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Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies

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Introduction

(*English*)

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"War," says Éomer to his sister Éowyn in the blockbuster film *The Return of the King*, "is the province of men." Éowyn's subsequent trajectory as killer of the Witch-King of Angmar contradicts his assertion, but since Éowyn is the only woman fighting on the Fields of Pellenor (and she fights disguised as a man), Éomer's assertion bears investigation. While it is a frivolous example from Western popular culture, Éomer's gendered stereotyping of war-making men and (by implication) peace-making women nevertheless has deep cultural roots in societies around the world and extends beyond warfare and peacemaking to touch upon the very nature of femininity and masculinity. This issue of *Matrix* pushes beyond gendered stereotyping into a challenging examination of the institutions and customs of matriculture by exploring a variety of situations in which the matricultural system either was weakened or became stronger as a consequence of warfare, and one in which a strong matriculture has contributed towards building peace.

So deeply entrenched are gender stereotypes, however, that societies where women also go to war or men provide childcare are held to be aberrations, if not unrealistic fantasies. For many, **s**omehow, the very meaning of *woman* incorporates peacefulness, even passivity and submission, and the essential meaning of *man* has come to incorporate war, violence, and aggression. The significance of these stereotypes extends beyond social behaviour into intangible culture, where they anchor root principles whereby masculinity and femininity are identified through aggression and passivity, respectively.

Proponents of biological determinism accept these gender stereotypes without contention, arguing that biology is destiny and that men are physically built – brain and body -- to be violent and warlike**,** while women are physically built to be peaceful nurturers. Whether the differing gender-based characteristics are attributed to male genes, hormones (testosterone in particular), greater average size and muscle mass, or brain structure, or to women's role in reproduction and childcare, women participating in warfare (or men caring for children) is considered to be odd, if not unnatural. Whether support is claimed from Scripture, Confucianism, tradition, or elsewhere, the strength of these opinions is considerable and persistent.

It is worth noting that biological determinist views are not restricted to proponents of patriarchal social systems. This type of gender essentialism is supported by many people of both sexes, including those espousing feminist philosophies such as *difference feminism*. This last posits that women's greater experience with birthgiving and related activities such as childcare, interpersonal nurturing, and social connections is the basis of what they regard as women's more peaceful natures**. T**hose who accept this analysis turn to women to bring peace, to bring peace, on the assumption that our womanly nature gives us an advantage over men's efforts.

The social consequences of aggression being defined as masculine and passivity as feminine are many; aggressors need victims. Statistics concerning domestic violence or incidence of rape reveal the vast and regular extent to which masculine aggression is enacted on women's bodies, to the detriment of all. The social implications of promoting aggression and warfare as central to masculine identity go far beyond violence towards women, however. They may include an idealization of competition (with corresponding degrees of insecurity, because only one man can be at the top), higher levels of intra-male violence and death, and, collectively, an acceptance of warfare as meaningful.

Women also suffer as a result of believing that our bodies mean we are essentially more peaceful, passive humans. Whether it is accepted voluntarily or practised as a survival strategy, behaviour that is excessively docile, submissive, or cooperative may indicate an inner repression of identity and/or agency, as well as a silent acceptance of masculine violence and aggression. Women who adopt hyper-femininity, or strict adherence to stereotypically feminine behaviour, may be inclined to go further, policing the femininity of other women or sabotaging them in order to gain masculine attention and recognition. A limited, stereotypical definition of womanliness often explicitly corresponds to a definition of manhood as inherently aggressive and violent, no matter how toxic, dysfunctional, or destructive of individual growth such a definition may prove.

Observing through a matricultural heuristic, however, we begin to notice a different rubric ordering gender relationships in warfare and peacemaking. That is, women's regular access to a wide range of social roles is correlated with a breakdown of the

culturally accepted link between passivity, nurturing, and biologically female bodies, as well as the link between aggression, warfare, and biologically male bodies. In societies with strong matricultures, both women and men are generally freer to explore the fullness of human experience, regardless of their gender. As well as offering men more opportunities to display cooperative, nurturing behaviour, this freedom may include women exercising military and political authority over men.[1]

