

### Multicultural Moments

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#### Exploring Matriarchal Societies

In honor of Women's History Month, this issue of Multicultural Moments will focus on societies with strong matriarchal traditions, including those in Indigenous communities.

**Defining Matriarchy.** The term "matriarch" is commonly used to denote the eldest female in a family, particularly one who is highly respected and influential in family decisions. [Merriam-Webster online dictionary](#) defines matriarchy as "as social unit governed by a woman or group of women."

- According to the 2023 *National Geographic* article, [A man's world? Not according to biology or history](#), "Male domination is not universal. There are many matrilineal societies, organized through mothers rather than fathers, dotted all over the world." Check out this Maps of the World graphic, [Matriarchal Societies Around the World](#), to see where many of these societies can be found. In fact, 160 societies can be categorized as matrilineal (see [Matrilineal societies exist around the world—it's time to look beyond the patriarchy](#)).
- The [International Academy for Matriarchal Studies and Matriarchal Spirituality](#) was founded in Germany in 1986 by feminist advocate and researcher Heide Goettner-Abendroth. The organization and Goettner-Abendroth work to educate others on different aspects of matriarchal societies while dispelling misconceptions. For example, according to the website, a matriarchy is not "the reversal of patriarchy with women ruling over men," but instead a society built on "maternal values: care-taking, nurturing, motherliness," that strives to "meet everyone's needs with greatest benefit" (see [Matriarchy](#) section).
- While matriarchal societies strive to achieve the greatest benefit for all of their members, women in these societies, according to the 2021 World Economic Forum article [Why a 'Kingdom of Women' is Better for Female Health](#), tend to be happier and healthier than those living in patriarchal societies. This benefit is attributed to women having more autonomy and a strong social support system within these communities.

**A Look Inside Matriarchal Societies.** Some believed matriarchal societies were hypothetical and did not exist (see [Matrilineal societies exist around the world – it's time to look beyond the patriarchy](#)), but we can find evidence of both the past and current existence of these communities.

- *Town and Country* magazine highlight six societies ruled by women today in the 2019 article, [Six Matriarchal Societies That Have Been Thriving with Women at the Helm for Centuries](#). In this article, you can see a snapshot of communities, including the Minangkabau in Indonesia (considered the largest matriarchal society with 4 million people) and the Umoja, a small community founded in the 1990s for women who faced gender-based violence and where men are banned.

- On Orango, an island of Guinea-Bissau, women have a long tradition of leadership and prestige, including significant roles in trade, spiritual connections with the dead and a higher power, and a service on council that issues judgement for wrongdoings in the community. In this society, it is the women who choose a husband, and they are the primary builders of their homes, which they own. For a glimpse of life in this matriarchal society, watch [Queens of Orango](#).
- The 2006 documentary, [Last Matriarchy Family](#), shows daily life in one Mosso family in Southwest China. The family, like other Mosso families, is led by women who work hard to maintain a multigenerational household. The film highlights the self-sufficient lifestyle as well as the women's participation in what is called "walking marriages." You can watch the documentary [here](#) through MC libraries using your credentials.
- In the BBC Broadcast feature, [Inside the Last Matriarchy in Europe](#), photographer Anne Helene Gjelstad captures stories from the small Estonian Island of Kihnu where the population of mostly women maintain their community while men work abroad or at sea. The women maintain not only the physical community but also manage their families, economy, and cultural traditions. Gjelstad, who explains her original intent was to photograph arts and crafts in the tiny community, shifted her focus to tell the story of the bonds and traditions among the elderly women on the island. You can view her work on *The Guardian's* [Where women rule: the last matriarchy in Europe – in pictures](#).
- Indigenous women from different tribal affiliations share perspectives on matriarchal status in their communities in the panel discussion, [The Power of Matriarchy: Intergenerational Indigenous Women's Leadership](#) sponsored by the non-profit environmental group called [Bioneers](#). The speakers address topics such as the prominence of women's leadership in the environmental justice movement among Indigenous groups and the history of women serving equally in governance and even in battle.

**Matriarchy in Literature and Scholarship.** In the TedEd Talk, "Did Amazons Really Exist?" Adrienne Mayor explores the question of the existence of Amazon warrior women in ancient writing and archaeological evidence, and the topic of women as societal leaders has been featured in both literature and scholarship.

- Science fiction and fantasy genres offer a plethora of titles featuring matriarchal themes, particularly in Young Adult fiction. See this list of 20 [Sci-Fi and Fantasy Books featuring a Matriarchal Society](#) from Nerd Daily.
- **Other notable works highlighting matriarchal societies include** the novels *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1915), *The Ruins of Isis* by Marion Zimmer Bradley (1978), *The Last Hawk* by Catherine Asaro (1997), *The Gate to Women's Country* by Sheri Tepper (1988), *Ritual of Proof* by Dara Joy (2001), *Carnival* by Elizabeth Bear (2006), *The Fortress* by S.A. Jones (2020), and the photo documentary *Matriarchs* by Maria Haas (2021).
- Adding to the body of literature is the work of scholars who have given attention to the topic of matriarchy. Here are a few examples:
  - In [Matriarchies as Societies of Peace: Re-thinking Matriarchy](#) (2008), Heide Goettner-Abendroth outlines different structures (economic, social, political, and cultural) identified in a matriarchal society that strive to achieve balance between genders (not hierarchy).

- [Matriarchy in the Bronze Age of Crete](#) (2020) is an open-source text by Joan Marie Cichon that uses an archaeomythology approach (which combines archaeology, mythology, linguistics, and historical data methods) to explore the question, "Was Bronze Age Crete a matriarchal society?"
- In [Reawakening of Indigenous matriarchal systems: A feminist approach to organizational leadership](#) (2023), authors Courtney Defriend and Celeta Cook explain that the loss of matriarchal systems in Native American societies is the result of settler colonialism that imposed male-dominated structures and gender discrimination. Authentic Indigenous matriarchal systems "not only welcome women in leadership roles, they are rooted in the deeper concept that women are direct reflections of the climate, land, and waters." The authors call for a reconsideration of matriarchal structures founded on feminist and Indigenous leadership approaches that value "cooperation, inclusivity, and collectivity" (Introduction).

*May we avoid blaming or bias based on our circumstance and continue to be grateful for the gifts of the global community.*

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