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Matriarchal Societies and the Division of Labour: Rethinking Economic and Gender Paradigms

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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary world is marked by deepening gender disparity, growing political instability, and a global economic inequality tied to capitalistic structures embedded within society, shaped by Western-centric narratives on ownership, accumulation, and patriarchal hierarchies. Such narratives are especially rooted in the colonial legacy that imposed male-centered administrations and ownership-based systems across diverse societies, often devaluing indigenous and non-Western modes of social organisations. During the course of history, various scholars and researchers, such as Martell, Professor of Political Sociology at the University of Sussex, noticed that these global issues continued to be approached with Western strategies that did not necessarily provide efficient and innovative solutions (Martell, 2024, 1). In this perspective, alternative social structures, like matrilineal and matriarchal societies, offer a critical framework to question dominant social and economic systems and to look for different approaches to such issues. The following dissertation aims at studying how ethnographic accounts of matrilineal and so-called matriarchal societies challenge dominant economic and gender paradigms, not only to question the universality of patriarchal and capitalist assumptions, but also to explore how these alternative systems can provide examples for more egalitarian and sustainable models of organisation. An additional element that will be taken into consideration in such an evaluation is the role of functional division of labour as a possible indicator of equality within societies, being a principle not only with symbolic relevance, but also applied in everyday life. By looking at how labour is organised and shared, it is possible to gather more insights on gendered power relations, evaluating whether a distribution of resources and responsibilities reinforce or challenge systemic inequalities.

In addition to the academic relevance of this topic, this research is also the result of a personal interest in the relationship between gender and economic behaviour. I initially became interested in the topic from an economic perspective aiming to observe women's relations with work and money, and to possibly distinct behavioural patterns from those that result from social pressures and constructs. I eventually expanded the scope to observe the same themes for other social and political aspects, and turned to matriarchal studies to test if different settings revealed different outcomes in terms of gender roles and social organisation. On a bigger scale, social stereotypes, even unconsciously, continue to dictate social norms and shape economic, political, social structures, and responses to challenges, reinforcing traditional power dynamics and limiting structural innovation. In the words of the Italian economist Azzurra Rinaldi, patriarchy constrains both men and women into rigid roles that prevent either from truly expressing themselves (Rinaldi, 2023, 15). As a consequence, overcoming gender inequality would benefit both genders, not only women's experiences,

allowing for more inclusive social systems, and exploring different models could inspire practical pathways towards such a transformation.

The debate surrounding matriarchal studies has been subject to controversy and conceptual ambiguity, which require a clarification of some key-concepts, such as the definitions of "matriarchy", "patriarchy", and of gender and economic paradigms. The term "patriarchy" commonly refers to the dominion of men over women, exercised through economic, political, and domestic oppression. The concept of "matriarchy" has been used as a mirror opposite of patriarchy, meaning a dominance of women over men, but in the context of this dissertation it is understood as referring to women-centered societies based on principles of equality and balanced division of roles. Such social organisations generally trace descent through the mother's line and equally divide political, economic, and domestic responsibilities. This means that power is not completely held by one gender over the other, but rather shared between the two. Matriarchal models of organisation have been used as references by feminist movements to analyse and challenge systems of oppression and to envision alternative ways to organise society. As a consequence, they developed their own understandings of gendered division of labour and power relations. Marxist feminists link women's oppression to capitalism, and argue that only a change in the economic structure can dismantle this system. In their account, capitalism profits by exploiting women's unpaid housework, which otherwise would have to be done by men and compensated with a salary, and reinforces such practices as a way to reduce labour costs (Walby, 1990, 25-60). Social feminists share Marxists' belief that society is shaped by the mode of production, but also recognise the complicity of a broader system in sustaining oppression. As a result, gender relations are not only shaped by capitalism, but also by pre-existing cultural and ideological structures that should be addressed (Martell, 2024, 112-135). By contrast, radical feminists attribute gendered power relations to a distinct patriarchal system often built on beliefs of a biological male superiority that needed to be addressed with a change in consciousness (Monagle, 2018, 340-348).

These definitions will be explored more in depth in chapter one, which provides the theoretical grounding of the research, outlining fundamental concepts of matriarchal studies, as well as taking into consideration feminist discourse on power and labour, and anthropological studies attesting the existence of matrilineal societies. Chapter two is going to present a comparative ethnographic analysis of the case studies of the Mosuo of China and the Asante of Ghana, observing their socio-economic organisation and systems of kinship, labour, and authority, in order to develop a grounded understanding of the functioning of matrilineal societies. Such findings are based on secondary analysis of published ethnographic studies, drawing particularly from anthropologists and researchers who have conducted long-term fieldwork among the Mosuo and the Asante. Lastly, chapter three is going to delve into the theoretical reflection on feminist engagement with the concept of "matriarchy" and how it can influence contemporary socio-political thought,

with particular attention to the tension between myth and reality. The overall approach will be interdisciplinary, combining aspects and studies that draw from anthropology, feminist theory, and political economy.

Overall, this dissertation argues that ethnographic accounts of matrilineal and so-called matriarchal societies can reveal fundamental challenges to dominant economic and gender paradigms through alternative kinship structures, value systems, and division of labour. These models not only disrupt Western conceptions of gender roles, but also present sustainable socio-economic structures that can decenter ownership, accumulation, and, to some degree, hierarchy.

CHAPTER ONE

Theoretical Framework: Matriarchy, Patriarchy, and Feminist Theories

The following chapter explores the basic concepts related to matriarchal studies, with the aim of presenting a clear framework through which various perspectives on gendered social structures have been examined. In particular, the focus will be on the notions of "matriarchy" and "patriarchy", and how these have been interpreted within feminist theory. On the one hand, "patriarchy" is often understood as a system of male domination, in which women are subordinated and controlled. On the other hand, the idea of "matriarchy" encompasses a wider spectrum of definitions which can range from a female rule to women-centered, but egalitarian systems. In order to provide a clearer understanding of such concepts, the chapter traces their historical and ideological developments and examines how they have been used by different feminist schools of thought. Finally, it considers some ethnographic studies conducted in South America, assessing the existence of different social organisations that challenge the Western patriarchal models.

1.1 *Defining Matriarchy: Origins and Interpretations*

The term "matriarchy" has been subject to different uses and interpretations by scholars, depending on their academic backgrounds. Birx identifies within the existing literature two possible meanings: a society controlled and governed by women, and a society structured around women as reference figures for matters such as identification of descent, family, or place of residence, and those regarding economy (Birx, 2005). The first definition was mainly used by feminists as a way to present an alternative to the existing and flawed patriarchal society, while the second was born from historical studies on the evolution of society. It is important to highlight that in the second understanding of this term "matriarchy" is not the direct opposite of patriarchy, as it does not mirror it with a domination of men by women, and does not present hierarchical structures based on gender (Birx, 2005).

Historically speaking, the studies connected to this second view present matriarchy as an early stage of social evolution, which was later 'overcome by the "higher" stage of the "male principle"' (Birx, 2005). One of the first scholars to present this perspective was the Swiss jurist Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815–1887), who used classical Greek sources that hinted at women-dominated societies in prehistory as the main base for his theory. In his understanding, at the time they had no clear notion of the reproductive process, and it was when men discovered paternity that they started wanting to assert dominance over women and identify

children as their direct descendants (Birx, 2005). Bachofen's theory represented a starting point for following scholars such as Herbert Spencer, Friedrich Engels, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who in many cases included a theory of prehistoric societies in which women dominated. In particular, the supremacy of women was seen as a way to contrast the existing patriarchal structures that were causing dysfunctional dynamics in society (Birx, 2005).

In the early 1970s, new archeological discoveries led to a reinterpretation of matriarchal prehistory. Second-wave feminists, such as Marija Gimbutas and Elizabeth Fisher, used neolithic sites as the main proof of the existence of peaceful matriarchal societies who were later disrupted by the arrival of Indo-Europeans groups. Heide Goettner-Abendroth can be placed in this framework as an extension of this wave. In her book *Matriarchal Societies of the Past and the Rise of Patriarchy*, she presents an alternative timeline of prehistory to the one provided by the more common concept of history marked 'by the ideology of patriarchal dominance', with the aim of identifying the moment in which societies shifted from a matriarchal structure to a patriarchal one (Goettner-Abendroth, 2022, 16). Heide Goettner-Abendroth analyses three periods: the Paleolithic, the Neolithic, that both presented matriarchal structures, and the Bronze Age, in which a transformation towards a more patriarchal organisation began. Initial matriarchal societies were peaceful settlements built on economies of balance, in which goods were equally redistributed within society, division of labour, which saw men and women splitting complementary duties, and social equality, instead of hierarchies. The author identifies two main elements that determined the matriarchal structure of early societies: the absence of a concept of 'genealogy', and the role of women as the main providers (Goettner-Abendroth, 2022, 40-55). The first implies that the little knowledge they had on procreation did not present them with the need to check and recognise paternity. As a consequence, there was no concept of monogamy, women had no restrictions, and clans were created around the mother's line, which was more easily recognised. At the same time, women were responsible for the survival of the species, both as mothers and gatherers, as they took care of agriculture and animal husbandry, which were the main sources of survival. So, women usually found themselves dealing with the most important decisions regarding their clan. In Goettner-Abendroth's account, the shift towards patriarchy started as a consequence of climatic changes and the rise of armed conflicts (Goettner-Abendroth, 2022, 247-307). The scarcity of natural resources, such as crop and water, determined by an increasingly dry climate, led to two decisive elements that changed the structure of societies: conflicts and invasions between settlements to secure goods for survival, and the beginning of the concept of ownership. For example, in the European Steppe, the herder warrior culture arose, bringing the establishment of chieftainships and warrior elites who could acquire cattle as private property and needed to have an assurance of their patrilineality to be able to pass their possessions on to their legitimate sons. To do so, women were constricted into monogamy, as property of ruling men to bear their children, and under their control, and society shifted towards patrilocality (Goettner-Abendroth,

2022, 247-307). A different example is West Asia, in which the scarcity of water led to a centralization of the irrigation system and a migration towards large cities. When people moved to the cities, social units shifted from clans to small family groups, in which women could only contribute to the textile industries, while men juggled various crafts. In addition, the superiority of male activity began because the hierarchical management of the irrigation system was exclusively in the male hands of the city council, whose members progressively started taking decisions on their own. All of these changes, backed by the increasing precariousness consequence of climatic changes and wars, eventually established patriarchy as the main social organisation (Goettner-Abendroth, 2022, 309-357).

