

World-historic defeat of women

Chris Knight of the Radical Anthropology Group examines myths about a supposed “primitive matriarchy”

Chris Knight

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Take pretty much any hunter-gatherer society in which men monopolise ritual power. You will find a myth explaining how men once violently seized that power from women, the previous rulers of the world. Often, the myths are quite explicit about this — they do not need much decoding. But I would also include more cryptic, far-from-obvious fairy tales such as ‘Jack and the beanstalk’, ‘The sleeping beauty’ and ‘Little Red Riding Hood’.¹ The great French social anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, carefully studied 1,000 similar tales from North and South America. The final chapter of his monumental work *The naked man* — which he entitled ‘One myth only’ — concluded that humanity’s interconnected myths amount ultimately to just one. Like the shifting patterns seen through a kaleidoscope, all are clearly variations on a theme.

Take, for example, St George and the dragon. Our hero is credited with establishing the social order as we know it: by slaying the dragon, George renders the world safe for marriage and the family. In my book, *Blood relations*,² I showed how the awe-inspiring motif of the dragon — known across Aboriginal Australia as the Rainbow Snake — is, in fact, a coded reference to the logic of clan solidarity. Since this is uncompromisingly collectivist, it makes sense to depict it with multiple heads. Any ambitious young man hoping to marry into royalty should mount his horse, raise his sword, hunt down his chosen bride’s brothers and sisters — the blood kin who had previously protected her — and cut off their heads. Three, seven, a hundred — all must go.

The target in all this is womankind’s original freedom and autonomy, demonised — naturally enough — as her captor and violator. The myths come down especially heavily on any hint of matrilineal kinship — the kind in which rights in children and property are inherited through the female line. The patriarchal hero’s sacred mission is to privatise his bride. The ‘many-headed monster’ — the basis of what Marx and Engels termed ‘primitive communism’ — must be slain.

Let me quote a couple of examples, so you get a feel for these myths. The first is from the Selk’nam-Ona of Tierra de Fuego:

In the beginning, witchcraft was known only by the women of Ona Land. They practised it in a lodge which no man dared approach. The girls, as they neared womanhood, were instructed in the magic arts, learning how to bring sickness and death to those who displeased them. The men lived in abject fear and subjection. Certainly they had bows and arrows with which to hunt, ‘Yet,’ they asked, ‘what use are such weapons against witchcraft and sickness?’

The tyranny of women bore down more and more heavily until at last, one day, the men resolved to fight back. They decided to kill the women, whereupon there ensued a great massacre, from which not one woman escaped in human form. The men spared their little daughters and waited until they were old enough to become wives. And so that these women should never be able to band together and regain their old

¹ C Knight *Decoding fairy tales* London 2011.

² C Knight *Blood relations: menstruation and the origins of culture* London 1995, pp449-513.

ascendancy, the men inaugurated a secret society of their own and banished forever the women's lodge, where so many wicked plots had been hatched.³

Here is another version, 'The origin of the sacred flutes'. It comes from the Baruya of Papua New Guinea:

In the days of the *Wandjinia* [dreamtime], the women one day invented flutes. They played them and drew wonderful sounds from them. The men listened and did not know what made the sounds. One day, a man hid to spy on the women and discovered what was making these melodious sounds. He saw several women, one of whom raised a piece of bamboo to her mouth and drew the sounds that the men had heard. Then the woman hid the bamboo beneath one of her skirts that she had hung in her house, which was a menstrual hut. The women then left. The man drew near, slipped into the hut, searched around, found the flute, and raised it to his lips. He too brought forth the same sounds. Then he put it back and went to tell the other men what he had seen and done. When the woman returned, she took out her flute to play it, but this time the sounds which she drew were ugly. So she threw it away, suspecting that the men had touched it. Later, the man came back, found the flute and played it. Lovely sounds came forth, just like the ones that the women had made. Since then, the flutes have been used to help boys grow.

