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Feminism from an African and Matriarchal Culture Perspective
How Ancient Africa's Gender Sensitive Laws and Institutions Can Inform Modern Africa and the World

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Paper Abstract

What explains that in patriarchal societies it is the father who passes on his name to his child while in matriarchal societies the child bears the surname of his mother? The biological reality is the same in both cases: it is the woman who bears the child and gives birth to it. Thus the answer does not lie in biological differences but in cultural ones. So far in feminist literature the analysis relies on a patriarchal background. Not many attempts have been made to consider the way gender has been used in matriarchal societies. Maybe one of the reasons of this is that matriarchy in itself is viewed by many scholars as being a myth. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that not only matriarchal really did exist in Ancient and precolonial Africa but also that these societies used the deification of the mother figure as a way to promote women rights in particular and human rights in general.

The idea of social construction is fundamental to the concept of gender as it shows that gender stereotypes are shaped by society. For that very reason it is important for feminist research to take into account the fact that if, in patriarchal societies, gender stereotypes are a means to promote male supremacy, woman's subordination, and all the other nefarious supremacist and fundamentalist doctrines; in matriarchal societies putting the mother figure on a pedestal and the ensuing gender stereotyping does not give rise to the same rules of oppression. Notwithstanding the general lack of scientific value of gender stereotyping, it is important to show how in matriarchal societies such stereotyping has been used to promote values associated with maternity and therefore with the female sex : loving care, fairness, generosity, competence in nurturing and protecting all forms of life, courage. Such values have reflected on African matriarchal societies' laws and institutions. Hence, from the legal point of view, it is equally interesting to study laws and institutions which are specifically meant to promote women rights and a humanistic society. Thus highlighting ancient and precolonial women-centered laws can inform modern Africa and the world.

I. Matriarchy: a system based on the sacredness of mother and by extension of all women

- 1.1. The true meaning of matriarchy
- 1.2. The sacred function of motherhood
- 1.3. Its effect on women's status

II. The values and institutions arising from matriarchy

- 2.1. The rule of Maat (the sacred principle of honesty, justice and fairness)
- 2.2. Gender parity as a principle of government
- 2.3. The sacredness of all life