Overall, these views present "matriarchy" as a complex form of organisation rooted in egalitarian principles, communal economies, and female-centered structures, that found concrete applications in history. According to the theories discussed, such a model was established prior to the now-dominant patriarchal organisation and has been studied by various scholars as a meaningful alternative to it.

1.2 *Understanding Patriarchy: From Classical Theory to Feminist Critique*

In order to have a clear understanding of the concept of "matriarchy", it is important to also define "patriarchy". Walby, citing a study of Pateman, argues that originally the idea of patriarchy was employed mainly by social scientists, such as Weber, to describe systems in which men held the most authority based on their roles as heads of households (Walby, 1990, 1-24). However, since then, the concept has been presented with different meanings. In the 1960s and 1970s, feminist scholars started using it to address the systematic domination of men over women, and question the idea that such a system is naturally determined. Counterarguments to their definitions were often based on biological and naturalistic discourses comparing the two sexes. For example, nineteenth century patriarchal extremists believed that women were at 'a lower stage of evolution than men' (Pateman, 1988, 226), while classical theorists identified sexual difference as 'the difference between subordination and freedom' (Pateman, 1988, 226). Overall, a common concept was that of biological determinism, and the idea that associated all men to dominance and all women to subordination, an argument that later became part of a wider debate on essentialism in feminist theory (Walby, 1990, 1-24).

More recently, Sylvia Walby defined the concept of patriarchy as 'a system of social structures and practices, wherein men dominate, exploit and suppress women' (Walby, 1990, 20), and she highlighted that these structures find such a wide application globally due to a common pattern of gendered division of labour, present both within the household and in the broader economy, that they also help reinforce. Walby's depiction of patriarchy sits on a rejection of biological determinism, and visualizes it as a concept with

different levels of abstractions. The most abstract level is the network of relationships within society, and it is composed of six structures: paid work, housework, sexuality, culture, violence and the state (Walby, 1990, 1-24). This implies that within society women are exploited at every level. In the households, their labour is undervalued and not retributed as a proper job, while in the labour market, women only have access to less skilled and lower paying jobs. These mechanisms are perpetuated and reinforced by the state which 'has a systematic bias towards patriarchal interests in its policies and actions' (Walby, 1990, 21), also resulting in a legitimization of male violence towards women, which is systematically condoned by the institutions. The six structures that make up the system of patriarchy can interact with each other in different ways, leading to diverse and continually evolving forms of patriarchy.

Walby's definition of patriarchy reflects the overall perspective shared by most feminists. However, in this framework, different feminist schools of thought developed their own analysis of gender inequality, and possible responses to such an issue. For example, radical feminism defines patriarchy as a system of domination 'in which men as a group dominate women as a group and are the main beneficiaries of the subordination of women' (Walby, 1990, 3), without possibly attributing this system of social inequality to other underlying factors. Everyday habits such as the distribution of chores in the household or the tendency to interrupt in conversations are thought to reflect the patriarchal structure. On the other hand, Marxist feminists consider gender inequality a direct result of capitalism and not a distinct system to identify as "patriarchy" (Walby, 1990, 3-4). In particular, gender relations are strictly connected to class relations in the social structures and they are determined by exploitation of one class by another. However, both these views were criticised, radical feminists for a tendency towards essentialism, and Marxist feminists for excessively focusing on capitalism as the main cause of gender inequality.

A recurring theme in the analyses of gender inequality as a consequence of patriarchy seems to be the role of the division of labour. According to Maria Mies, an apparently simple division of responsibilities hides the underlying idea that men's tasks are usually seen as productive and rational, proper "labour", while women's tasks are considered to be determined by nature, therefore not as demanding or 'conscious' (Mies, 1998, 46). A further consequence is 'occupational segregation', which Walby, drawing from Hartmann (1979), describes as the tendency in the labour market for men to keep access to the best paid jobs for themselves, while in the household women do more work than them (Walby, 1990, 25-60). These two aspects together strengthen both the social organisation presented by patriarchy and the cultural beliefs that perpetuate it, as women's disadvantaged position leaves them with little choice in marriage arrangements and limits their employment opportunities due to their obligations within the household (Walby, 1990, 1-24).

Over the course of history, the concept of patriarchy has expanded through the contributions of various scholars to encompass a variety of social aspects, both in the private and public sphere, and has developed into a comprehensive framework for understanding gender relations. Building on this foundation, different feminist traditions have studied possible responses to gender inequality, among them, socialist and Marxist feminists have offered relevant perspectives.

1.3 *Feminist Social Analyses: Marxist and Socialist Perspectives*

A definition of patriarchy allows to define a framework, and identify ways in which a different social organisation, such as a matriarchy, could improve certain dynamics. For example, Engels, and later marxist feminists, presented patriarchal structures as a 'necessary part of capitalist societies' (Littig, 2013, 42-43). In a similar way, ecofeminists, especially those following the Bielefeld approach, linked patriarchal systems to capitalist modes of production, identifying the 'boundless capitalist utilisation logic' as the driving force of internationally active exploitation (Littig, 2013, 43). As a consequence, by referencing Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies, Littig explains that the only effective feminist response is to re-establish subsistence-based economic practices and disengage from capitalist-driven consumerism (Littig, 2013, 43). Stepping just a bit further from matriarchal studies, other ecofeminist theories expanded on the idea of superiority of women by suggesting that they are especially attuned to the destruction of nature due to their social and biological roles. This "privilege" is attributed to women's oppression, nurturing roles, reproductive capacity, or specific lived experiences (Littig, 2013, 14). However, some critics have claimed that these arguments risk falling into the so-called 'essentialist trap'. As Pepper (1996) explains, 'If the logic of patriarchal domination lies in human biology [...] any kind of social formation will be faced with the problem of patriarchal domination' (Littig, 2013, 134). Essentialist thinking "naturalizes" the link between women and nature, regardless of whether this relationship is seen as historical or biological, which may limit the idea of men being able to engage meaningfully in ecological or feminist politics.

Two schools of thought that presented influential perspectives on patriarchal dynamics and gender inequality are Marxism and socialist feminism. Walby noticed that, despite Marx's disregard of feminist issues, Engels was one of the first marxist to present a perspective which included an analysis of gender inequality, grounding it in the division of labour between men and women, and its role in shaping class dynamics (Walby, 1990, 61-89). According to his analysis, the political and ideological superstructure was determined by a material base composed of two parts, production and reproduction, which were divided between the two sexes. As a consequence, the balance of power between genders was seen as being dependent on the importance given to those two "tasks", and, by extension, to those carrying them out. Engels also outlined an historical timeline which saw matriarchy being the main social organisation in early human history, and later overthrown by the development of class society. The latter was characterized by the

desire to own productive surpluses, and to ensure one's inheritance to sons by imposing monogamy and strict control of wives (Walby, 1990, 61-89). Despite being criticised for being ahistorical and biologically reductive, Engels' perspective opened the door to broader debates within Marxist theory. Building on this, Einstein suggested that capitalist and patriarchal structures are so intertwined that they form an 'interdependent system' in which capitalism shapes the economic system in the pursuit of profit, while patriarchy provides the social order and control which allows the first to operate (Walby, 1990, 150-172). These two systems merge at the state level through institutions. In this regard, McIntosh (1978), as reported by Walby, suggested that, in particular, the state plays an active role in the oppression of women, because it reinforces both capitalist and patriarchal structures by promoting an idea of household that benefits men, in which women are required to fulfill unpaid domestic responsibilities (Walby, 1990, 150-172).

Overall, Marxist feminists link gender inequality and the patriarchal structure to capitalist relations, and argue that in order to achieve women's liberation it is first necessary to dismantle the capitalist system that benefits from the exploitation of this class. Marxist feminism has been criticised for focusing excessively on the economic sphere and neglecting aspects that hint to the possibility of patriarchal dynamics pre-dating capitalism. For example, as shown by Walby, Hartmann (1979) argues that the occupational segregation of women has been used as a tool by men to maintain control over the course of history, and in various spheres of society (Walby, 1990, 25-60). For example, when it comes to marriage agreements, men with higher-paying jobs hold a privileged position due to their economic power, allowing them to secure wives who will take care of children and the majority of the housework, while women cannot refuse, for they have no personal source of income (Walby, 1990, 25-60). Women's domestic work prevents them from accessing higher paying jobs which require training, creating a vicious circle. At the same time, broader criticisms have been made against Marxism as a revolutionary organisation. Jaggar highlights that especially in the 1960s the women's liberation movement argued that the traditional Marxist strategies and approaches to social change were inherently sexist (Jaggar, 1983, 229-244). This has been attributed to various aspects. On the one hand, revolutionary organisations usually emerge and survive in extremely oppressive societies and it is likely that some of the values of such societies might be absorbed by individuals, even unconsciously (Jaggar, 1983, 229-244). On the other hand, Jaggar notices that male dominance is believed to be embedded in the traditional conception of the revolutionary leader, who is politically experienced, highly trained and operating the party with 'rigid discipline and with a high degree of centralization' (Jaggar, 1983, 229-244). Radical feminists have criticised this model for placing too much emphasis on individual action rather than collective, and for romanticizing the strength of male figures, failing to recognise the equally important support provided by women (Jaggar, 1983, 229-244). In addition, the traditional Marxist view perceives capitalism as the cause of most social dysfunctions and exclusively

focuses on overthrowing such a system, at the expense of feminist issues, and putting women in a position considered less strategically important.