Daniel Iweze and Umasom Amos introduce two precolonial African queens, both of whom won renown and respect for their military capacities. In their article 'Matriarchs in African Societies: Examining the Roles of Queen Amina of Zazzau and Queen Idia in State and Empire Building in Precolonial Nigeria,' Iweze and Amos include mention of several economic and political leadership positions available to women, such as market leader or member of the council of kingmakers. Women's access to military, economic, and politically powerful social roles was sharply curtailed by colonialism; the character of the resulting patriarchal colonial society persists until today, despite Nigeria's achievement of independence from the British in 1960. Iweze and Amos demonstrate that social opportunities available to women-- and, consequently, their status-- may be eroded in any society when cultural constraints are laid upon women's gender roles and the very meaning of *womanhood*.

This is not to say that military aggression by an external power inevitably results in the suppression of a matriculture. Tigray's strong matriculture has been under attack since 2020, when armed forces from southern Ethiopia and Eritrea to the north attempted to occupy the area. As Francesca Baldwin recounts, many war crimes were committed, including a failed attempt to destroy Tigray culture using rape, sexual slavery, gang rape, mutilation, deliberate HIV infections, forced pregnancy and sexual assault as weapons of war. To quote directly from her article, "Although Tigrayan society largely adheres to fixed gender norms and expectations of female behaviour, Tigrayan women are integral to social cohesion as community leaders and upholding standards of morality, representing the essence of being Tigrayan."[2] Baldwin relates how, with a powerful matriculture grounding their action, women in the Tigray diaspora are leading collective organizing not only against the war but also against sexual and gender-based violence in their community. Although Tigrayan matriculture has been under assault in the homelands, the focused attack on them *as women* inspired women refugees and emigrants living outside those territories to exercise political leadership in ways which traditional expectations had held in check. Tigrayan men have been vocally and visibly supportive of Tigrayan women's activism, which inspires hope that the Tigrayan matriculture, although attacked, will develop even more powerfully in that society.

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1 See Frederique Darragon, 'Contemporary Husband-less Societies and Ancient Queendoms in the Sino-Tibetan Marches,' *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies* 1:1 (2021), 118-51. Available online at <https://www.networkonculture.ca/activities/matrix/issues/vol2_iss1>.

2 See Baldwin, this issue, 32-59.

It is clear, then, that as women challenge restrictive gender roles and exercise greater agency in a society, the cultural meaning of *woman* grows to embrace a wider range of human experience than allowed for by biological determinism. Matthew Cerjak's research note 'This Must Be Done By Mothers Alone: Research Notes on the Expansion of Women's Agency During the Croatian Homeland War' provides some preliminary explorations which illuminate this process in late twentieth-century Croatia. In an organic manner, Croatian women organized collectively in an attempt to prevent the war; when those efforts failed, they joined the national defence as soldiers (meanwhile suffering rape and other sex-based war crimes). After the war, they leveraged the social capital they had gained from serving in the military and enduring criminal attacks to achieve greater political representation. Croatian women's initial organizing efforts won approval and widespread engagement thanks to a grounding in traditionally feminine gender roles of caring for the family. When – despite opposition – some women entered military service, their participation eventually was recognized as essential to the successful defence of their country. Working with the networks and associations formed before war was inflicted, women effectively parlayed this recognition and the suffering they had endured into a significantly higher participation of women in the Croatian Parliament.

Leveraging military service to achieve greater political consequence has not been a strategy unique to Croatian women. A well-known example is that of the British suffragettes, whose service to their country won a limited franchise for women after World War I. Less well known is the story of Nanyehi, a Cherokee *Ghigau*, or Beloved Woman, whose military valour was recognized with a position in negotiations with Euro-American settlers. Matthew Cerjak's article '"The Women Must Hear Our Words:" Nanyehi's Negotiations' explores the cultural contexts of two very different societies, one with a strict patriarchy and one with a flourishing matriculture. His description of the gender balance at the heart of the Cherokee worldview is a startling contrast with the patriarchal hierarchy found among the Euro-American settlers.

