

## **Cherchez la femme!**

**C. Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past won't give Women a Future***

Beacon Press, Boston, 2000

288 pp

ISBN 0 8070 6793 8

US\$24.49

*The Realm of the Great Goddess; The Reflowering of the Goddess; The Great Mother Earth; Mythology, the Matriarchy and Me; Motherpeace A Way to the Goddess ...*

For those of you who are interested in a spiritual feminist window on life, an infinite number of titles avail themselves in your local bookstore. But before you rush into buying one, you might want to read Eller's critical monograph first. *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory* combines a serious scrutiny of popular, as well as more academic writing on the presumed existence of a cult of the Goddess in ancient gynocentric societies. Even if after reading the monograph, you do not agree with the author's ideological position, you will certainly have widened, in the process, your scope of this particular field of study and of the literature relevant to its analysis.

### **Defining the myth of matriarchal prehistory**

In the first three chapters, the author explores and explains her personal fascination with the subject. She also presents the central thesis underlying the myth, and she demonstrates the tremendous impact it has had on popular culture. Eller uses the label "matriarchal" to refer to this particular brand of feminism, though she readily admits that many of the authors whose publications she intends to debunk, prefer not to use the term. They do not want to encourage the common assumption that "matriarchal societies" simply represent a mirror opposite of the patriarchy. Women in prehistory, they contend, were not dominating men. They ruled on harmonious terms with men. Despite this, Eller insists on using the term "matriarchal" in her book, as an appropriate reference to a society where women's power was higher or equal to men, and where culture centred on values and life events described as feminine.

Such a society, she proposes, is mythical. No historical evidence has been found in support of its existence. Eller admits that the use of the term "myth" is not without problems either. Indeed, some of the "matriarchal feminists" have stated categorically that it isn't really important to them whether the era of the Goddess really existed or not ...! They defend their theoretical vision as an agenda or a model for living, rather than as a historical truth. Perhaps it would be more scientific, Eller deliberated for some time, to call the concept of matriarchal prehistory a hypothesis or theory. However, she eventually decided the matriarchal window on prehistory could be called a myth, in that it constitutes a value-laden narrative, dense in imagery and rich in poetic language.

The myth, matriarchalists believe, offers women a new, improved self-concept. Its purpose is to redeem and reevaluate the feminine. Many followers of the myth strongly feel that the feminist movement has failed. The myth is in essence a spiritualist movement in which the mystery of female biology features centrally, in combination with a revived version of an older paradigm known as "difference feminism". It has become part of the cultural mainstream in Europe and North America, through the mediation of textbooks, plays, poetry, movies, the tourism industry, and educational syllabi.

The matriarchal myth, Eller reports, isn't really new. In its original form, it can be traced back to classical Greek history. The anthropologists McLennan, Spencer, Tyler and Morgan rejuvenated the classical myth, and their evolutionist thinking inspired Freud, Marx and Engels, who constructed their own versions of matriarchal prehistory. With the exception of Hartland, Frazer and the Soviet scholars in this field, anthropologists rejected the myth at the beginning of the twentieth century, mainly on account of the fact that by then the era of "armchair research" had been replaced by

ethnographic fieldwork. However, several archaeologists, art historians, classic historians and psychoanalysts (including Reich, Fromm and Neumann) continued their search for the matriarchal origins of society.

In the 1970s the myth re-emerged with a clear shift in emphasis. Previously, evolutionist thinking propagated the notion that a patriarchal revolution had replaced the matriarchy, and had pushed humankind forward in its long path of development towards modern civilisation. In contrast, the feminists who revived the myth depicted the prehistoric matriarchy as a superior society. They suggested that the era of the Goddess came to end when violent migrations established the patriarchy. Matriarchal feminist theory, Eller proposes, gained popularity in the 1980s because of three reasons. Feminist anthropologists like Shelly Ortner, prevented the myth from developing any roots within the discipline and in doing so encouraged popular writings. Also, the myth gained tremendously from converting to a spiritualist approach, involving women in magic and healing. Finally, Marija Gimbutas and her research on the prehistoric remains of Europe before the Indo-European migrations, provided the followers of the Goddess with ample material “evidence” for the existence of a Goddess.