By comparison, socialist feminism builds on Marxist theory and extends it by emphasising the importance of gender and the sexual division of labour in shaping society. In particular, it shares Marxism's view that human nature is shaped by both social and productive aspects, but argues that activities such as procreation are also forms of productive labour, and should be analysed alongside waged work and the wider economic structure (Jaggar, 1983, 125-148). This perspective rejects the idea that differences between men and women are biologically fixed, and instead presents them as socially constructed and historically changeable. In addition, socialist feminists argue that true freedom must extend to all areas of life, and that achieving this requires technological, economic, and social transformations, such as access to contraception and the reorganisation of caregiving and domestic labour (Jaggar, 1983, 147). According to Martell, one of the criticisms directed towards socialism highlights the excessive focus put on class as the key element separating society based on benefits and power, and overlooks cultural and ideological structures that existed before capitalism and which would continue to be present in a socialist society (Martell, 2024, 112-135). Compared to their male counterparts, women face additional layers of oppression that derive from long-existing ideologies of patriarchy, and not just capitalist economic structures. As a consequence, it is not enough to change the economic system if the cultural and ideological structures stay the same. Martell explains that, according to these critiques, although socialism alone is not considered as an efficient answer to gender inequality, many socialist feminists consider it to be congruent with feminism, and argue that it only needs to be adapted to include broader aspects of society (Martell, 2024, 129).

For both Marxist and socialist feminists, a big challenge to overcome seems to be the fact that historical examples did not align with their expectations. Maria Mies (1998) argues that, in many aspects, socialist countries still present patriarchal relations. Revolutions in such states brought changes in the division of labour but not a long-lasting 'change of consciousness'. As a consequence, the old social order was restored, and women, in spite of their contributions, were not integrated within the new institutions, and, instead, they were relegated to their traditional responsibilities within the household and the 'subsidiary economy', while men were given opportunities for advancement (Mies, 1998, 194-198).

1.4 *Matriarchal Societies: Ethnographic Studies in South America*

South America has been one of the references for matriarchal studies as it presents historical and ethnographic evidence of non-patriarchal, matrifocal, and matrilineal organisations that offer alternatives to Western social structures. Wilhelm Schmidt anticipated the theory presented by Heide Goettner-Aberndtroth

by suggesting a similar interpretation of history, with matrilineal groups turning into patriarchal societies as the herder warrior cultures emerged, and argues that South America had slightly different dynamics that led to a slower shift towards patriarchal structures. In particular, Schmidt argued that South America was a region where matrilocal marriage was a common practice within mother-right cultures, so the following decline of women's property rights was not as widespread or impactful as in other parts of the world (Schmidt, 1935, 244-256). Many 'horticultural' societies remained highly dependent on cultivated land, which was owned by women, causing their economic superiority and leading to matrilocal marital arrangements. In particular, Schmidt noticed that this phenomenon was especially concentrated among the Carib and Arawak tribes of the Antilles, and the northwest coast of South America, and, although more irregularly, it was also present among the Pareci, the Caraya, the Bororo, and some Chaco tribes (Schmidt, 1935, 244-256).

Some forms of matrifocal structures survived even during colonial times. Helen Safa reported that, according to historical data, indigenous populations in colonial South America, including areas beyond the Caribbean, such as Mexico, Brazil, and Central America, presented matrifocal patterns of family organisation (Safa, 2008, 317). Upon their arrival, colonisers introduced slavery and confined legal marriages to class and racial equals, to maintain racial and class superiority. In particular, the Anglophone Caribbean presented a more rigid system of slavery, prohibiting slave marriages and failing to recognise legal rights or personal identity, contrary to the Hispanic Caribbean administration (Safa, 2008, 318). At the same time, Safa argues that 'the barriers between colonizer and colonized were not as great in the Hispanic Caribbean as they were in the Anglophone Caribbean and other colonial areas' (Safa, 2008, 318). This determined different outcomes after the abolition. In areas of the Anglophone Caribbean with available land (like Jamaica), former slaves formed independent villages, and male authority was reinforced by missionaries who promoted formal marriage and the nuclear family, as requirements for church membership and community stability. On smaller islands like Barbados, male migration determined the presence of multiple female-headed households. In Cuba, U.S. influence reinforced a strong patriarchal ideology which limited women's civil and political rights. Overall, these colonial experiences shaped social, economic, and familial structures among Afro-descendant populations in South America (Safa, 2008, 314-334).

Today, an example of a matrilineal community is the one established in Juchitan (Oaxaca, Mexico), which has been the object of study for various scholars. According to Taylor, in this society, the traditional gendered division of labour expects women to be 'entrepreneurs', responsible for community and household affairs, while men manage 'behind-the-scenes labor', such as in the fields or as fishermen (Taylor, 2006, 821). This division of labour dates back to pre-colonial times, when Aztec women controlled trade. However, this economic differentiation has never caused inequality, as the responsibilities shared between

men and women are considered of equal importance within society (Taylor, 2006, 821). Bennholdt-Thomsen specifies that work is appreciated for its intrinsic value and the skills it highlights, rather than a way to increase wealth, which is only a tool to buy food (Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1989, 4). Still, every woman has her own income, which is used to provide for her children. Kinship systems are organised around the mother's line, and matrilocality tends to be the norm (Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1989, 3).

Ultimately, these ongoing studies in South America offer interesting insights into different social organisations, challenging the Western standard represented by patriarchy, and highlighting the resilience and significance of women's economic power in regards to modern challenges.

1.5 *Conclusions*

The theoretical approaches discussed represent the main frameworks through which the key-concepts of matriarchal studies have been explored. Particularly relevant are the clarifications made by various scholars regarding the definition of "matriarchy", which, especially in reference to anthropological studies, is not to be meant as a mirror opposite of patriarchy, but rather refers to egalitarian societies with a balanced division of roles between genders and no hierarchical structure. From a more theoretical perspective, this type of organisation was both a source of inspiration and debate among feminist movements, who tried to use it and adapt it to their goals. For example, Marxist feminists focused specifically on the structural implications of matriarchal organisations, and how women's emancipation could be achieved by changing the economic system. On the other hand, more radical schools of thoughts, such as ecofeminists, followed an interpretation that highlighted the biological distinction between the two sexes, giving particular relevance to women's connection to nature and environmental concerns. In addition, the validity of the debates surrounding the concept of matriarchy was supported by a series of studies on its historical and anthropological existence. Archeological findings have shown the possibility that prehistoric societies presented matriarchal elements, while ethnological studies have reported similar characteristics among indigenous societies, such as in the Juchitan area. These perspectives present an alternative framework to understand gender relations and to develop alternative models based on balance, inclusivity and cooperation.

CHAPTER TWO

Ethnographic Case Studies of Matrilineal Societies: A Comparative Analysis of the Mosuo (Na) and the Asante

One of the criticisms often directed at matriarchal theorists is their lack of empirical evidence in support of their theses. From this perspective, ethnological and anthropological studies offer a valuable addition to the debate surrounding matriarchal systems. In order to address this concern, the following chapter is going to analyse two cases: the Mosuo of China, and the Asante of Ghana, both considered relevant for their distinct cultural backgrounds and geographical contexts, as well as shared matrilineal structures. The first two sections will present the socio-economic organisations and kinship systems of the Mosuo and the Asante, respectively, while the third and fourth sections will compare how the two manage gendered division of labour and approach globalization and economic change. Lastly, the fifth section will observe how these societies have evolved throughout history, additionally looking for possible evidence of either erosion or resilience of their matrilineal systems.

2.1 *Kinship and Socio-Economic Organisation Among the Mosuo of China*

The Mosuo are a Chinese ethnic group deriving from an ancient population of the Tibeto-Qin plateau (northwestern China). They can be distinguished into 4 groups, one of them being the Na, who live in the Yongning basin and account for approximately 30,000 people. One of the anthropologists who studied this population in depth is Cai Hua. Between the 1980s and the 1990s he conducted a series of ethnographic studies and reported his findings in his book *A Society without Fathers or Husbands: The Na of China*. The author presents the Na as a society founded on matrilinearity as the absolute determinant of consanguinity, matrilocality, and communal property (Cai Hua, 2001, 459-476). Among the Na, the concept of matriliny is 'primordial' due to the fact that people are born from women, making the female gender 'anterior' and the male 'posterior' (Cai Hua, 2001, 459-476). As a consequence, consanguinity is exclusively matrilineal, meaning that the individual is identified through the mother's line, and this is the most important parameter for personal identification. Kinship is organised around the "matrilignée", which is the fundamental unit of society and consists of all consanguineal relatives, those who share the same maternal ancestor. The members of a "lignée" share their possessions, residence, and work together, as there is no concept of individual property. In addition, everyone is recognised the same rights and is expected to demonstrate mutual care. For example, older members raise younger ones, who, in return, will take care of them in their old age. Property is also passed on from one generation to the other according to matrilineal descent, without

involving formal inheritance issues. Cai Hua specifies that their system does not present marriage as a custom (Cai Hua, 2001, 459-476). In his account, this is an additional element that preserves a matrilineal organisation as opposed to that based on family, with which the institution of marriage is associated. Instead, the process of mating revolves around nocturnal visits to women from men who exclusively belong to non-consanguineal "lignée". The encounter does not entail any obligation and it does not involve the transfer of women or men between non-consanguineal groups, instead, those involved will continue living with their "lignée". As a consequence, men do not have children by right, and their sons and daughters are raised in their mother's home and by her "lignée". The biological connection to the mother is enough to establish the legitimacy of the children, and it is the maternal uncle who plays a role equivalent to that of the father.