A similar gender balance is displayed in the Tlingit worldview. *Matrix* is pleased to reprint John Swanton's ethnographic work on the Tlingit sacred peace dance, accompanied by some introductory remarks from Marie-Françoise Guédon. Guédon draws on ethnography from Frederica de Laguna to contextualize Swanton's descriptive work, noting that cultural divisions among the Tlingit relate more powerfully to one's position as an aristocrat or a commoner, rather than to distinctions between women and men. That is, the social roles which someone is entitled to occupy are allotted primarily according to social status, not gender; in the ceremonies which establish peace after warfare, noble women and noble men act with equal authority and occupy equivalent roles.

In her contribution 'The New Ideology of 'Eternal War' in Archaeology. Critical Reflections on Early History,' Heide Goettner-Abendroth declares that contemporary archaeologists

are severely hampered in their ability to interpret findings accurately, as a result of their enculturation to patriarchal biological determinism and the related extrapolation that, since men are inherently violent and warlike today, men have always been warlike, and stable, peaceful societies have never existed. This intellectual bias, writes Goettner-Abendroth, leads archaeologists to assume that warfare is the only explanation for several sites with multiple graves**,** when there is stronger evidence that these mass graves are sites of reburial ceremonies conducted by peaceful communities.

The fact that the stereotypes of male aggressor / female victim are not integral to 'human nature' was confirmed more than forty years ago when, in 1981, Peggy Reeves Sanday discovered that societies where men are enculturated to respect women and the sanctity of life – in other words, societies with strong matricultures - have a much lower incidence of rape than those societies under the sway of an ideology of male dominance.[3] As well as offering men greater opportunities to show their cooperative and peaceful natures, societies with strong matriculture also do not define women exclusively as subordinates or victims. As long as lethal intergroup violence **(**as Joshua Goldstein defines war**)** continues to exist, it is worth remembering that there are and have been societies where women are not excluded from participating in war (both in defence and offensively) nor from the opportunities and social status such participation brings.

We're pleased to include two book reviews in this issue: the first, Aubrey Lauersdorf's review of Alejandra Dubcovsky's *Talking Back: Native Women and the Making of the Early South* (Yale University Press, 2023), focuses on Dubcovsky's skill at navigating an unsympathetic archive to identify and describe Indigenous women's lives in the context of their own societies as these societies faced Spanish colonization. As Lauersdorf notes, Dubcovsky incorporates not only material from a Spanish archive but also the results of archaeological research, Indigenous myths and stories, and Timucua language materials to develop a clear portrait of Timucua women's lives during a tumultuous period.

Our second book review is Marie-Françoise Guédon's extensive review of *The Darker Angels of Our Nature: Refuting the Pinker Theory of History and Violence* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), an anthology of seventeen chapters edited by Philip Dwyer and Marc Micale which is itself a response to Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence has Declined* (Viking Books, 2011). Why review a book which is essentially a review of another book? Guédon reasons that "social violence is an essential theme in women's lives and we need to know how violence is perceived, explained, and engaged in our world…"[4] Three of Guédons' conclusions are of specific interest to the study of matriculture: (1) that *The Darker Angels* emphasizes the need to base research in the

3 See Peggy Reeves Sanday, 'The Socio-Cultural Context of Rape: A Cross-Cultural Study,' reprinted in *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies* 1:1 (2020), 31-46. Available online at <https://www.networkonculture.ca/activities/matrix/issues/vol1_iss1>.

4 See Guédon, this issue, 139-73.

human sciences on observation rather than theoretical assumptions; (2) that interpreting violence as a process rather than an event promotes consideration of context and consequences; and, most importantly, (3) that the invisibility of violence, and even more of systemic violence, should warn us that progress in social well-being depends in large part on making violence visible.

These articles, book reviews, and the research note all contribute towards making the context and consequences of warfare and violence visible to readers. Several authors in this issue acknowledge women's active participation in the processes of warfare and peacemaking, highlighting the agency of women in historical and contemporary societies when a strong matriculture permits it. This creates knowledge about conflict and the resolution thereof which is more reliable because it includes the changing developments of cultural systems. By explicitly moving beyond biological determinism when considering warfare and peacemaking among matricultures, these articles, indeed this journal, contributes to developing stronger matricultures in the global context.

Many thanks for the contributions of Thomas Lips and Nicole Lacroix to translations in this issue. Thank you also to Stanislav Nepochatov for his photograph of a Defender of Ukraine on the Independence Day March of 2020, placed on the cover of this issue.

Enjoy the issue!

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