Most matriarchalists locate the flourishing of the Goddess cult in the Neolithic, somewhere between 8 000 and 3 000 B.C. The most popular locations for its heartland are “Old Europe” (South-East Europe), the Mediterranean (Malta, Crete) and the archaeological Near East (more specifically the site of Catalhuyuck in Anatolia). The utopian, golden age of matriarchy is routinely defined by such features as: peace, prosperity, harmony with nature, appropriate use of technology, sexual freedom and gender equity. Agriculture is said to have been its greatest achievement. Sex was considered sacred, and its sacrality was expressed by and concentrated in the Goddess figurines. Kinship centred on matriliney and matrilocality. Women ruled, as religious functionaries, in a very benign way, and motherhood provided a “natural” model for leadership. Matriarchalist writing suggests that prehistoric men were not fully aware of their contribution to human reproduction, and that childbirth was a kind of mystery of which the womb was the only visual manifestation. The end of the matriarchy, it is generally proposed, coincided with the change from simple agriculture to pastoralism, or to a more technological kind of agriculture. Some believe that this transition was gradual and internal. Others suggest that invasions by pastoralist societies brutally ended the era of the Goddess. The Kurgans of the Russian steppes are often blamed for ending the era of the matriarchy.

### **Evaluating the evidence for the myth**

Archaeology and anthropology have provided the matriarchalists with the data to support their vision of prehistoric society. Eller dedicates an entire chapter (chapter 5) to the exploration of the possibilities, as well as to the identification of the limitations of these two disciplines, before taking on ‘The Case against Matriarchal Prehistories’ (chapters 6 and 7), in the second half of the monograph.

The early anthropologists – the evolutionists – have based their reconstruction of the matriarchal past on the study of its assumed cultural remnants in subsequent historical periods. They referred to this data source as “living fossils” and “survivals”. The arm-chair approach of the evolutionists, Eller suggests, has not generated very

reliable evidence. Many matriarchalist researchers, on the other hand, use “ethnographic analogy” to animate the prehistoric remains of the past. They look for anthropological answers to archaeological questions. There is, in principle, nothing wrong with using living cultures for the interpretation of ancient remains, Eller reassures. Rather, it is anthropological fieldwork itself that should be treated with suspicion. Reconstructions of the social life of a people are almost unavoidably, generalising in nature. Further, what people say they do and what actually happens in real life, are often two very different things. Finally, she cautions the reader, anthropological fieldworkers cannot possibly be expected to observe the totality of a people’s life. All of these arguments, incidentally, are pretty standard in the literature relating to a post-modern critique of anthropology.

On the other hand, the greatest problem with prehistoric artefacts is that they are few in supply and limited in terms of social meaning. Archaeological data acquisition goes through a double process of selection: only what has been preserved *and* recovered through excavation, avails itself for analysis. Prehistory, Eller suggests rather pessimistically, offers the researcher of ancient cultures a “scattershot affair of things”. Also, gender issues have only recently entered prehistoric debates, and archaeologists are generally still unsure how, or even if, gender is detectable in the record. Feminist archaeologists, therefore, like their colleagues in anthropology, have steered away from the myth. They prefer gender categories that are variable, permeable, changeable and ambiguous, dynamic and historically specific. One could, of course, simply admit that the myth is of a subjective nature, as some matriarchalists have done. This would mean that the researcher allows for the fact that her interests, values, judgements, histories and life experiences have become part of the research process. Seemingly, this is not considered to be an authentic option by Eller, judging from the chapter ending in which she spells out in detail how to bring about rigour in anthropological research and the formulation of assumptions.

### **The case against matriarchal prehistory**

In chapter 6, Eller critically weighs the anthropological “facts” that have been put forward in defence of the existence of a prehistoric matriarchy. She identifies four general areas for the borrowing of anthropological data: reproduction and kinship; the goddess worship; women and the division of labour; and interpersonal violence.

