

# Understanding Matrilineal Descent and its Dimensions.

## PART II

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By

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# Matrilineal Puzzle

- The authority of males and tracing the descent through females supposedly creates an evident problem addressed by Audrey Richards (1950) as *Matrilineal Puzzle*.

**How is this tension addressed among matrilineal groups?**

# Matrilineal Puzzle

- Matrilineal Puzzle refers to the much evident tension between the social roles of Husband/father in opposition to that of Brother/Maternal Uncle.
- A man derives his descent from his mother and is related to her sister's children more than being the father of his own child. Thus he will always be related to his sister more than his wife.
- The man is sent away from his descent group in some cases which might create an internal disharmony between kin groups especially MB and ZH.
- The conflict also lies because of responsibilities of husband towards his wife and children and towards her sister and nephew.

# 1. Movement of Male members into Wives' residence

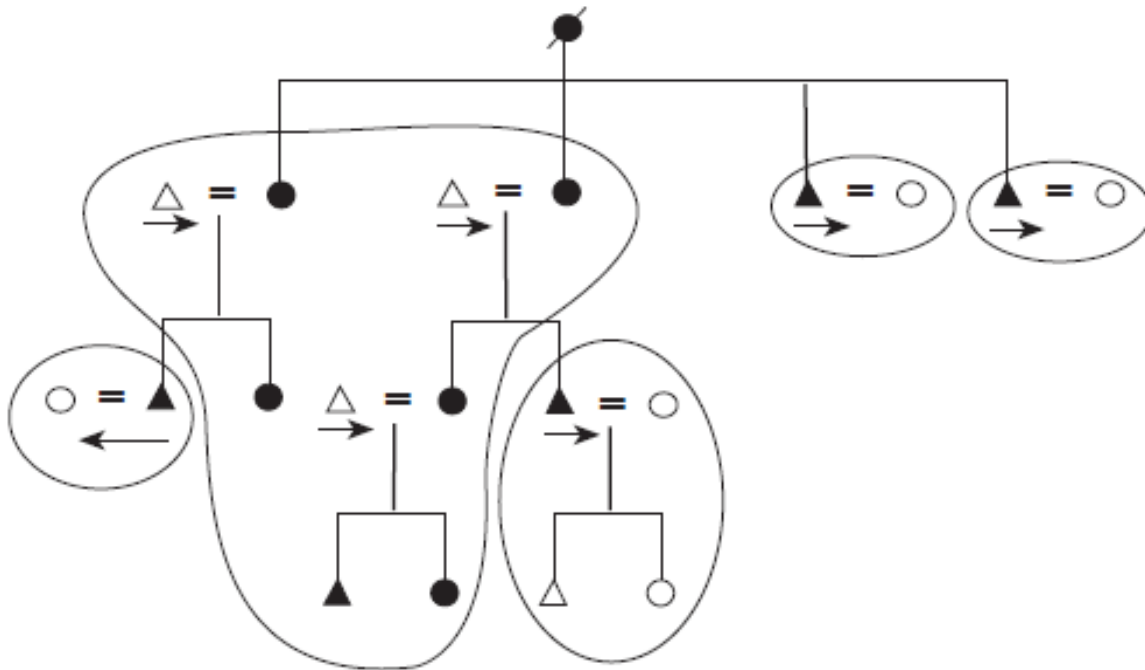


Fig 1.2: Matrilineal as well as a Matrilocality Group where brothers move out after marriage. Circles indicate matrilineal residence and arrows indicate movement of men. ( Stone, 2010: 122)

