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Men and Masculinities from Matricultural Perspectives: An Introduction

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Abstract

This special issue of Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies *examines the lives of men from matricultural perspectives. Matriculture is a concept derived from the interpretive anthropology of Clifford Geertz, who developed his cultural systems theory based on an understanding of the symbolic elements that constitute human cultures. Marie-Françoise Guédon, Linnéa Rowlatt, and Angela Sumegi have further defined matriculture as those aspects of a cultural system unique to women. The articles, interviews, and book reviews in this special issue illustrate two trends that warrant further investigation. First, men play crucial roles in the creation, performance, and maintenance of matricultures. Second, the interviews published in this special issue indicate that women in Indigenous societies have historically played essential roles in preserving, revitalizing, and decolonizing their cultures. Moreover, women continue this vital work in today's world, regardless of whether they hail from societies that possess matrilineal, patrilineal, or bilateral kinship systems.*

Key Words: Matriculture, masculinity, matrilineal, patrilineal, colonialism / decolonisation

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In the call for papers for this special issue of *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*, the editorial team posed the question, "How are men and masculinity understood and portrayed from matricultural perspectives?" When I was invited to serve as the guest editor, I did not know how to respond to this question. Now, after serving in this capacity, neither I nor any other member of the team has a definitive answer to this query. To some, that may sound like an admission of defeat; a failure to accomplish the original goals the team announced when it devised the theme of this special issue. However, such an assessment would be premature. Posing the question was itself an important step towards opening a new line of inquiry into the growing body of literature concerning matriculture, an anthropological approach that has the potential to shift our thinking about the lives of both women and men in human societies.

Matriculture is both a concept and, to a significant degree, a methodology that emerges from the interpretive anthropology of Clifford Geertz, who asserted that culture consists of "an image of cosmic order—a world view—by means of a single set of symbols."[1] Human societies organize such symbols into systems that perform two functions, according to Geertz. They provide "a model *for*" the organization of the nonsymbolic aspects of society; they also offer "a model *of*" social reality that allows for "the manipulation of symbol structures so as to bring them, more or less closely, into parallel with the pre-established nonsymbolic system."[2] The methodology of matriculture originates in the analysis and understanding of those symbols that define a matriculture, or, in the words of Marie-Françoise Guédon, symbols that "designate that part or those components of culture that sustain, express, and welcome women's participation in the socio-cultural fabric."[3] Matriculture, of course, is the subject upon which this journal is established. The growing recognition of matriculture as an anthropological approach is evident in a recent anthology of scholarly essays that examine matriculture in various societies: *Matriculture, Shamanism, and the Authority of Women: The Powers That Be*. Linnéa Rowlatt and Angela Sumegi, the editors of this volume, further refine our understanding of matriculture by noting that every society has a matriculture (and, likewise, a patriculture). They also argue that "every society—even the most severely patriarchal—must include a matricultural cultural system, or matriculture for short, because every society must conceptualize motherhood and the means of biological reproduction."[4]

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[1] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 118 (qtd. 118).
[2] Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 93 (qtd. 93).
[3] Marie-Françoise Guédon, "Introduction," *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies* 1(1) (May 2020): 5-6 (qtd. 5).
[4] Linnéa Rowlatt and Angela Sumegi, "Introduction: Considering Women's Power," in *Matriculture, Shamanism, and the Authority of Women: The Powers That Be*, Linnéa Rowlatt and Angela Sumegi, eds. (Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2025), 1-7 (qtd. 1).