As far as reproduction and kinship are concerned, the matriarchalists have proposed that the matrilineal and matrilineal social arrangements of power were invented in societies that conceived of birth as a mystery or a miracle. In these particular societies the ignorance of paternity, it is proposed, has shaped the religious and symbolic importance of motherhood. Unfortunately, Eller maintains, the anthropological literature seems rather vague on the issue of matrilineal beliefs concerning human reproduction. She claims not to have found any society that has not granted some significance to biological paternity. In addition, the feminist anthropologist Ortner has suggested that in matrilineal societies motherhood has not really been rewarded by political prestige. Even those societies that practised couvade and womb-envy rituals did not award any prestige to their women. If prehistoric men envied women, it would most probably have worked to their detriment, not to their advantage.

The female goddesses in historical societies generally appear to have been creations of the male fantasy, rather than of female worshippers. The matriarchal Goddess, Eller proposes, is simply an imaginary construct. It is defined in terms of what male gods are not. The notion of the Goddess was conceived to provide rich possibilities for modern women's psychic and spiritual life. Also, many ancient goddesses of the historical societies (e.g. in Sumer and Canaan), were clearly linked to war. If Goddess worship ever existed, Eller concludes, it would probably have indicated a bad state of affairs for women.

It is doubtful that the invention of agriculture can be attributed to women. Judging from the anthropological literature, it is even more uncertain that women gained prestige from being more industrious or from contributing more to the economy. Anthropology shows that division of work did exist, but pre-modern societies generally display no uniformity in terms of deciding who does what. Foraging and horticultural societies show no evidence of women being recognised as economic pillars or as tribal mothers. Seemingly agriculture was never the preserve of women to the same degree as hunting was of men. At best, Eller concludes, it can be said that prehistoric women could have flourished in some societies, but would have been exploited in others. There certainly is no uniform picture.

Finally, the proposition that matriarchal societies were peaceful is probably the weakest of all hypotheses. Weapons occur in all prehistoric contexts, and based on our knowledge of living cultures, it is clear that weapons and fortifications do not necessarily leave objectively discernable material traces.

Which brings Eller to the discussion of the prehistoric evidence for the Goddess theory (in chapter 7). The main problem of interpreting archaeological images (rock art, figurines etc.), we are told, is that they look invitingly familiar, and therefore inferences tend to be intuitive, empathic and imaginative, rather than objective. Archaeologists generally agree that art is a slippery interpretive terrain, but that has not stopped the matriarchalists from finding proof "in virtually every scrap of prehistoric art". The realm of the Franco-Cantabrian cave art is one of the favourite places for researchers to look for the symbolism of the Goddess. In doing so, matriarchalists followed in the footsteps of two pioneering experts in the field of French Palaeolithic art: the Abbé Breuil and André Leroi-Gourhan. Both archaeologists claimed to have found convincing evidence of a prehistoric sign system expressive of male and female sexuality. In their "vulva finding expedition", Eller sneers, the Goddess worshippers found proof for a universal symbolism of birth and fertility. Unfortunately, she adds, one can read into the signs whatever one likes. The same applies to the painted human figures, many of which lack clear sexual features. Eller concludes sarcastically that female has become the default sex of the anthropomorphic imagery from early prehistory. Worse still, images that combine the two sexes are sometimes declared female and are labelled "phallic goddess" by some supporters of the myth!

The meaning of the so-called Palaeolithic "Venus figurines" is rather unceremoniously declared to be "irresolvable". These artefacts, she explains, are characterised by a limited spatio-temporal distribution and, therefore, can hardly represent a universal religious phenomenon. Also, Eller notes, they are not showing any convincing signs of representing fertility; they are not accompanied by children,

are not involved in lactation, and appear to be fat rather than pregnant. The Neolithic figurine art, she admits, could perhaps generate more plausible interpretations, and is probably associated with the origins of agriculture, the alleged economic realm of the Goddess. Unfortunately, no ancient religion seems to assign agricultural fertility to a single female goddess. In addition, the ethnographic evidence reveals that figurines were used for a wide variety of functions. Unfortunately, few of these can be traced back unambiguously in the archaeological context. Female goddesses may be more visible than their male counterparts in many cultures, but many of these cultures are patriarchal. Even if a certain figurine type represented a female goddess, how would one determine its real meaning? And how did it relate to male gods? Finally, Eller cautions, it may be true, generally, that female figurines substantially outnumber their male counterparts in Neolithic sites. However, that does not absolve researchers from looking for the meaning of sexless and male figurines.