Note how the flute was originally stored by its owner under her skirt, kept hidden in her menstrual hut. The anthropologist, Maurice Godelier, who recorded this story,⁴ comments:

The message of this myth is clear. In the beginning, women were superior to men, but one of the men, violating the fundamental taboo against ever penetrating into the menstrual hut or touching objects soiled with menstrual blood, captured their power and brought it back to men, who now use it to turn little boys into men. But this power, stolen from the women, is the very one that their vagina contains, the one given to them by their menstrual blood. The old women know the rough outlines of this myth and relate it to young girls when they have their first period.

Men's house

According to Lévi-Strauss, mythology is that privileged realm in which the mind "is left to commune with itself".⁵ But in my view, the myth-makers are not just idly philosophising about the distant past. There is a war going on. While women collectively contest men's claims, their voices tend to be muted. The much louder male narratives form part of a system designed to subordinate — indeed, terrorise — the

³ EL Bridges *Uttermost part of the Earth* New York 1948, pp412-13. Quoted in J Bamberger, 'The myth of matriarchy', in MZ Rosaldo and L Lamphere (eds) *Woman, culture and society* Stanford 1974, pp263-80 (slightly abridged).

⁴ M Godelier *The making of great men* Cambridge 1986, pp70-71.

⁵ C Lévi-Strauss *The raw and the cooked* London 1970, p10.

female sex. Regardless of the past, men's current preoccupation is to deny women any chance of deriving solidarity or power from having a menstrual cycle or giving birth.

The world's patriarchal religions to this day echo the idea that womankind gives birth to mere flesh, whereas proper birth-giving — the kind conferring also a soul — must be done by a man. To get a soul, male offspring need to be born again. Across Aboriginal Australia, men claimed to be reproducing their own kind, while, of course, taking the necessary raw materials from women. At a certain time of year, initiated men might seize a cohort of youths from their mothers' arms. The terrified victims would be placed in a symbolic womb, perhaps for several nights, their flesh cut to make them bleed. Eventually, painted in red ochre mixed with blood, out would come initiated men — now successfully “reborn”.⁶

Across the world, core sacred myths accuse women of once monopolising power in a lodge — which you might think of almost as a temple. Nowadays, patriarchy has succeeded in eliminating almost all evidence for such traditions. Where the ‘women's house’ still features in myth, it is usually conceptualised as some kind of brothel. I am reminded here of Frederick Engels, when he takes issue with the moralist historian of marriage, Edvard Westermarck:

Westermarck ... takes the standpoint that promiscuity “involves the suppression of individual inclinations”, and that therefore “the most genuine form of it is prostitution”. In my opinion, any understanding of primitive society is impossible to people who can only see it as a brothel.⁷

In the spirit of Engels, then, let us turn to the facts.

My source here is a 2001 book by Wynne Maggi, *Our women are free: gender and ethnicity in the Hindukush*. The author explains how, to this day, women in the Kalasha Valley in north-west Pakistan proudly consider themselves “free to marry or not, free to travel to their maternal home and free to resist men's demands”. The bastion of these freedoms is the communal menstrual house; here, women love to gossip, laugh and sing together. Centrally located, the women's lodge or *bashali* — off-limits to men — provides a period of refuge and reprieve extending over several days. In theory, women should enter only when menstruating or giving birth. But a woman needing simply to escape her husband — to plan an elopement, for example — might invoke menstruation as a pretext and confidently expect solidarity and support.

Twenty women may occasionally be present, although half that number staying overnight would be more typical, everyone helping care for each other's toddlers. Inside their ‘most holy place’, women compare the duration of their menstrual flows and tend to sleep with their limbs wrapped around one another. Men do not even have the words to ask what happens in this house: the names of women's reproductive organs and processes are the greatest secret of all. The *bashali* offers an opportunity

⁶ MFA Montagu *Coming into being among the Australian Aborigines: the procreative beliefs of the Australian Aborigines* London 1974.

⁷ F Engels (1884) *The origin of the family, private property and the state* London 1940, p35.

to women roughly analogous to what men's houses in other cultures offer men. The author cautions:

I don't want to make the mistake of leading you to believe that women always achieve mystic solidarity simply by virtue of sharing time in the menstrual house ... Yet one of the delightful things, for me at least, is that for a few days women whose paths otherwise rarely cross find things in common ... The *bashali* is a place of intense physical intimacy, where women share knowledge about their bodies that would be unthinkable in everyday life.⁸

I want you to bear this example in mind when thinking about early religion. Before there were temples there were men's houses. These were modelled on the communal women's house. That is true not just sometimes: it is *always* true. No, you did not learn that at Sunday school. Nor do academics feel safe discussing such things. Not so long ago, our major universities were theological colleges. We are talking about churches, synagogues, mosques, temples. People get upset. It is sensitive information.