## 2. Combining Matrilineal descent with Patrilocal residence

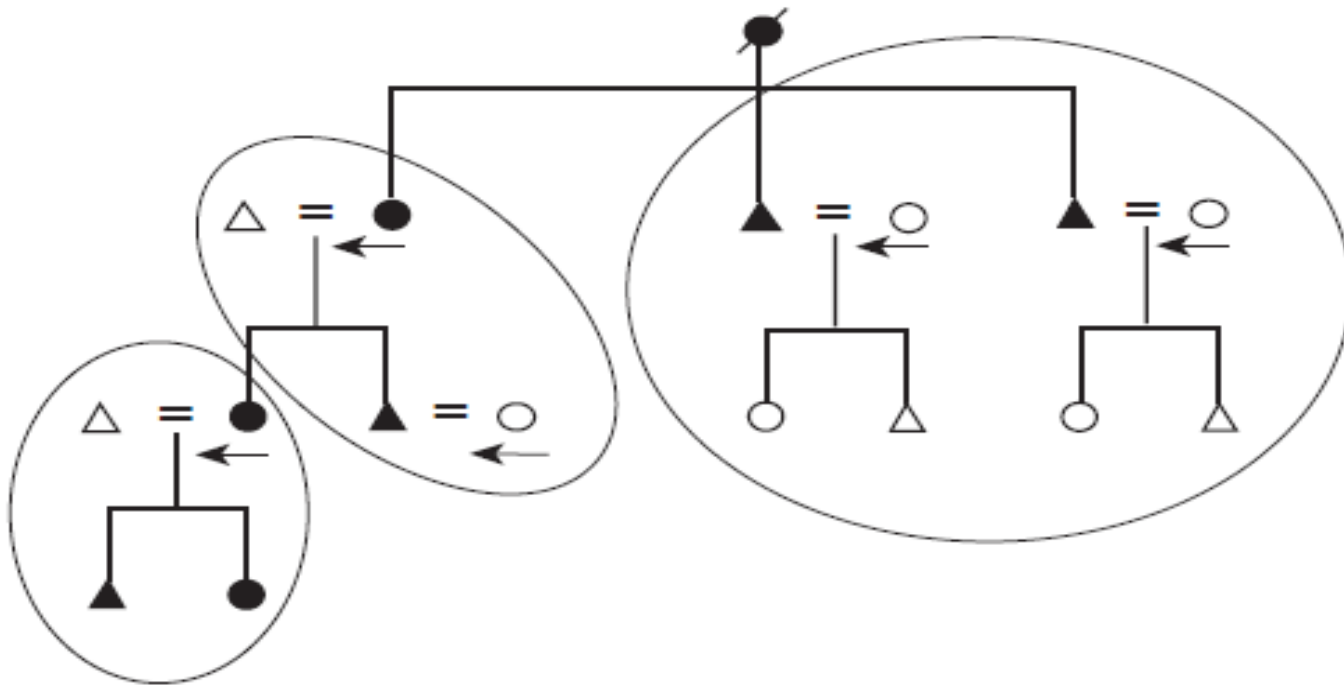


Fig 1.3 Patrilocal Group for Matrilineal descent. Arrow shows movement of daughters' of the matriline to their husband's residence (Stone 2010: 123).

### 3. Movement of woman to patrilocal residence at marriage and further movement of their sons to MBs residence after marriage.

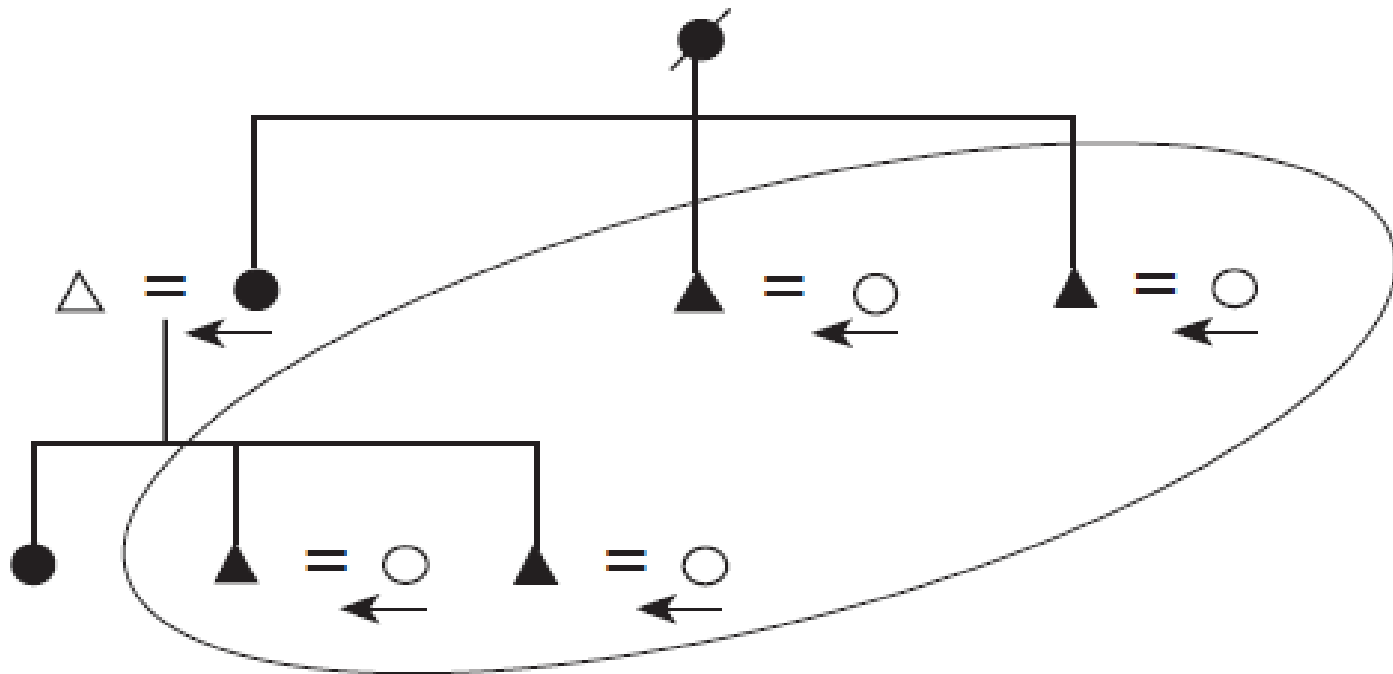


Fig 1.4 The circle represents people sharing avunculocal residence. Arrows show movement of women to patrilocal residence and their sons move to MBs residence after marriage.