In the second half of the chapter on the prehistoric Goddess related data, Eller looks at the archaeological art of the three cultural areas most closely associated with the Goddess: Catalhuyuck, Malta and Crete. Mellaart, who first excavated a section of the Catalhuyuck site, is believed to have found references to a possible goddess cult. However, Ian Hodder who re-started the dig in 1993, corrected many of the initial findings. Mellaart had found stylised female figurines, moulded breast-shaped reliefs, a seated female figure (known as “the goddess with the leopards”) and plaster relief sculptures of females with swollen bellies. Matriarchalists, obviously, have focused on this female imagery and conveniently ignored the masculine representations: cattle horns incorporated in plastered heads, depictions of hunting, and male figurines. Malta, on the other hand, has produced large stone statues which several matriarchalists have described as female goddesses. The lay-out of the famous megalithic tombs supposedly replicated the general shape of these female statues. Eller refutes this evidence as not convincing. The Minoan palaces of Crete are said to replicate the body of the Goddess too. In addition, the famous palace frescoes and the faïence figurines with bare breasts holding snakes, the matriarchalists believe, represent an ancient world ruled by women. Eller reminds the reader, in response, that all the evidence for hunting and combat, which does not fit the myth, as well as the depictions of men in body postures similar to the goddesses, have conveniently been swept under the analytical carpet.

### **The end of the goddess**

Chapter 8 explores the end of the era of the Goddess, which allegedly coincided with the invasion of patriarchal, nomadic, warlike tribes who had moved from their homeland (the Russian-Ukrainian steppes) into Europe. Three sources are commonly used in support of this hypothesis: linguistic evidence, artefacts and genetics. The spreading of Indo-European languages supports the dates proposed for the decline of the Goddess cult. And the attempts to reconstruct the “original” Indo-European mother tongue, does provide some support for the location of an “original” society in the steppes. Unfortunately, Eller reminds the reader, the movement of languages does not necessarily inform us about the peoples who spoke them. The same argument goes for the matching of artefacts with units of people.

Since its inception, archaeology has focused primarily on the identification and location of groups of artefacts in time and space. Prehistorians have traditionally

created chronologies, and studied the movement or diffusion of artefacts. They have also loosely associated artefact types with cultures. Since the 1970s, however, the migration-diffusion paradigm has been seriously questioned by practitioners within the New Archaeology. The simple correlation between peoples and artefacts has been rejected too. The main critic of migration narratives has been Colin Renfrew, who has suggested that there was no real need for steppe peoples to migrate or invade their neighbours. Archaeologists do not need invasions from the East to account for cultural transformations in the West.

Genetic evidence is probably even more speculative. Some data can be used in support of the myth. Data that doesn't promote the myth is usually omitted. In the 1970s Cavalli-Sforza used genetic data to identify early migrations from the Near East, as well as later movements from the Ukraine and South Russia radiating into Europe. Unfortunately these cannot be dated very accurately. In short: the issue of migrations remains largely unresolved, and therefore Eller declares the link between migrations and a patriarchal invasion to be speculative.

### **The goddess in literary traditions**

In the final chapter Eller briefly discusses the attempts made by some matriarchalists to link literate historical traditions with prehistory. Texts from Sumer are amazingly supportive of a woman-centred society ... at least in the upper class stratum. The realm of ordinary citizens, in contrast, depicts patriarchal domination. The earliest written Cretan sources, which could perhaps support a female dominated Minoan society, are still awaiting the deciphering of the script in which they have been produced (linear A). Later texts, in linear B, depict the Mycenaean patriarchy. Homer's description of Greece in the Bronze Age, relates of a society with powerful aristocratic women. Classical Greece, on the other hand, describes a most unfavourable social set-up for women, a "reign of the phallus", as Eva Keuls has called it. Ancient mythology describes the replacement of female deities by male gods (e.g. Tiamat and Marduk; Persephone and Hades; the birth of Athena). Eller explains the narratives of a mythical age of female domination – with the help of Malinowski's functionalist theory of religion – as literary creations in which men provide a "social charter" justifying the existence of male dominance in the present. Phrased differently, gynocentric mythology could have been a tool, used by the patriarchy, to mystify inequities in the social order and to justify male control. They were didactical rather than historical.