From an economic perspective, Cai Hua explains that, due to the geography of these territories, the Na mainly rely on agriculture, livestock, and weaving (Cai Hua, 2001, 35-47). They mostly cultivate oats, manqin (Brassica rapa), flax, corn, wheat, potatoes, sunflowers, soybeans, vegetables such as beans, pumpkins, and milkweed, and rice, only since the 1950s. They employ a mixture of metal tools, imported from neighbouring regions, and wooden tools that they fabricate themselves. Each person works seven hours a day for seven months a year and receives around 500 kilos of grain in return for handling a half hectare of land. The livestock they raise mainly consists of buffalo, cows, horses, mules, which they also use for transportation of crops and manure, chicken, and pigs. Particularly pork is considered a symbol of wealth and a valuable good, as it is the food used for guests, funeral offerings, payments, and trade of grain, salt, tea, and cotton, as a form of currency. Finally, Cai Hua presents spinning and weaving as the main types of crafts practiced not only to make tools and clothes for personal use, but also to trade for grain, tea, salt, and brown sugar (Cai Hua, 2001, 35-47).

2.2 *Kinship and Socio-Economic Organisation Among the Asante of Ghana*

The Asante are one of the major ethnic groups in Ghana, and part of the larger Akan people who have lived in this region since pre-colonial times. The British invasion at the end of the 19th century and other external influences deeply transformed the social and political landscape of West Africa, also affecting the Asante population. Ampofo and Atobrah have described aspects of the Asante socio-economic organisation in pre-colonial times, including its connection to kinship practices. According to the two authors, among the Asante lineage was traced following the mother's line, a practice founded on the belief that a child inherits the spiritual essence, or 'sunsum', from the father, and the life-blood, or 'mogya', from the mother (Ampofo and Atobrah, 2023, 2-4). Inheritance was passed on from mothers to daughters, while men's possessions were left to their sisters' sons. However, while alive, all children were recognised as having the right to use their father's property. The Asante also practiced marriage and followed a duolocal system when it came to

choosing a residence. This meant that the two spouses would continue to live with their respective matrilineal groups after marriage. Ampofo and Atobrah also clarify that children most often lived in the maternal home or the original matrilineal residence, if the mother decided to move into her husband's house (Ampofo and Atobrah, 2023, 2-4). According to Salifu, this kinship system is still practiced among contemporary Asante. The biological descent is still identified through the mother's line and many couples live in their matrilineal residences, although some decide to move in together in a different house (Salifu, 2020, 686).

From a socio-economic perspective a distinction needs to be made between pre-colonial and contemporary Asante. Arhin, in his article *Peasants in 19th-Century Asante*, describes Asante prior to the British occupation at the end of the 19th century as organised into a highly centralized state consisting of autonomous political communities, called "oman", that depended on the "Asantehene", the king. Land was officially controlled by the state, but effectively managed by the various matrilineages who owned it (Arhin et al., 1983, 471-474). The basic political units of the state were the villages made up of various matrilineal families, and led by a representative that was elected among the royal matrilineage descendants who founded the settlement. The representative and the heads of the other matrilineages constituted a council that handled internal disputes, regulated land issues, oversaw communal welfare like cleaning and maintenance, conducted necessary spiritual rituals, and served as the link between the village and higher administrative levels. During this time, Arhin describes the economic activities as quite varied (Arhin et al., 1983, 471-474). Agriculture constituted a valuable resource and farmers produced both for subsistence and regional trade. In addition, some villages were specialized in crafts such as weaving, pottery, metalworking, and woodworking. Two other significant activities were mining, especially for gold, and trade. Today, the Asante are only one of the ethnic groups living in the State of Ghana. Although they maintain their customary social structure and kinship system, they have to coexist with other groups with different traditions under the same State. As highlighted by Samuel K. B. Asante, in *Over a Hundred Years of a National Legal System in Ghana*, society in Ghana remains fragmented into communities governed according to different customs, while the legal framework was gradually shaped into a dual system of State Law and Customary Law, combining English Common Law with indigenous customary laws, and which are applied depending on the situation (Asante, 1987, 85-92). In contemporary times, Birmingham has described Ghana's economy as mainly reliant on cocoa cultivation, which constitutes an important source of government revenue, and the extraction of minerals such as gold, diamonds, manganese, and bauxite, which are significant sources of exports (Birmingham, 1957, 9-13). Formal wage employment is limited and most people still live in a subsistence economy based on small-scale agriculture, forestry, fishing, and trade, which is especially practiced by women. These traditional occupations continue to coexist alongside more formal sectors of Ghana's modern economy.

2.3 *Gendered Division of Labour and Political Roles*

Both the Na and the Asante present a gendered division of labour, although in different ways. Regarding the Na, from a political perspective, Cai Hua observes that each "lignée" is managed by the two chiefs, one male and one female, that usually correspond to the eldest mother and maternal uncle of the group (Cai Hua, 2001, 122-125). The female chief is assigned the affairs internal to the household, while the male chief is in charge of the external matters. The female chief's responsibility usually consists in overseeing household budgets, organising work in the house and in the fields, distributing clothes and meals, and preparing offerings to the ancestors, as well as feasts during celebrations and rituals. On the other hand, the male chief handles relationships with external affairs concerning land and livestock, and with other villagers, when help is requested or to create social ties with other "matrilignées". Based on his research, Cai Hua argues that the two chiefs do not have special privileges and usually hold their positions as long as they are able to fulfill their duties, then they are usually gradually substituted by the oldest daughter and son (Cai Hua, 2001, 122-125). However, in this case seniority is considered secondary to personal merit. In order to be chief, a member has to prove competence and impartiality, otherwise someone else is chosen. When facing an important question, the decision has to be discussed by all the members of the "lignée". However, within each "lignée", decision-making tends to be guided by the chief who is most respected, in terms of experience and personal qualities. In this context as well, seniority is valued more than gender, meaning that in some households the female chief is the highest authority, while in others, the male is. Cai Hua's research on sixty-three households reported an overall majority of female chiefs (Cai Hua, 2001, 122-125). From an economic perspective, Stephen Knight, referencing Chuan-Kang Shih's work, states that labour is not clearly divided (Knight, 2023). Men and women both pull up, rinse and bind seeds in the morning and later move to the rice fields as a collective group. Mothers both take care of house-chores and work in the fields, while all children are given equal opportunities and are seen as equally important in contributing to their household, with no distinctions based on gender.

In the case of the Asante, from a political perspective, during the pre-colonial period both men and women were recognised as having their own specific responsibilities. Men would usually fill the role of province chief, who acted as custodian of the land, although not economic manager, and that of king, who Arhin describes as representing a centralized sovereignty, responsible for land dispute arbitration and rituals (Arhin et al., 1983, 471-474). At the same time, women were assigned important roles as well, particularly, the "hemma", the female authority figure, was recognised as having a variety of powers. She could participate in the general assembly of Asante rulers and take part in the decision-making process of both judicial and legislative matters, which included declarations of war and distribution of land. She could influence decisions regarding the selection of the successor to the throne, and was the only one who could

start “impeachment proceedings” against the king. In certain situations she could even take the place of her male counterpart and perform his duties. From an economic perspective, Salifu states that men and women owned separate plots, which they inherited from their respective matrilineal families, but often joined each other’s labour to cultivate food crops (Salifu, 2020, 685-689). Farming tasks were defined by a strict gender division of labour, with men clearing the land, and women planting, nursing and harvesting. At the beginning of the 20th century, cocoa cash cropping was introduced and it became more difficult for spouses to keep separate lands. Salifu observes that when people were required to migrate to obtain land for cocoa farming, it was easier for just men to acquire it for joint cultivation (Salifu, 2020, 685-689). Today, the majority of the farming tasks are performed by women, who, in most cases, also account for the primary contribution to the family income. Salifu, referencing Clark, argues that women are expected to provide for the household’s financial needs, and consider it a way to show affection to their children and lineage, which are prioritized over their obligations to their husbands (Salifu, 2020, 685-689). They also value their economic independence and often decide to not join their personal revenues with their husbands, to have more freedom in their spending choices. In addition to farming and marketing food crops, Ampofo and Atobrah highlighted that trading activities are widely practiced by women, and in many cases constitute a vital source of funding for children's education (Ampofo and Atobrah, 2023, 8).

2.4 *Globalization and Economic Transformation*

Globalization has influenced the Na and the Asante in quite different ways, due to their different historical backgrounds. When focusing on Na society, market integration and the rise of tourism seem to be the leading factors of such reorganisations in the traditional social structures and ways of life. According to Goettner-Abendroth, a key factor was the 1983 opening of the villages on Lake Lagu to mass tourism by the Chinese government (Heide Goettner-Abendroth, 2012, 112-115). This shift introduced the Na to the money economy and brought tension within the population, especially as their culture was turned into a commodity. From this perspective, globalization is a transformative factor, reshaping social norms under the pressures of external economic demand. On the one hand, the new contact with external technologies and ideals influenced some of the younger members to move towards different cities. On the other hand, the increasing industrialization and deforestation of their regions has made it increasingly difficult for the Na to manage their agricultural activities. However, some villages learned to benefit from the new tourism and turned it into their main source of economic revenue. A study by Mattison et al. published in 2023 explored more in depth the relationship between market integration and kinship system. The research used data collected in 2017 regarding 505 households in fifteen villages, of which six were matrilineal and nine were patrilineal. The study reported that both types of villages were undergoing market integration, but in different ways and at varying speed (Mattison et al., 2023, 5). Matriarchal households seemed to engage more with tourism as

an economic activity, while patriarchal ones still relied mostly on agriculture and livestock, also due to their distance from touristic centres. In both cases, one of the major consequences observed was migration towards tourist towns and cities to work. The need for workers in roles such as cleaners, kitchen staff, tour guides and drivers especially created appealing job opportunities for the younger members of the communities, who would often send their incomes back home. According to the study, matriarchal villages witnessed an increase of wealth, resulting from their involvement with tourism, compared with their patriarchal counterparts (Mattison et al., 2023, 14-15). In addition, the researchers noticed that matriarchal villages often presented redistributive norms that allowed an even partition of income, avoiding monopolization (Mattison et al., 2023, 14-15). This practice was traced back to their custom of collective administration, which expects individuals from each household to take part in group activities and provide reciprocal cooperation in the gathering of resources through sharing and assistance. Based on the findings of the research, the higher the wealth gathered the higher the level of redistribution, showing the overall tendency to use the income obtained for the common good rather than personal gain (Mattison et al., 2023, 14-15). Again, this seems to show the resilience of the matrilineal society of the Na in the face of change and a communal approach to problem-solving. Nevertheless, the impacts of globalization on this community remain complex and layered, both highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the Na.