Two theories

There are two theories about temples. One is that hunter-gatherers do not have them. Foraging people lack sacred spaces in which to assemble. The explanation is that they do not have "fully developed minds", and therefore cannot ascribe "symbolic significance" to things. Because they cannot write — they tend to be completely illiterate — their minds are not developed enough to establish religious or other social institutions.

That is quite a common view — in fact the senior archaeologist in this country, Lord Renfrew, puts things precisely that way. Colin Renfrew contends that human society underwent no qualitative development until the Neolithic. Before that, as mere hunter-gatherers, humans retained social continuity with non-human primates. Admittedly, *Homo sapiens* was in *biological* terms a new species. But little happened *socially* or *cognitively* until the development of farming in association with priesthoods, slavery, armies, hierarchy, private property, writing and bureaucracy. As Renfrew puts it, "It would seem, then, that the arrival of our species over much of the surface of the globe did not produce any very remarkable consequences for several tens of millennia."⁹

Referring to the emergence of a distinctively human 'mind' — regarded by most archaeologists as a revolutionary transition — Renfrew suggests that "we should regard this supposed human revolution and probably the emergence of 'mind' itself, as a process which, while it may have begun (at least in some respects) with the emergence of our species, has in fact to be regarded as a more gradual one, operating in several

⁸ M Maggi *Our women are free: gender and ethnicity in the Hindukush* Michigan 2001, pp155, 157.

⁹ C Renfrew, 'Commodification and institution in group-oriented and individualizing societies', in WG Runciman (ed) *The origin of human social institutions* Oxford 2001, pp93-117; p94.

phases and stages, and perhaps independently in different parts of the world”.¹⁰ Hunter-gatherers are *genetically* like us, with modern brains. They have the right “hardware”, Renfrew concedes. But, if they lack the necessary ‘software’, in what sense do they possess ‘minds’? “For does it make sense to speak of the full development of ‘mind’,” Renfrew asks, “if we are not yet in the presence of complex notations, and the sort of argumentation, for instance in the field of mathematics and astronomy, which only writing permits?”¹¹

While accepting that hunter-gatherers have ‘culture’, Renfrew conceptualises these illiterates as ‘browsing’ for their food like animals:

Most animal species may be thought of as browsers and collectors, dependent mainly upon plant food, or as hunters who in many cases need to catch the highly mobile prey upon which they depend. The same is true of most hunter-gatherers, although they have indeed their own culturally mediated forms of engagement.¹²

“It is not until the emergence of sedentary societies (usually in conjunction with food production),” according to Renfrew, that “the process of the human engagement with the material world takes on a new form and permits the development of new modes of interaction with the material world, allowing the ascription of (symbolic) meaning to material objects.”¹³ In other words, since hunter-gatherers do not produce food — they just gather and consume it — they do not have labour. That is, they do not engage with nature in the manner necessary for truly ‘symbolic’ mentality to emerge.

Renfrew acknowledges that his ramblings at this point might be mistaken for ethnocentric prejudice of the most reactionary imaginable kind: “I realise,” he confesses, “that the proposition that ‘mind’ is in some senses less fully developed among the illiterate and innumerate in our own time is a potentially controversial one, open to misinterpretation.”¹⁴ Despite this, Renfrew presses on: “The true human revolution” — the emergence of “fully developed ‘mind’” — had to await the Neolithic. Engels had written that the origin of the family, private property and the state, linked inextricably with agriculture, corresponded to the “world-historic defeat of the female sex” — the moment when class conflict and accelerating exploitation began. For Renfrew, the establishment of property was no defeat. It was an unqualified victory — the true human revolution — the emergence of symbolic culture and mind.