### **"Why an invented past won't give women a future"**

The author's main thesis is discussed somewhat prematurely in the first half of the book (in chapter 4). Eller has decided to devote an entire chapter exploring the theoretical underpinnings of the matriarchal myth. The focus is on the basic assumptions underlying the matriarchalist understanding of the nature of the "feminine" and the sexual determination of women's personality, preferences and values. The paradigm that best embodies these issues is known as "difference feminism". It defines female identity primarily in terms of childbirth and menstruation. It states that the biological qualities of womanhood are responsible for the development of female virtues like nurturance, compassion, intuitiveness and the love for an ethical, lawful and spiritual way of life. According to the same paradigm

men are believed to display the opposite personality features: they are said to be aggressive, cold, rational, competitive and possessive. Some of the more moderate matriarchalists, however, also recognize positive male roles and they strive for a balance between masculinity and femininity. They invite men to embrace, or to allow for the feminine in themselves. The original matriarchal society is generally believed to be holistic, and the dualities that characterise modern society (nature-culture; male-female; mind-body) are habitually blamed on the patriarchal revolution.

Difference feminism, the author believes, is outdated and supportive of biological determinism. The valorisation of motherhood is a rightwing, conservative ideal type, and the reader is referred to writers such as Sherry Ortner and Simone de Beauvoir for its deconstruction. Reaching out for an archetypal female identity, Eller explains further, makes women less human and the division of human characteristics along gendered lines is tantamount to inviting sexism and supporting classism. The alternative Eller suggests is simple: women are to negotiate sex differences. Gender has been explained in terms of human nature, cultural learning or performance. The bottom line is that gender is as real as race and class. The discussion of gender differences, we are told, provides an excuse for male discrimination, just as debating the meaning of race fuels racism. The concept of gender differences supports the cultural mechanisms by which women are subordinated to men. Gender should not be reified; as a woman you should refuse to be included in a category. In the final analysis, Eller explains, the concept of femaleness relates to what one experiences when being perceived as a woman or being treated as one. In short, matriarchalist theories are not acceptable on critical feminist grounds, as the myth does not remedy male dominance. It may be ideologically strong and appear impressive, but it is essentially regressive in political terms.

Eller feels confident to conclude that prehistoric life was nasty, brutish, short, and male-dominated rather than blissful, peaceful, long and matriarchal. The concept of matriarchal prehistory is nothing more than a myth created by women who long for freedom, safety and equality. This myth is unacceptable to feminists, because myths are nostalgic and therefore escapist and dysfunctional. Even if such a kind of society did exist, it is not women's destiny to attempt and revive it. The past is not our destiny, biology is not our destiny. Women, Eller explains, do not need a history of sexism to tell them that sexism is bad, or that it should be opposed.

### **Much ado ...**

All in all, working through *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory* was an interesting but somewhat frustrating experience. Halfway through the book, the negative and aggressive nature of Eller's critical exercise begins to irritate, if not wear down the reader. In the end, one is left with the distinct impression that she wanted not only to disprove the myth, by pointing out its factual and ideological weaknesses, but also intended to wipe it off the surface of the earth, once and for all!

I find Eller's approach, in addition to being overstretched, also ambiguous. She casually blends two distinct critical perspectives. On the one hand, as an academic and as a historian, the author denounces the myth's lack of scientific method and factual evidence. On the other hand, she has taken a clear political stance,



when she attempts to dispose of the matriarchy on feminist grounds and when she declares this particular matriarchal theory to be harmful to the feminist cause. Eller states repeatedly that she cannot support “difference feminism”. She has decided to oppose a female identity that is symbolic, timeless and archetypal. Women should have the freedom to choose their own personal identity, informed by political and moral preferences. Eller rejects the matriarchal myth on the basis of a political choice.