In a different way, the impact of globalization on the Asante economy and society is deeply rooted in their historical engagement with trade, and shaped by colonial and postcolonial transformations. Gracia Clark has stated that, historically, the Asante have a long tradition of intercontinental trade thanks to their strategic position that allowed them access to important trading routes (Clark, 2023, 149-150). Prior to the British colonisation, they presented a solid trading system with both male and female chiefs taking part in commercial activities, including providing state loans for trade. The introduction of the British administration disrupted this system and dismantled Asante trade controls to prioritize European commercial interests, undermining Asante's autonomy. Local merchants were replaced by loyal intermediaries and the Asante were restricted to cocoa farming. According to Clark, a first departure from these constraints started during the nationalist movement, when market traders, especially women, played an important role in supporting anti-colonial efforts (Clark, 2023, 158-161). Independence was followed by the official introduction into the international system. In the 1980s, under the pressures of the IMF and the World Bank, Ghana implemented structural adjustment policies that included removing price and import controls, devaluing the national currency, and cutting public services in return for foreign loans. While these reforms aimed at opening up the economy, they failed to address and include informal traders, leading to overcrowded markets, lower incomes, and tougher competition. In Clark's account, this created a sense of instability as it became difficult for traders to sustain their businesses and, as a consequence, provide economic support for their families or ensure an education for their children (Clark, 2023, 164-171). In the

1990s, Ghana's transition to a more stable electoral democracy allowed traders, especially women, to engage in politics again, even joining advisory roles where their economic expertise was recognised. Although fundamental inequalities had not completely disappeared, traders could now advocate for themselves and be heard at governmental levels as well. Today, Asante traders keep transforming through the changes and fluctuations of a liberalized economy, balancing traditional practices with the demands of a global market. Clark argues that the resilience and proactive strategies of Asante merchants through past hardships and external pressures proves their importance for national economic development, and their ability to continuously adapt to future changes (Clark, 2023, 171-172).

2.5 *Continuity and Change in Matrilineal Systems: Evidence of Resilience or Erosion*

For both the Na and the Asante there is ethnographic evidence that shows changes in their socio-economic organisations as a result of various historical processes. The Na society has transformed over the years mainly due to unavoidable engagements with the central Chinese government. Political integration and administrative reforms introduced by successive regimes have influenced both leadership structures and the traditional kinship system. Cai Hua describes how, prior to the Qing dynasty, there were no rigid laws regulating ethnic minorities (Cai Hua, 2001, 459-476). The communities were represented by the indigenous chiefs appointed, and the submission to the central government was only shown through a symbolic tribute to the court. However, as the Qing were consolidating their power they introduced new laws that allowed for tighter control. Among these, there were new regulations on the transfer of the power of the representative, called "zhifu", which partly changed the Na's kinship system. Cai Hua reports that in order to appoint an heir, the "zhifu" was required to prove the legitimacy of his eldest son, forcing the need to adopt a concept of paternity and marriage, therefore, separating from his "matrilignée" (Cai Hua, 2001, 459-476). The Na society was divided between the traditional matrilineal families and the patriarchal families of the political chiefs, which became an aristocratic stratum. As a consequence, the society started adopting a more hierarchical structure which lasts until today. Cai Hua reports that in 1956, the "zhifu" were relieved of their political responsibility, but, still, the Na were divided into three social strata: the "sipi", the "dzeka", and the "we" (Cai Hua, 2001, 49-53). The "sipi" consisted of those with the highest social status, the "lignée" descending from the zhifu's families. They adopted virilocal and patrilineal norms for the inheritance of residence and social status, so the children belonged to the father's social stratum, and introduced marriage to control the legitimacy of their descendants. The "dzeka" were the common people, the majority of the Na, still living according to matrilocal and matrilineal traditions, and the modality of the visit. Lastly, the "we" were the servants owned by a master, and who could be sold to others. Since 1956, the Na were subject to additional changes and policies imposed by the following two Chinese governments. Nevertheless, Cai Hua believes that the Na showed great adaptability to the various circumstances without

giving up their traditions and kinship system (Cai Hua, 2001, 459-476). The external influence of patriarchal cultures led to the introduction of the modality of marriage, but did not fundamentally change the traditions and core principles of the Na. Drawing from this, Heide Goettner-Abendroth argued that the Na society shows that patriarchal structures are a consequence of outside pressures and not a natural 'process of societal development' that leads matriarchal structures to adopt patriarchal patterns (Heide Goettner-Abendroth, 2012, 112-115). As a result, societies with a strong matriarchal identity show to be able to resist patriarchal pressures or reverse to their original kinship systems. According to Cai Hua, the major challenges to the survival of the Na are the contemporary changes of lifestyle connected to the introduction of this population to new salaried professions and industrialization of their region (Cai Hua, 2001, 459-476). As seen in the previous section, an additional element that revealed to have great impact on the organisation of the Na is the increase of tourism, which forced this population to engage with new economic activities and a variety of cultures.

Focusing on the Asante, one of the major factors contributing to the evolution of their society was the influence of Western States who sought to establish colonial rule over their territories. One of the most significant was the British colonial rule that lasted from 1874 to 1957. According to Ampofo and Atobrah, in order to consolidate their control over the occupied territories and "educate" those who they perceived as "uncivilized" communities, the British imposed their ideas of social organisation and legal systems to the Asante (Ampofo and Atobrah, 2023, 6-8). Only male chiefs were recognised as legitimate authorities, while women were excluded from the colonial register and not allowed to participate in the native councils or colonial courts, as they were used to. At the same time, women were denied their autonomy and their responsibilities were reduced to those of housewives, when the model of the non-working wife supported by her husband was introduced. The European slave trade reinforced the exploitation of women, and the transition from traditional farming systems to cash crops, with the introduction of cocoa cultivations, additionally widened the socio-economic disparity between men and women, relegating them to roles of simple labourers. According to Salifu, the shift towards virilocal residence was facilitated by the introduction cocoa farming, since the income from this activity allowed men to move away from their matrilineal residence more easily, and by the spread of Christianity and Islam that were making the ideals of patricentric household model and patrilineal inheritance more socially acceptable (Salifu, 2020, 689). In addition, Ampofo and Atobrah have highlighted how educational opportunities were mainly directed towards boys, preparing them for governmental roles, while girls, if granted the possibility of going to school, were taught domestic skills (Ampofo and Atobrah, 2023, 6-8). As a consequence, men had more chances to obtain paid jobs than their female counterparts. Despite these disruptions, Asante women demonstrated considerable resilience by continuing to assert their roles in both economic and political spheres. During the struggle for independence, women played an active role by organising cocoa boycotts,

preparing food for activists at rallies across the country, and recruiting people to join the movement. Such a role in the struggle for freedom as well as the Asante ability to re-establish traditional matrilineal systems seem to show the resilience of this population and the ability to adapt in the face of adverse conditions. According to Salifu, an example of women's autonomy among the Asante today is their use of microcredit (Salifu, 2020, 695). As the key figures of trading activities, women often rely on microcredit to start their businesses. In order to complete the loaning process, many formal microcredit institutions, which are still rooted in Eurocentric concepts of family, demand a male guarantor, usually the husband. However, to protect their businesses from potential interference by their spouses, many women ask their brothers to fill this role, which not only highlights the enduring strength of matrilineal ties, but also a strategic adaptation to external systems that marginalize such ties. As a consequence, matriliny remains a crucial source of social and economic resilience for Asante women, even as it evolves in response to new challenges.

2.6 *Conclusion*

The comparative analysis of the Mosuo and Asante case studies reveals both the diversity and the adaptability of matrilineal systems, offering valuable insights into how these societies have preserved core principles while responding to changing historical and economic pressures. Despite their very different cultural backgrounds and geographical contexts, the Mosuo (Na) and the Asante share some common traits. Both societies are organised according to matrilineal structures, in which descent, inheritance, and residence are traced through the mother's line. In these systems, women play a central role, managing resources, raising children, and as important authoritative figures for their lineage, but do not unilaterally control the community. Instead responsibilities are shared as among equals. The degree of equality and gendered division of roles can vary from a simple complementary partition of tasks to more complex arrangements, often due to the influence of external actors during occupations and colonial periods. Going back in time, what seemed to be common was for women to manage internal affairs, such as inheritance, resources, and economy, while men held more representative, public and social roles for the groups. However, due to the variety of factors at play, it is difficult to clearly identify the underlying values dictating such a division. What appears to be more evident is that a complementary gendered division of labour could offer a system based on shared authority, with at least one female chief and one male chief. There is often a figure that may have the final say, but no one can make unilateral decisions. Social survival depends on reciprocity and cooperation, and it could be interesting to investigate further if these core beliefs constitute some of the traits that make these populations so resilient and perseverant. They do experience the effects of external pressures, but never completely abandon their customs and underlying kinship systems, which allows them to fight for their autonomy and turn back to their previous social organisations whenever circumstances permit. The Mosuo demonstrated this while being subject to the Qing administration, as they managed to

keep most of their lineage-based organisation, despite the imposition of patrilineal inheritance. The Asante as well showed this ability while struggling against colonial rules, and continue to exhibit it as they live integrated in a wider and varied society where each ethnic group maintains its own customs. In some cases what remains of matrilineal traditions is just symbolic, an honorary role, while the actual tasks are assigned through more patriarchal criterias. However, the underlying beliefs are still passed on, and, as in the case of the Asante's struggles against colonialism, stories of a matrilineal past served as foundations for women's emancipation through times of hardship. In addition, based on the ethnographic data presented, in both case studies, women play dominant roles in contemporary trade and tourism, activities that require thorough engagement with wider social and economic networks, which seems to contradict traditional gender norms that assign external, social affairs to men. Although further research would be needed to confirm this, such evidence might suggest that the traditional division of roles did not originate from abilities and aptitudes associated with a specific gender, but rather from cultural norms shaped by the overall context.