Well, that is one theory. The original ‘human revolution’ theory¹⁵ states the opposite. The establishment of hunter-gatherer egalitarianism was a qualitative transition. Hunter-gatherers do have fully developed minds, do establish symbolic meanings — and do mark out symbolic space for sacred ceremonies. The transition to fully sym-

¹⁰ *Ibid* p95.

¹¹ *Ibid* p95.

¹² *Ibid* p96.

¹³ *Ibid* pp100-01.

¹⁴ *Ibid* p96.

¹⁵ C Knight *Blood relations: menstruation and the origins of culture* London 1995.

bolic mind, language and culture did not have to wait for farmers, priests or temple bureaucrats to organise such things from above.

Let me cite an example of African hunter-gatherers ascribing symbolic meaning to actions and objects used during a sacred ceremony — something which Renfrew says cannot possibly happen. Do not expect a temple: these people do not make permanent structures. In the following passage, anthropologist Colin Turnbull is describing the most important, socially unifying ceremony of the Mbuti pygmies of the central African Ituri Forest. Centred on a specially built grass hut known as the *elima*, it celebrates a girl's first menstruation — welcomed positively as a sign of her fertility:

So when a young pygmy girl begins to flower into maturity, and blood comes to her for the first time, it comes to her as a gift, received with gratitude and rejoicing ... There is not a word of fear or superstition, and everyone is told the good news.

The girl enters seclusion, but not the seclusion of the village girl. She takes with her all her young friends, those who have not yet reached maturity, and some older ones.

In the house of the *elima*, the girls celebrate the happy event together. Together they are taught the arts and crafts of motherhood by an old and respected relative. They learn not only how to live like adults, but how to sing the songs of adult women. Day after day, night after night, the *elima* house resounds with the throaty contralto of the older women and the high, piping voices of the youngest. It is a time of gladness and happiness, not for the women alone, but for the whole people. Pygmies from all around come to pay their respects, the young men standing or sitting about outside the *elima* house in the hopes of a glimpse of the young beauties inside. And there are special *elima* songs which they sing to each other, the girls singing a light, cascading melody in intricate harmony, the men replying with a rich, vital chorus. For the pygmies the *elima* is one of the happiest, most joyful occasions in their lives:

And so it was with happiness that we all heard that not one, but two girls in our camp had been blessed by the moon.¹⁶

Some days into the ceremony, the girls decide to go on the warpath. Suddenly, they burst out from the *elima*. Wielding saplings as whips, they chase after any particular boys they fancy. On being touched, a young man is honour-bound to make his way into the *elima*. "Once inside," writes Turnbull, "there is no need to do anything further, but you are subject to considerable attention if you refuse."¹⁷ Turnbull is being coy here: what happens is that the boy — assuming he is quite young — may have his first sexual experience, attended to by a whole bunch of women. Over the next few days, a succession of youths may find themselves similarly initiated into sex and adult life. Having got the young men motivated, the women clarify that their future marital success will depend on their success in the hunt. This, then, is the final test which the youths must pass: each must go into the forest and bring back a large game animal, handing over the meat. Then he will be deemed eligible.

¹⁶ C Turnbull (1961) *The forest people* London 1993, p169.

¹⁷ *Ibid* p171.

Communism in motion

The details vary, but among African hunter-gatherers, that is generally how initiation works. It is prompted by menstrual onset, conceptualised as the moon's blessing. Hunter-gatherers view this period as the best time for fertile sex. As Turnbull explains, "they consider that any couple that really wants to have children should 'sleep with the moon'".¹⁸ Western science sees things differently, but that does not make the hunter-gatherer view wrong: if you bond with a cycling female and keep having sex with her, before long she will probably conceive.

Now consider the theoretical implications. According to Renfrew, hunter-gatherers have yet to make a qualitative break with the social principles of apes and monkeys. Society is not yet morally regulated. Nothing is sacred. Religious institutions do not yet exist. Now, if this were the case, would not menstrual onset simply trigger an outbreak of conflict, males fighting like any other primate to monopolise access to the female concerned? As we have just seen, this is not what happens at all. Women in real life intervene decisively to prevent any such damaging outcome. They get to the girl first, before any male can reach her. She and her blood are declared sacred. For several days, until the danger is over, women establish what evolutionary anthropologist Christopher Boehm terms "reverse dominance" — turning the world upside down.¹⁹