More significantly, her position on what constitutes the right form of feminism (far from being irrelevant), shapes her understanding of what is “scientific”, and what is not. The “divide” which Eller observes between anthropological fieldworkers who describe a society’s official ideology as against those who prefer to study behavioural variation, is clearly inspired by a notion of feminism that emphasises the subtleties, complexities, contradictions and ambiguities of gender relations. Again, I am not saying that her position is wrong. However, it does not constitute a scientific or empirical truth either. Rather, it is merely one of several positions within the feminist camp.

This methodological flaw is worsened by the fact that Eller is neither an archaeologist, nor an anthropologist. In my opinion, she simply lacks the expertise or the “flair” to write about these disciplines in terms of meta-theory. For a non-professional, the task of evaluating the factual evidence relating to the matriarchy constitutes enough of a challenge. A vast amount of fieldwork data avails itself in the literature. Eller not only weighs this data, she attempts to critique the anthropological discipline itself. Her remarks on the methodological weaknesses of prehistory are indicative of the same kind of bias.

At times, Eller is far too keen and quick to denounce the value or the meaningfulness of those facts and artefacts that she has selected for “discussion” (read annihilation). It is true that the concepts of “survivals and fossil ideas” (evolutionism) and the migration paradigm (diffusionism) have been the subject of intense critique, both within archaeology and anthropology. They have not been totally discarded however. In fact migration models are being revived in some archaeological circles and social Darwinism has made a re-appearance in a much more reasonable form. I think it is immature to assume that older approaches within a discipline have become irrelevant to modern day practice. It is an accepted truism in anthropology that all stages or schools are essential to the intellectual and methodological growth of the discipline. Anthropological growth should not be carried forward by theoretical substitution or replacement. The same, of course, applies to archaeology, and any intellectual field of study for that matter, as Kuhn has demonstrated long ago.

This is not to say that Eller is not fully entitled to her opinion. But her exclusion of essential and important contributions to the study of the relationships between gender, culture and personality (e.g. by Margaret Mead), creates the wrongful impression that this particular aspect of women’s studies should be struck off the research agenda of any serious and responsible academic. Eller unintentionally conveys the notion that many anthropologists, and prehistorians, and worse still, the pre-modern or non-Western societies which they study, have nothing of interest to contribute on the subject of gender opposition, or at least nothing that isn’t going to be denounced *stante pede* as classist and racist.

Sadly, Eller's anthropological overview of what is known of matrilineal societies is plain shallow. No convincing attempt was made by the author to objectively evaluate existing ethnographic data. The fact that much of this data is interpreted by some matriarchalists in a simplistic or a naive fashion, does not reduce its relevance to the debate. In short: her critical review of relevant anthropological and archaeological facts is generally biased and often incomplete. These essential flaws are disguised by Eller's general statements on the perceived limitations of anthropological and archaeological methodologies: "material relics can easily be misinterpreted"; "anthropology is selective and subjective by nature"; etc ...

### **Symbolic femininity: An authentic subject**

It is one thing to oppose the matriarchal myth, but another to try and disprove the existence of any form of gynocentrism in society. Eller is well on her way to do just that. If we were to follow her advice and reject any data related to the "difference paradigm", there certainly wouldn't be much left to research, for those with an interest in gender relations in pre-modern societies. Thinking in terms of gender differences may be old hat in certain feminist circles, or it may constitute a poor strategy for the liberation of women in contemporary society, as Eller has suggested. More importantly, however, it has been (and continues to be) an integral part of the strategies women have used in traditional or rural communities to build female identities and to validate themselves in opposition to men.