At the same time, the Mosuo and the Asante present differences in their organisational structures. An example is the absence of institutionalized marriage among the Mosuo, which is vastly practiced among the Asante instead. Another distinctive feature is redistribution. On the one hand Mosuo villages often prioritize communal resource management, which involves an equal redistribution among the members, reflecting the collective nature of their kinship system. On the other hand, the Asante place greater value on economic independence and individual accumulation of wealth, by keeping the spouses' income divided. However, redistribution is still practiced through women's economic role as main providers for their families.

Overall, both the Mosuo and Asante cases show that matrilineal systems are not fixed structures, but evolving systems able to adapt even to overwhelming change, and the comparison between these two societies can offer a chance to ponder and challenge dominant narratives on gender roles, authority, and resilience.

CHAPTER THREE

Between Myth and Method: Feminist Engagements with Matriarchal Societies

Recent interest in a re-evaluation of gender roles and social organisation have led to an academic and political renewal of engagement with matriarchal studies. As a consequence, research on matriarchal societies have been approached by both scholars and activists, discussing the models it presents, their characteristics and how they can be practically used in modern society. However, much of the debate has been centered around questions regarding the empirical grounds on which most of these studies sit. In particular, matriarchal studies have encountered two main obstacles in asserting their theories on a scientific base: an historical doubt on the existence of matrilineal communities over the course of history, and an anthropological doubt on the existence of matrilineal societies in contemporary times. Ethnographic accounts, such as those of the Mosuo and Asante observed in the previous chapter, provided valuable insights to such a discourse, and feminist engagements with these studies further helped shape the contemporary academic and theoretical landscape. The following chapter is going to look into how such issues were developed and answered by major scholars, and how they resonated with feminist movements. The debate divided the public between scholars requesting more empirical evidence and stronger scientific arguments, and feminist movements, such as cultural feminists, interpreting and employing studies on matriarchies in more idealized terms. These two different perspectives highlight the tension between reality and utopias, shaping the debate on the relevance of matriarchal studies.

3.1 *The Question of Matriarchal Prehistory*

In regards to the historical doubt, some hypotheses on the existence of matriarchal societies in prehistory had already been put forward by authors such as Bachofen and Engels, but they often lacked the necessary scientific and archaeological foundations to support their validity. One of the first empirical analyses attempting to address such an issue was the one presented by Marija Gimbutas. Between the 1980s and the 1990s, the archeologist and linguist published a series of books in which she reflected on the ancient cultures of ‘Old Europe’, prior to the Indo-European expansion, and theorized the presence of a matrifocal social organisation, to which she gave the name of ‘Gylany’ to specify that it was not a hierarchical society. In *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe, Myths and Cult Images* (1982), *The Language of the Goddess* (1989), and *The Civilization of the Goddess* (1991), Gimbutas presents an archeological record of prehistoric Europe, particularly pre-indo-European culture. She studies artifacts such as figurines, vases, temples, tombs, burial trends and settlement patterns to build a picture of the ‘Old European’ culture. Particular

attention is given to religious artifacts, such as representation of deities, to understand the culture's worldview. In such archeological findings she noticed a vast assortment of figurines representing female deities, to which Gimbutas refers as a 'Great Goddess incarnating the creative principle as Source and Giver of All' (Gimbutas, 1982, 9), who was worshipped as the central divine figure. By contrast, to male human and animal entities were attributed energy and vitality that stimulate, but do not create, life (Gimbutas, 1982, 9). Overall, the pantheon seemed to hint at a society centered around the mother, but without a complete domination of women over men. At the same time, 'the world of myth' was not strictly divided between the two sexes and neither was subordinate to the other, they were rather complementary to one another, as the male divinities, represented both in human and animal forms, support and reinforce the 'creative and active' forces of the female entities (Gimbutas, 1982, 237). Such findings led Gimbutas to hypothesize that Old Europe was organised according to a matrifocal and, likely matrilineal, structure, both 'agricultural and sedentary, egalitarian and peaceful' (Gimbutas, 1982, 9). Further proof of this was found in the burial rites and settlement patterns of the time, which reflected a matrilineal structure and a distribution of wealth typical of economic egalitarianism. In particular, burial sites showed that 'elder women, the great clan mothers, received the highest social respect' (Gimbutas, 1991, 334), while no male grave displayed insignia of rank, as it happens in aristocratic societies instead. Graves of girls and female infants were the richest in ornaments and symbolic objects, which Gimbutas interprets as a sign of their status of heirs in a matrilineal society, while boys and adults' graves were equipped with few tools (Gimbutas, 1991, 334-335). This organisation lasted until 4500-2500 BC, when proto-Indo-European populations started infiltrating from the Russian steppe onto all Europe, with the exception of southern and western fringes. Their culture was 'patriarchal, stratified, pastoral, mobile, and war-oriented' (Gimbutas, 1982, 9), their gods were also warriors, while the female deities were just wives, beauties without any power. With the arrival of Indo-European groups, the goddesses and their cults did not completely disappear, but were rather integrated into the new dominant culture, slowly turning from parthenogenetic figures to wives, daughters and maidens at the service of men. At the same time, the social organisation shifted into a 'patriarchal chieftainate of the Indo-European type', that can be traced through remains of male royal tombs, residences in megarons on hill forts, and burial rites (Gimbutas, 1991, 324).

At the time it was published, Gimbutas' work sparked considerable debate. It represented a turning point for feminist studies, linking early hypotheses of a matrilineal prehistory, as presented by Bachofen (1861), to archeological findings that appeared to support a realistic possibility of such ideas, but it was also subject to heavy criticisms. Her methods were questioned and she was accused of oversimplifying her findings, overlooking elements that were contradicting her hypotheses. Still, Gimbutas' theory aligned closely with the feminist discourse of that period. Since the 1970s the feminist movement was going through a re-evaluation of religion and spirituality, with radical feminists such as Mary Daly arguing to abandon the

worldview shaped by the Judeo-Christian tradition and re-think the concept of the divine from a female perspective (Navickaitė, 2023, 152). Daly advocated for a change in consciousness instead of just the struggle for institutional reforms. In her account, the 'antidote' to patriarchal structures and historical visions was 'goddess worship', particularly, a return to 'a primal matriarchy, through the attachment to the feminine goddesses of classical, Jewish, and Christian cultures' (Monagle, 2018, 340). Only by stripping away patriarchal culture the feminine '"Be-ing" could occur' (Monagle, 2018, 348). Her vision also associated women with the concept of the natural, making the 'demonization of science and technology' an additional crucial step for female emancipation. Mary Daly's feminist "mysticism" played a vital role in shaping post-second wave feminist theory. Her ideas, along with those of others who shared similar perspectives, eventually evolved into the so-called "cultural feminism", characterized by its focus on the women-centered approach, linking feminist battles to environmental causes, keeping a critical perspective towards technological progress, and emphasising the importance of spiritual change (Navickaitė, 2023, 152). This particular school of thought was highly criticised by Marxist feminists, especially for its esotericism, focus on the inner world, detachment from politics, and association of the feminist struggle with women's bodies (Navickaitė, 2023, 152). For cultural feminists, the overthrow of the patriarchal order required a re-evaluation of the social definition of women and their traits, instead of the elimination of the sex-class system. To do so, these feminists turned to prehistoric civilizations, looking for the causes behind the development of patriarchy, and for evidence on the existence of different social and ideological models that identified women as powerful, strong, and innovative figures (Navickaitė, 2023, 150). For these reasons, when Gimbutas initially published her theories in the first edition of *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* in 1974, she was welcomed as a groundbreaking figure among cultural feminists. Her work provided the scientific base missing in feminist theories, allowing scholars and activists to understand the roots of patriarchal structure and to imagine a future vision, and further inspired the "Goddess movement" developing in the 1980s. The latter was deeply influenced by spiritual feminism and believed that a society founded on "feminine values" resulted in a more harmonious and developed community (Navickaitė, 2023, 157). Gimbutas interpretation of Old Europe presented a positive image of an egalitarian society which allowed women freedom of choice over their life and the possibility to hold a social and political authority (Navickaitė, 2023, 158). This vision perfectly aligned with the core beliefs of the Goddess movement, which embraced the idea of a prehistoric time characterised by female-centered spirituality and social balance, using it both as source of inspiration and a form of legitimization for modern feminist struggles. Gimbutas' vision of Old Europe, whether accepted as literal history or symbolic myth, offered a counter-narrative to patriarchy.

