Engels sull'origine dello stato. Nella sua analisi, il filosofo tedesco denota il fatto che le società si siano fondate su delle strutture fortemente patriarcali. Questa tesi è supportata da due argomentazioni. La prima è l'idea che l'ultimo stadio della famiglia, dal quale si sono formate poi le società, fosse di tipo monogamo. Questa costruzione monogama era impari, poiché gli uomini avevano più libertà delle donne, soprattutto nell'antica Grecia, dove le donne venivano vinte come trofei di guerra e prese come spose o come schiave, ma in entrambi i casi erano legate alla figura maschile di riferimento. La seconda argomentazione a favore della tesi di Engels risiede nell'idea che il patriarcato fosse causato dallo sviluppo della proprietà privata. Dividendo le sfere di competenza, gli uomini dovendosi occupare della guerra, della caccia e della fornitura di risorse hanno rapidamente acquisito la possibilità di possedere e quindi di guidare il commercio. Per questo motivo la proprietà privata si è spostata nelle mani degli uomini, e le donne hanno dovuto seguire questo andamento, ma senza usufruire dei vantaggi di avere possedimenti. La teoria di Engels mette in evidenza il fatto che la dottrina del patriarcato è insita nella struttura ideologica delle società occidentali, quindi pensare di sovvertirla imponendo un'organizzazione di tipo matriarcale o di tipo matrilineare è un'impresa irrealizzabile.

Vista l'impossibilità di modificare la struttura in sé della società, è necessario capire come possono le società matriarcali e matrilineari aiutare ad ottenere il raggiungimento della parità di genere. Le vittorie ottenute attraverso i movimenti di emancipazione femminile del ventesimo secolo sono state la conquista di diritti fondamentali in ambito economico, politico, lavorativo e socio-culturale. Il diritto di voto, leggi su divorzio e l'abolizione del delitto d'onore sono solo tre esempi dei traguardi ottenuti attraverso i movimenti e le rivolte per abbattere la discriminazione. Tuttavia, queste battaglie vinte non sono sinonimo di ottenimento della parità di genere. Analizzando le lotte che vengono portate avanti nel ventunesimo secolo a sostenimento dell'uguaglianza tra i sessi, possiamo notare che le sfere di interesse siano diventate meno generiche, andando verso richieste più specifiche. Due esempi in sostegno di questa tesi sono: in primo luogo, la lotta portata avanti da molte donne per abbattere gli stereotipi sul corpo femminile diventando padrone legittime di esso, e poi, il tentativo di stravolgere il vocabolario, che spesso propende verso delle espressioni maschiliste. Il linguaggio rappresenta un forte strumento di integrazione, e spesso favorisce i cambiamenti culturali. Queste lotte rappresentano il tentativo di modificare la struttura ideologica e culturale nelle sue radici più profonde per abbattere ogni tipo di differenza tra donna e uomo. Non sono altro che il tentativo inconsapevole di raggiungere quelle che nelle società matriarcali e matrilineari sono le basi per le quali non esiste proprio un concetto di gender gap, ed è proprio questo l'anello di congiunzione tra le due culture. Come visto in precedenza, secondo numerosi filosofi, sociologi e antropologi Africani, nelle culture analizzate in questo elaborato non esiste la distinzione di genere come caratteristica dell'individuo. La prima teoria a sostegno di

questa tesi riguarda proprio la centralità del corpo. L'importanza data ai tratti estetici come elementi caratterizzanti del singolo ha portato alla stereotipizzazione del corpo, in particolare quello femminile. Sotto questo aspetto, dalle società matriarcali e matrilineari si può trarre proprio l'aspetto legato all'individuo. Il cambio radicale nell'ideologia potrebbe avvenire cercando di dare meno importanza all'estetica e focalizzandosi su altri aspetti come la personalità e le qualità di una persona ed usando questi come elementi caratterizzanti e descrittivi. Il secondo aspetto sul quale le società matriarcali e matrilineari possono aiutare il resto del mondo è quello dell'identità culturale e la suddivisione del lavoro. Permettere a ciascun singolo, indipendentemente dal sesso, di partecipare attivamente in tutti ambiti di una società, permette un rafforzamento dell'unione nell'identità culturale e lascia da parte le discriminazioni e le distinzioni.

Per concludere, è importante sottolineare come da questi due aspetti, il resto del mondo abbia da imparare e possa prenderli come elementi chiave nella lotta contro la disuguaglianza. La soluzione non risiede dunque nell'adottare direttamente una struttura sociale analoga a quelle società, ma nell'essere coscienti che è necessario un cambio radicale nel pensiero delle persone, ed essere aperti a questo cambiamento è il primo passo verso l'obiettivo 5 dell'Agenda 2030 sugli obiettivi di sviluppo sostenibile.