The *elima* is not unusual, chosen merely to back up a particular theory. The 'eland bull dance' of the Kalahari Bushmen is another celebrated example.²⁰ In fact, all truly egalitarian hunter-gatherers — that is, virtually all African hunter-gatherers — regularly accomplish "reverse dominance" by similar means. I myself witnessed it among the Hadza bow-and-arrow hunters of Tanzania. During rituals of this kind, young men vividly learn that, while physical strength is appreciated, they must redirect their weapons outwards — proving themselves to be cooperative and generous hunters. If they want sex, there is no other way. The sexual division of labour — indeed, cooperative labour itself — is in this way structured and motivated by female collective action from below.

Initiation (in the case of African hunter-gatherers) fundamentally concerns girls, although boys are, of course, interested and involved, as we have seen. In being socialised, sex is decisively liberated — shielded from the competitive logic of primate-style dominance, with its winners and its losers, its jealousies and associated anxieties. Engels noted the evolutionary significance of such sexual liberation, describing how inter-male rivalry breaks up primate social groups: "Mutual toleration among the adult males," he wrote, "freedom from jealousy, was the first condition for the formation of those larger, permanent groups, in which alone animals could become men."²¹

¹⁸ *Ibid* p169.

¹⁹ C Boehm *Hierarchy in the forest: the evolution of egalitarian behavior* Cambridge MA 2001.

²⁰ JD Lewis-Williams *Believing and seeing: symbolic meanings in southern San rock paintings* London 1981.

²¹ F Engels (1884) *The origin of the family, private property and the state* London 1940, p33.

Everyone benefits from hunter-gatherer sex-education, including, of course, men. Women dominate such occasions, although always in a good-humoured, playful way. But, maliciously reversing everything, patriarchy depicts such playfulness in lurid terms, denouncing it as women's tyrannical rule. Women's sacred house is depicted as a brothel, its inhabitants essentially prostitutes. And, of course, these same patriarchs insist that womankind's blood is no longer the moon's blessing, but her punishment — her monthly 'curse'.

There never was a time when women ruled. Admittedly, women organised autonomously as women, turning the tables on men. In that sense, the potential for matriarchy was always more than a myth. But women's 'rule' was never more than a periodic coming together. Banding together, women would playfully seize power. Then they would lose that power on purpose, collapsing into laughter and the pleasures of heterosexual sex. Then they would band together again, turning the tables once more on men. That way, the revolution was kept going

And isn't there a lesson here somewhere? A case can be made for the idea that revolution is necessarily — even logically — followed by counterrevolution. The best way to deal with this is to manage the counterrevolution itself, supporting both movements of the pendulum, making sure counterrevolution does not outstay its welcome.

Among African hunter-gatherers to this day, that is how communism works.²² The moon cycles through its phases, while power correspondingly swings to and fro between the sexes, neither side monopolising it for long. Morna Finnegan terms it "communism in motion".²³ It lasted for well over 100,000 years. But, when such arrangements came to an end, the newly dominant sex really did seize power and keep it — there is no question about that.²⁴ Male elites then justified their permanent monopoly by claiming to be following in women's footsteps. That was always the ideological function of those matriarchy myths. 'Yes,' say the patriarchal elders, 'we do all these horrible things to women: we threaten them with rape, we conspire against them. But — don't forget — that's what women once did to us.'

That accusation, needless to say, is a total myth.

²² J Lewis *Forest hunter-gatherers and their world: a study of the Mbendjele Yaka pygmies of Congo-Brazzaville and their secular and religious activities and representations* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of London 2002: http://radicalanthropologygroup.org/old/pub_lewisthesisfull.pdf).

²³ M Finnegan *The personal is political: Eros, ritual dialogue and the speaking body in central African hunter-gatherer society* (unpublished PhD thesis, Edinburgh University 2008, p218: www.radicalanthropologygroup.org/old/pub_MornaPhD_small.pdf).

²⁴ L Sims, 'The "solarization" of the moon: manipulated knowledge at Stonehenge' *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 16(2) 2006, pp191-207. J Conrad, 'When all the crap began' *Weekly Worker* supplement, February 24 2011.

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