While highly regarded by part of the public, Gimbutas' work was not welcomed by all. One of the best known criticisms is the one presented by Cynthia Eller in her book *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why*

an Invented Past Will Not Give Women a Future. She argues against the possibility of a matriarchal organisation in prehistoric societies, framing it as an unrealistic myth which undermines modern feminist struggles. According to Eller, Gimbutas' claims are not supported by enough archeological evidence, and the interpretations given to the remains found are not reliable. As a consequence, even though it is possible that ancient societies honored female deities or followed matrilineal practices, there are no clear signs of a wider matriarchal social order. Eller frames Gimbutas among the spiritual feminists, and interprets her findings as an attempt to construct a myth that provides women with a sense of empowerment and legitimacy that can be traced back to ancient traditions, while, in reality, reflecting only their utopian hopes rather than accurate history. In her account, such an invented past does not help feminists, but instead makes them vulnerable to critiques of being historically inaccurate, especially in academic and political contexts, and undermines their goals by relying on essentialist ideas of gender (Eller, 2000, 8). Women are presented as naturally nurturing, peaceful, spiritual, while men are naturally warlike, hierarchical, destructive, which further romanticizes and idealizes the roles and traits expected from women in society. Finally, the myth of matriarchal prehistory tends to center white, Western, middle-class visions of feminism and femininity, excluding histories or worldviews that do not align with goddess-centered spirituality or idealized perceptions of women's essence (Eller, 2000, 10). Overall, Eller's analysis challenges the use of myth-like views as foundations and aspirations for feminist struggles. Instead, she highlighted the need for evidence-based and historical perspectives that could support feminist positions without undermining their accountability.

However, Eller's critique has itself sparked significant debate, with some scholars arguing that she dismisses legitimate archaeological interpretations without conducting a proper evaluation. Her approach has been seen as reductive, potentially overlooking the complexity and diversity of historical studies coming from feminist perspectives. For example, Max Dashu argued that Eller undermined her own critique by committing the same error she attributed to Gimbutas. When assessing the perspective of what she calls 'feminist matriarchalists', Eller proceeds without any strong historical evidence (Dashu, 2005, 2). According to Dashu, she mixes scholarly studies with a variety of non-academic sources shared by the Goddess movement and shapes them into one undifferentiated "myth". Dashu also found that Eller gave little credit to the archeological sites studied by Gimbutas, such as the Vinca, Starcevo, Karanovo and Sesklo, and avoided comparisons between her work and other archeological theories. As a consequence, the wider framework of archeological studies of the time is left out. Dashu highlights that, until recently, archeologists would assign graves to female or males based on the type of goods found inside, instead of analysing the skeletons, which puts in a different perspective Eller's statement that 'most remains are not detectably gendered' (Dashu, 2005, 11). Finally, Dashu challenges Eller's understanding of gender politics. While Eller accuses 'feminist matriarchals' of reinforcing traditional gender roles, she offers no alternative other than the erasure of gender altogether, neglecting the 'structural realities of patriarchy', such as systematic physical abuse, economic

insecurity, and overall low female status. Eller's view of "female" is 'a negative, constrictive category imposed by a patriarchal system' (Dashu, 2005, 15), with no chance of redefinition, which dismisses the possibility of feminist interpretations able to engage with history and archeology.

Overall, Gimbutas' work marked a turning point for feminist discourse by providing an archeological grounding for the theory of a matriarchal prehistory. However, it has also highlighted the tension between empirical and idealised perception surrounding the existence of matriarchal societies and their characteristics. At the time it was received, Gimbutas' theory divided the public between cultural feminists, who embraced the more myth-like aspects and symbolisms, and critics, who accused her of speculation and selective readings of evidence. Nevertheless, her work challenged existing narratives and questioned dominant perceptions of women's roles in prehistory. As the historical argument remained contested, scholars increasingly turned to anthropology to test whether matrilineal or matrifocal societies could be found in the present, offering alternative forms of evidence to explore similar questions on gender roles.

3.2 *Anthropological Evidence and The Search for Matriarchal Alternatives*

Another major obstacle in proving the relevance of the discourse surrounding matriarchal societies was the uncertainty of their existence based on anthropological or ethnographic studies. The lack of such scientific grounds was partly due to the little research conducted on feminist issues. Historically, women had less access to sources and funding that would allow them to conduct their research with the proper methodological tools in comparison to their male counterparts. Starting from the 1950s, women's scholarly involvement started increasing, with a particular impact on the anthropological field, and by the 1970s a new approach known as "feminist anthropology" was being developed to focus on concepts and questions surrounding women, such as personal identity and differences in roles in varying cultures.

In this framework, it is necessary to mention Eleanor Burke Leacock, who Kanna identifies as a foundational figure that gave a relevant contribution to the field (Kanna, 2022). Coming from a Marxist feminist perspective, Leacock researched and studied a variety of indigenous and non-Western cultures looking for an explanation of the patriarchal structure and realistic alternatives to pursue. Her scholarly research was strongly connected with her political perspectives, as she considered Marxism as a tool for workers and women against oppression. In a more theoretical context, she discussed theories of gender and how they intertwined with capitalism and colonialism, which reflected her belief that anthropology should be analytically accurate as well as 'committed to human emancipation' (Kanna, 2022). As an example of this, her work published in *Myths of Male Dominance* was conceived to address the fight for women's liberation occurring between the 1960s and 1970s. The book itself focuses on the idea of natural male

superiority, arguing that ‘universal male dominance is myth not fact’ (Leacock, 1981, 4-5). In particular, Leacock presents proof of the existence of egalitarian societies in the past and suggests the possibility that, in these cases, male dominance has been a structure that arose as consequence of various elements, such as colonisation, changes in economic organisation forcing trade and specialization over ‘production for use’, and interpretations of data through Western lenses. The introduction of wage labour for men and trade both changed the social structure from clans and tribes to smaller family units in which children and women had to increasingly rely on men for economic support (Leacock, 1981, 18). In colonial times, this was facilitated by the attribution of formal political authority and rights of ownership to men, and by missionary teachings, leading to the deterioration of women's position in society. Drawing from such theories, Leacock argues that women’s oppression is embedded in the capitalist and imperialist system, and that dismantling such structures would require a change in the global organisation that is characterized by powerful national and multinational corporations exploiting those at a disadvantage (Leacock, 1981, 310-312).

Most of Leacock’s empirical data is based on her study of the Innu people from Northeast Canada, and how their organisation shifted from an egalitarian society to a patriarchal structure as a consequence of colonialism. Based on Leacock’s work, Kanna states that, prior to the arrival of French colonists, the Innu peoples owned land collectively, all genders were considered equal in status, women were autonomous, and multifamily groups would usually reside in the maternal households (Kanna, 2022). From a political perspective, decision-making was not centralized, there was no official leader, just a series of people, women included, which were considered of influence. From an economic perspective, goods, such as clothing, tools, were produced to meet immediate needs and hunting was shared among all. Colonialism imposed the concept of market exchange which forced the Innu people to start trading fur, an activity that eventually replaced their traditional economic activities and became predominantly carried out by men, leading to a hierarchical understanding of the sexual division of labour. At the same time, the French Jesuit missionaries sent to “civilize” the population reinforced the idea of hierarchy, by lecturing men on the importance of ‘women’s “obedience”, and corporal punishment’ (Kanna, 2022).

The relevance of Leacock’s contribution to feminist discourses and matriarchal studies is the link between ethnographic studies on the existence of egalitarian societies and the development of effective strategies to achieve women’s emancipation. She highlighted that media and popular discourse continue to promote women’s equality as an ideal, and challenged such a statement through anthropological research that does not necessarily claim the existence of a universal matriarchal past, but rather present real-world evidence of alternative gender systems.

3.3 *Matriarchies Between Historical Possibility and Contemporary Relevance*

The debate surrounding matriarchal studies is complex and varied. Studies such as those conducted by Marija Gimbutas and Eleanor Burke Leacock represent important contributions by providing empirical grounds to the discourse. Still, the validity of their arguments remains contested, and the different interpretations of their findings highlight the tension between possible realities and symbolic or ideological views, often polarizing the debate between skeptics and devotees.

In this context, it is necessary to return to Heide Goettner-Abendroth, already discussed in chapter one, as she provides a synthesis of historical and anthropological perspectives that link ethnographic evidence and contemporary feminist theory. She often draws from interpretations of "Old Europe" provided by Gimbutas, supporting her theory of a matriarchal prehistory, and also includes a wide range of ethnographic case studies, such as the Mosuo of China and the Asante of Ghana, to support her arguments on the existence of matriarchal societies. Drawing from such sources, similarly to her predecessors, she frames matriarchies as egalitarian societies based on a complementary division of roles, communal governance, and matrilineal inheritance, instead of a dominion of women over men. Goettner-Abendroth's work has drawn significant criticisms, especially for its idealised portrayal of matriarchal societies, and its affinity to spiritual movements. Her emphasis on the veneration of feminine traits and their connection with nature has led some to question the empirical foundations of her approach and to value it as a more idealised interpretation, rather than an anthropological or archeological contribution.

However, theoretical debates have also been accompanied by practical studies that aim at addressing and solving contemporary issues. These approaches analyse how different social organisations determine specific aspects such as health, education, economic stability, and political representation. An example is the study conducted in *The First Political Order* (Hudson et al., 2020) which documents the impact of a patriarchal structure on both civil society and nation states, arguing that it can have 'serious and negative ramifications for the security, stability, resilience, prosperity, health, and happiness of the collective as well as [...] regionally and even internationally' (Hudson et al., 2020, 9). The authors compare the cases of Morocco, Tunisia and Iraq to show how different societies managed patriarchal structures and gender inequality, and collect a series of data, based on the strategies applied in these countries and their success, to propose a series of actions which they believe would be useful for social transformation. What emerges is the importance of path dependency, the link between freedom and equality, as well as that between crisis and subjugation, the recognition of women's rights, and electoral democracy. As a consequence, public education and efficient governance are presented as crucial factors. Tunisia is one of the cases the authors highlight as a positive example of how confronting the 'Patrilineal syndrome' can lead to more democratic stability (Hudson et al., 2020). Particularly in post-colonial times, Tunisian governments passed a series of

progressive family laws and reformist constitutions which undermined the traditional kin-based patriarchal power structures, moving towards a more inclusive governance. Still, the authors recognise that the durability of these gains depends on broader political trajectories, which is why in Tunisia's case, these democratic reforms had limited duration. In this context, particular importance is given to the participation of civil society to prevent such reversals, which, again, highlights the importance of public education (Hudson et al., 2020).