In the process of differentiating themselves from men, women, naturally, have turned to the life-giving powers in the cosmos, when creating metaphors for the expression of female identities. Women have mystified these powers and created female ideologies, mythologies, rites, ceremonies and deities around them. The fact that this is not to Eller's liking does not make symbolic expressions of femininity less "real" or authentic. The symbolic discourse of procreation explored obvious analogies with the key elements of agricultural subsistence: the earth, the soil, vegetation, rain and the occurrence of seasonal changes. In fact, I believe, the intersection between agriculture and religion is a perfect place to look for instances of female symbolic thought.

Traditional Zulu religion provides us with an interesting case study of how gynocentric energies or tendencies in society were expressed in the form of a religious ideal-type, in this particular case known as "the Heavenly Princess". Nomkhubulwana or iNkosazana yeZulu was believed to be the daughter of the supreme Sky deities iNkosikazi yeZulu and iNkosi. She was the object of a fertility cult. She was closely associated with young unmarried girls. Only children and girls were permitted to look at her; men would be struck by blindness or a serious illness when laying their eyes on her. She appeared dressed only in a string of white beads, a white garment or a very colourful gown that evoked colourful visions of a rainbow, the forest, pastures, a bed of reeds and cultivated fields. She always made her shy and quiet appearance on misty days and was believed to plead with her father, on behalf of humans, for steady and frequent rains.<sup>4</sup> The following is an account of the festival or celebration organised in her honour:

---

4 A Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1976) pp 64-65

The girls participating in the celebrations were to be married soon after the festival. Young unmarried mothers were strictly prohibited from joining the festival. The participants waited for the first mist in spring to secretly prepare *uNomdede* beer from the individual portions of millet contributed by the girls. The millet was not bought in a store; only left-over seeds from the previous harvest could be used. The Princess always descended from a particular section of the nearby mountain, visiting rivulets running through dense vegetation. Men avoided those parts of the mountain in early spring. The girls dressed in the attire of their lovers and also carried their dancing shields and sticks. They collected some of the cows belonging to the herds of their fathers. In the past the whole herd (excluding bulls and oxen) were taken to the mountain. Amongst the animals gathered should be heifers and milk-producing cows. The animals were left at a specific grazing ground. The girls then proceeded to climb the mountain, carrying their beer calabashes, some beans and maize, millet and pumpkin seeds. The beer and seeds were placed on a large rock and the girls invited the Princess with a song: "Come our Sister! ( )". The girls spent the day on the mountain, occasionally consuming some of the beer. They discussed their lovers and marriage plans. They danced around a fire and composed songs for their marriage. They quietly returned to the village with the cattle and sneaked in their homes unseen. The seeds were brought back to the individual homesteads to be mixed with the seeds for planting.<sup>5</sup>

The ritual visit of the Princess to the mountain, it was said, would produce good rains, promote the health status of livestock and create an abundant harvest. In addition, the belief complex of the Princess was meant to promote female identity. The heifers symbolised the girls themselves. Bulls were excluded from the ritual, and so were men. The Princess was said to appear as a rainbow near pools; women who failed to give birth would visit these pools for help. Men would avoid the pools fearing for their health. The Princess was also believed to teach girls good behaviour and give them advice on motherhood, the choice of a suitable partner, and the proper ways of food preparation and field cultivation.

Of equal interest is the following account on the preparation of the seeds, immediately before the start of the agricultural season. Rituals like this were of course not restricted to Zululand. They were common throughout Africa, and illustrate the close symbolic affinity that once existed between agriculture and womanhood:

On a Saturday morning, shortly after a rain shower in early spring, an elderly woman decided to "doctor" some of the maize seeds she wanted to plant in her field. She was assisted by her firstborn son who would plough the field. The woman dug a small hole in a portion of the field nearby the river and ... created a small container, approximately 15cm wide and deep. The lid of a billy-can was then filled with water from the river. She took some of the water in her mouth and placed the lid with the remaining water in the hole. She sent a boy to fetch a bored stone from her yard and placed the stone on the lid in the hole. Seeds were taken from a basket and placed inside the hole of the bored stone. The seeds fell through the hole into the lid. She took some medicine in her mouth, and after mixing it with the water in her mouth the medicine was blown through the bored stone. This procedure was repeated three times, and as a result the seeds had now accumulated up to the rim of the stone. The stone and lid were removed and care was taken to remove all the medicated seeds into the basket, in order to be mixed with the untreated millet. The stone, which the woman claimed had been treated with blood, was kept under the storage hut; its hole was plugged from both sides with maize cobs.<sup>6</sup>