## 4. Visiting Husbands

- A rare arrangement where brothers and sisters live in one domestic unit.
- The husbands visit their wife but share domestic unit with their sisters.
- Example: Nayars of India.

# **Were matrilineal groups torn because of female descent overridden by male dominance ?**

- In spite of the solutions of residence combined with matrilineal descent anthropologists assumed that a tremendous amount of tension existed among matrilineal societies because of:
- Tussle over domestic authority between Husband and MB.
- Greater proximity with either husband or brother affecting domestic relationships etc.



# Matrilineal Puzzle

- Matrilineal Puzzle has been heavily criticized for neglecting the role of women in matrilineal society.
- It appeared to focus more on role of men, and male authority within the society.
- Male authority was considered normal and given in societies of matrilineal and patrilineal descent.
- Researches have proved that there is range in distribution of authority, control and power among the male and females within matrilineal descent. To understand this we see two cases.

# The Navajo

- The Navajo are natives of America who are considered have migrated from Asia around 12000 years ago, originally hunter-gatherers.
- In spite of lot of changes, Navajo community is marked with central position of women socially as well as symbolically.
- Navajo's are exogamous group with strict prohibitions on incest (Aberle 1961).
- A Navajo child is believed to have “born into mother’s clan but born for father’s clan”. Thus father’s descent and fatherhood was also acknowledged (Stone 2010: 129, Kluckhohn and Leighton 1946:64).
- Among Navajo father enjoys a affinal as well as consanguineal realtion, dual kinship status (Witherspoon 1975: 31-36).

# The Navajo

- The consanguineal kins are guided by the idea of sharing and solidarity. The most important bond being that of a mother and child. Affinal relations were based on exchange and reciprocity, most important one being that of husband and wife (Witherspoon 1975: 56-57). Here is what Witherspoon (1975) describes about mother- child and husband-wife relationship:

Navajo mothers do not give life, food, and loving care to their children because they want the same in return. A mother loves and helps her child regardless of whether he is a king or a bum, a worker or an indolent . . . A contributor or a parasite, moral or immoral . . . [But] when a husband is a bum or an indolent, or immoral, the wife usually gets rid of him . . . The relationship is supposed to be advantageous to both through mutual obligations of assistance. Where one party falters, the relationship loses its balance and disintegrates (Witherspoon 1975:56-57).

# The Navajo

As opposed to Matrilineal puzzle, the Navajo men shared no such tension over control and authority. A father had a greater authority over his child than MB. However, the role of MB was important in arranging the marriage of her ZS or ZD.

# The NAYAR: Notes from work of Kathleen Gough

- Nayers are matrilineal community found largely in state of Kerala in India. Nayers are matrilineal exogamous clans not a corporate group just like Navajo clan.
- Residence after marriage was natal local.
- Polygyny and polyandry both was practiced among Nayers. The Nayar woman had two types of marriages: tali tying ceremony and sambandam .
- Both these ceremony acknowledged female reproduction. The Nayar woman enjoyed control over her sexuality and the visiting husbands had no authority over the woman or the child.

# The Nayar

Gough (1955: 53) : “A Nayar *taravad* [lineage] is perpetuated by its women. Hence the extraordinary value set by Nayar on obtaining a sufficiency of husbands and thus children for their lineage. The tali-rite dramatizes this need of the lineage for male sexual partners who (‘like breeding bulls,’ as a Calicut prince remarked) will fulfill the one role denied to men of the lineage in respect of their sisters and nieces.”

## Two matrines and the differences

- Navajo typically Native Americans engaged in herding and agriculture.

Nayars are South Asian caste based Hindu community.

- Among Navajo, both men and women have control over resources and directly contribute to the economic activities.

Among Nayar, men control the 'productive property and economically manage the group's estate (Stone 2010:150).

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- Descent of both mother as well as father is considered among Navajo.

Nayars do not recognize descent through father.

- Among Navajo, the head woman has greater authority in residence.

The eldest male is head of the group among Nayars and MBs have authority over ZS/ZD.



# Conclusion

- Kinship in simple societies is means to collective and cooperative labour.
- The matrilineal descent groups might be ruled by the authority of men. But they do not depend on the status of father or husband. (Schneider 1961).
- Unlike patrilineal descent which can not do away with the wife and mother and authority rests in the hands of men but continuity is in hands of women among matrilineal.
- Matrilineal descent groups are not structurally divisive.

# Conclusion

- But patrilineal descent being corporate groups are better able to adapt to need of regulating the property.
- Many scholars are of the opinion that the modern economic system will decay the conformity towards patriline or matriline.
- Descent groups might be cultural solution to problems of resource and residence (Aberle 1961).

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