While not directly framed as "matriarchal", additional valuable studies that could be taken into consideration are the ones focusing on the effectiveness of development strategies, such as microcredit programmes, cash transfers, and community-based initiatives. Such analyses present concrete evidence that alternative social models based on more collaborative systems of value can lead to more balanced and sustainable outcomes.

Overall, the relevance of the debate over matriarchal societies lies in the search for alternative social organisations that challenge the Western standards, by providing examples of more balanced and egalitarian structures. While the theory of a universal matriarchal past may always be subject to criticism due to a lack of scientific evidence, the search for egalitarian alternatives can result in more practical applications that can benefit society.

CONCLUSION

As contemporary social challenges intensify, re-thinking the foundational structures of society has become increasingly necessary. This dissertation set out to study how ethnographic accounts of matrilineal and so-called matriarchal societies challenge dominant economic and gender paradigms with the aim of critically examining the universality of patriarchal and capitalist assumptions and explore how alternative systems can inspire a shift towards more egalitarian and sustainable forms of social organisation. In this perspective, the role of functional division of labour was considered relevant in the evaluation of equality within societies as a means to study gendered power relations through the practical distribution of resources and responsibilities, which can reinforce or challenge systemic inequalities. Overall, although often inconsistent due to different cultural and historical backgrounds, ethnographic accounts of matrilineal and so-called matriarchal societies reveal kinship structures, value systems, and a division of labour that challenge Western-centered paradigms of social organisation, and present socio-economic systems that decenter accumulation, and individuality. This field of study is particularly important today, as the world is experiencing a crystallization of gender inequality, increasing political instability and global economic inequality. Western-centric approaches to such issues have in some cases failed to provide effective, universally applicable solutions, and this highlights the importance of considering alternative social structures to observe innovative strategies.

A necessary starting point for reflecting on alternative social models is the definition of the main concepts and how they have historically been interpreted. Patriarchy is usually perceived as a system of male domination, but matriarchy is not its mirror opposite. Rather, it refers to egalitarian societies structured around the mother figure, which determines descent and the family core, and that are characterized by a balanced division of roles. This concept has been studied from both historical and anthropological perspectives, leading theorists such as Bachofen, Gimbutas, and Goettner-Abendroth to interpret matriarchy as an early stage of social evolution in prehistory that was later overthrown when the idea of ownership developed, and men started tracing their genealogy to pass their possession on only to their legitimate sons. These studies are particularly relevant within feminist movements, which have often turned to these concepts as tools to reflect on gender relations and how society could be organised beyond patriarchal structures. For example, Marxist feminists argue that women's oppression is linked to capitalism, and therefore look at matriarchal societies as inspiration for changing the economic system. In a similar way, socialist feminist acknowledge the importance of economic factors, but also pay attention to the broader system that supports women's exploitation, including institutions. On the other hand, radical feminists

attribute gender discrimination to a distinct system of male-power, and draw from matriarchal studies the more symbolic aspects that celebrate women's nature and spirituality. The debate often links theoretical conception of matriarchy to real-world examples, particularly through ethnographic studies, to demonstrate surviving or historically documented matrifocal and matrilineal societies, and to address critiques of lack of empirical grounding. Two contemporary examples are the Mosuo of China and the Asante of Ghana, both matrilineal systems that have proved to be flexible and able to endure transformation while preserving their key social values. Both groups trace descent through the mother's line and practice a gendered division of labour and of political roles, but can present different structures in relation to some aspects. In terms of kinship, among the Mosuo, property is communally owned and equally redistributed, residence is mostly matrilocal, and there is no institution of marriage, relationships are formed through a system of nocturnal visits. By contrast, the Asante maintain separate income and economic independence, they follow a duolocal residential pattern, and practice marriage. In regards to the partition of roles, the Asante present a stricter division of agricultural tasks between sexes, and men and women have different responsibilities both within the house and at the political level, while the Mosuo tend to share workload and leadership equally, placing particular importance on seniority and personal merit. Both societies have evolved over time, due to contacts with other cultures, external pressures from patriarchal administrations, and changes in the global economic system, but have managed to maintain their fundamental structures. For example, the Mosuo had to face the rise of tourism and integration into the market economy, both of which have caused disruption and social tensions as well as highlighted the efficiency of their wealth redistribution practices. The Asante faced globalization through colonial and postcolonial trade, with the introduction of cocoa farming and expansion of the trade market. Colonial rule replaced matrilineal practices with patriarchal norms, recognising only male chiefs and structurally changing their legal and economic systems, but women still played key roles in trade and political activism, especially during the nationalist movement, and today this population still adheres to their matrilineal customs. The resilience shown by these two groups seems to support the idea that alternative social organisations based on balance and cooperation can promote more stable and long-lasting systems. Both scholars and activists have engaged with studies such as those on the Mosuo and the Asante to develop their own perspectives on the matriarchal discourse.

As observed in chapter three, a recurring theme in such debates is the tension between empirical research and symbolic interpretations, myth and reality. In this perspective, contributions such as those of Marija Gimbutas, Cynthia Eller, Max Dashu, and Eleanor Burke Leacock present important turning points. Gimbutas' archeological-based theories about a peaceful, egalitarian, matrifocal "Old Europe" became especially influential among cultural feminists, inspiring a spiritual and political counter-narrative to patriarchy, and a spiritual feminism that emphasised goddess worship, rejecting male-centered values. Eller provided an opposing perspective, standing against speculations of a prehistoric matriarchy and the

idealizations of female figures, as she believed could harm feminist goals and reinforce gender essentialism. Dashu provides an additional perspective in support of Gimbutas' work, highlighting its more scientific and empirical-based aspects, in contrast to the later, more abstract interpretations. Lastly, Leacock adds an anthropological perspective on the theme and refocuses the attention to the practical and political relevance of matriarchal studies. As a Marxist feminist, she used her ethnographic findings to show how colonialism and capitalism introduced and enforced patriarchal systems in egalitarian societies, such as the Innu of Canada, and to emphasise that male dominance is not a universal human condition. In her account, patriarchy is a consequence of economic and political change, and anthropology can help reveal alternatives to such social structures. Her work reinforces the idea that the study of matriarchal and egalitarian societies can become a tool to imagine and construct more just and sustainable systems, especially through more pragmatic research, such as *The First Political Order*, that uses empirical evidence to observe in depth how different gendered social structures can affect governance and development.

These scholarly approaches highlight the possibility for matriarchal studies to serve as a tool to improve dominant social systems. However, as it is possible to observe from the examination of matriarchal studies, this field is subject to various limitations that, at times, challenge the reliability and consistency of its findings. One of the most significant limitations lies in the debate surrounding the definition of some key concepts. For example, the term "matriarchy" in some cases is still misinterpreted as the dominion of women over men, instead of a women-centered social structure. This confusion can lead to essentialist or reductive readings that undermine the field's theoretical contribution, and further marginalize it within academic debates. Another relevant issue regards the nature of ethnographic studies, which have frequently been criticised for methodological bias. Similarly to Eller's criticisms towards Gimbutas, researchers have been called into question for presenting and highlighting only the data that supports their theses, overlooking evidence that goes against them. In addition, the historical exclusion of women from academic institutions and denial of access to research funding for much of the 20th century led to early ethnographic accounts, which are still used as references today, being largely produced by men. These male researchers not only were hardly interested in questions regarding gender inequality or other themes closer to women's experiences, which, as a consequence were not explored, but, as men, they were also rarely able to interview or have any type of contact with the women of the indigenous groups they were studying, resulting in significant gaps in the data they gathered. Lastly, there are limitations related to the tools and frameworks traditionally used in anthropological and sociological research. The categories applied to analyse social structures often reflect Western epistemologies and assumptions, which may not align with the worldviews of the societies being studied. These limitations show the importance of developing a more inclusive and critical approach to matriarchal studies, that allows for more transparent and comprehensive findings.

Based on the insights and critiques discussed, it could be relevant to further expand comparative ethnographic research, also focusing on contemporary challenges, such as ecology and sustainability, and a re-thinking of power and labour. Expanding ethnographic studies to encompass different cultural, historical, and geographical contexts could help identify patterns, differences and variations that challenge Western dominant narratives on gender and power. In addition, such findings could be used to study specific approaches to current issues, such as climate change and development, in order to elaborate innovative and efficient strategies.

In regards to this research process, my understanding of matriarchal societies has evolved. In particular, while I was expecting a quite polarized distinction between patriarchal models and matriarchal organisations, the ethnographic evidence revealed a more complex and varied picture. Rather than a complete reversal of gender roles, such societies often present an elaborate, functional division of labour that reflects both cultural continuity and ability to adapt to challenges. In addition, they are not as isolated and untouched by external actions as initially assumed and hoped, in order to study alternative social patterns and behaviours completely unexposed to Western paradigms. However, this turned out to be quite useful in assessing their ability to cope with possible obstacles, and the strength of their cultural principles. Finally, this research has deepened my understanding of feminist theory and of the link between economic and social systems, encouraging me to further explore such topics. What remains unchanged is the belief that Western social narratives should not remain unquestioned nor the global standard.

Overall, as the field continues to evolve, incorporating more comparative, ecological, and critical frameworks, it could show that alternative ways of organising labour, power, and kinship are both historically significant and relevant to address contemporary challenges. The value of the discourse surrounding matriarchies is not in the possibility of reversing the patriarchal system, putting women in hegemonic positions, but in the underlying principle that everyone deserves the same opportunity to contribute to society. In addition, as observed in the examples discussed, allowing a wider engagement of people during decision-making processes, for example by dividing roles in a way that they complement each other and are given equal importance, seems to promote a social organisation that is less vulnerable to possible exploitations of power and that is more resilient to changes. Matriarchal studies offer a chance to imagine alternative ways to coexist in mutual respect, cooperation and equity, and, in a world increasingly marked by division, crises, and inequality, these principles appear urgently relevant, not only to feminist theory, but also to broader conversations on democracy, sustainability, and social justice.

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