---

5 Adapted from Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism*, pp 66–68

6 Adapted from Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism*, pp 357–358

Berglund was told by the old woman, and by other people who were present, that the ritual was meant to ensure the fertility of the seeds. During a follow-up discussion with one of his key informants, a diviner, he was told that the ritual could only be performed by an old woman. The cavity in the ground was explained as a metaphor for the womb. The field was said to be “the mother from whom we eat” and the water from the river, the water from the womb, was explained as “the water of the children”, because children were said to come from the water.<sup>7</sup>

The realm of storytelling, I discovered recently, is another very productive realm for the exploration of female symbolism and, in addition, of the qualitative features of women’s opposition to patriarchal ideologies. Folklore, I learnt in the process of my research, provided rural women with a subtle and symbolic stratagem by means of which they could taunt, challenge, ridicule and critique masculinity. The following Xitsonga narrative, recorded in 2001, clearly exemplifies the subtle nature of the voice of femininity:

The Woman who Killed the Big Snake

There once was a man by the name of Mkhacani. He left home in order to hunt in the nearby mountains. He loved game hunting for the taste of the meat, especially lion’s meat. There he ran into Ximemene, a Snake that had killed many. It enjoyed hiding in a tree to attack people from above. It grabbed its victim by the head and crushed the skull in order to get to the brain. The fight between the Snake and Mkhacani ended in the death of the hunter. The Snake killed the hunter in its usual way. The wife reported Mkhacani’s death to the chief, who called a meeting. Strong men were sent into the mountain. They walked while singing: “Mee, Mee, Mee, Mee, Sombelisa ( )” The huge Snake scared the men back to the village. The wife was angry and made a plan. She prepared a pot of soft porridge. She walked to the mountain while balancing the pot on her head, singing the song: “Mee, Mee, Mee, Mee, Sombelisa ” The Snake prepared for the attack and the woman continued walking and singing: “Mee, Mee ” The Snake tried to bite her head but landed in the hot porridge and died. The woman was honoured by the chief and the villagers.

The narrator of this narrative insisted that the song was meaningless. The words were neither Xitsonga nor isiZulu (many Tsonga stories display loanwords from related languages). The presence of the ambiguous vocabulary does not weaken the story. It deepens the mystery surrounding the Snake and enhances the feelings of excitement amongst the young listeners. It draws them closer to the action, as do the body movement, intonation and other dramatic tools in the toolkit of the narrator (which are, of course, excluded from this simplified version). “Mee ... Mee ...”, most probably is an abbreviation of the snake’s name (Ximemene), used by the brave men and the wife of the lion hunter to call the monstrous Snake.

The folk tale basically suggests that a woman can succeed where men have failed. It gnaws at the very foundations of man’s assumed superiority: his virility. Mkhacani was not just a hunter. He loved hunting the most ferocious of beasts: the lion. The king did not send ordinary men to fight the Monster. He sent the strongest of the district. However, they did not attempt to fight the Snake; they ran back to the village. Mkhacani’s wife decided to face her husband’s murderer without the help of anybody else. She used the men’s song lines to challenge the Snake. The woman did

---

7 Adapted from Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism*, p 359

not run away when finding her adversary. She continued singing instead. She showed no fear. She did not use a spear or a battle axe, but a simple kitchen utensil (and her mind) to kill the Monster. So much for the brave hunter and the warrior! So much for the might of men and their virility!

Folklore, of course, is only one of many means used by women to create a symbolic space for themselves, in opposition to men. In Eller's understanding, ethnographic data of this kind is irrelevant for the furtherance of a socially engaged form of women's studies. I would like to suggest, in contrast, that this space was a proud, dignified and procreative entity, and that its study remains worthwhile even in the context of contemporary society.

*Jean-Marie Dederen*  
*Thohoyandou*