Guédon, Rowlatt, and Sumegi assert that matricultures vary considerably in their constitutions. Matrilineal, matrilocal, and uxorilocal societies tend to have the strongest matricultures, as women play essential roles beyond motherhood, particularly within kinship systems and households. Guédon writes, "Matricultures are found in every single human culture in many different versions; they are sometimes weak and limiting, such as when patrilineal kinship systems and patrilocality prevent women from accessing, communicating, and transmitting their knowledge."[5] On the other hand, Rowlatt and Sumegi describe "flourishing matricultures, where women exert authority equal to or greater than men," including the Kanien'kehà:ka (Mohawk) of North America and the Minangkabau of Indonesia, both of which are matrilineal and matrilocal societies.[6] The research articles, interviews, and reviews in this special issue highlight the lives of men in a variety of matricultural contexts. Moreover, the concept of matriculture is not static; it continues to evolve and mature. This is due, in part, to the fact that other anthropological concepts have informed the notion of matriculture. The authors who have contributed to this special issue have tempered their understandings of matriculture with a variety of other anthropological concepts, including intersectionality, matriarchy, and female genital power.[7]

Related to matriculture and patriculture are the cultural constructs of masculinity and femininity. Ethnographic studies of how masculinity is constructed and performed in cultures began in the 1990s. Since then, the subject has expanded significantly in the anthropological literature.[8] Indeed, how men (and women) construct the cultural system of maleness and masculinity (and, likewise, femaleness and femininity) overlaps with the

[5] Marie-Françoise Guédon, "Northern Athabaskan Dreaming: A Matricultural Viewpoint," in *Matriculture, Shamanism, and the Authority of Women*, 10-14 (qtd. 13).
[6] Rowlatt and Sumegi, "Introduction," 2 (qtd. 2).
[7] For the concept of intersectionality as cited by Mihye Shin, see Jerker Edström, Satish Kumar Singh, and Thea Shahrokh, "Intersectionality: A Key for Men to Break Out of the Patriarchal Prison?" *IDS Bulletin* 47 (November 2016): 57-74. For the concept of matriarchy as cited by Shin, see Ifi Amadiume, "Theorizing Matriarchy in Africa: Kinship Ideologies and Systems in Africa and Europe," in *African Gender Studies: A Reader*, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 83-98; and Cheikh Anta Diop, *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa: The Domains of Matriarchy and Patriarchy in Classical Antiquity* (London: Karnak House, 1989). For the concept of female genital power as cited by Ayodeji Abiona, see Dianne M. Stewart, "Matri-archive: A New Portal to Knowledge Production in African Studies," *Journal of African Religions* 7 (2019): 310-315.
[8] For the foundational work on masculinity studies, see David D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). For literature reviews of significant ethnographic examinations of masculinity, see Matthew C. Gutmann, "Trafficking in Men: The Anthropology of Masculinity," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26 (1997): 385-409; and Matthew C. Gutmann, "Remarking the Unmarked: An Anthropology of Masculinity," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 52 (2023): 55-72.

study of men in matricultural societies. However, as the editorial team reviewed the submissions to this issue, it became clear that we were engaged in something unique and unprecedented. For me, as a guest editor, it was a profoundly engaging intellectual journey. The only disappointment was realizing we had only scratched the surface of this subject. My hope is that the work of the editors and authors in preparing this special issue will serve as the seed of a larger, more comprehensive effort across the various subdisciplines of anthropology and other disciplines, such as history. The contributions to this special issue have made at least two tentative conclusions clear. The first is that men in human societies play crucial roles in the creation, performance, and maintenance of matricultures. The second conclusion is that women have played—and continue to play—essential roles in the preservation, revitalization, and decolonization of colonized Indigenous societies.

The research articles by Ayodeji Abiona and Mihye Shin provide strong evidence for the first conclusion. Abiona examines the *Èró* festival practiced among the Yorùbá people in Ùṣò, Ondo State, Nigeria, a patrilineal society. While Abiona also characterizes the Yorùbá as patriarchal, he qualifies this conclusion with several important caveats. He writes that "patriarchy is practiced or exists relative to femininity, that is, there could be no notion of patriarchy without women's active participation."[9] Among the Yorùbá, men move from various age groups during the course of their lives, the last of which is the *Ọmọlúṣò*. Men in this category are freed from the duties and responsibilities of younger men and released from daily labor. Held every nine years in December, men participating in the *Èró* festival don women's clothing prepared for them by their daughters. As they make their procession through the streets during the festival, they wield brooms and sweep toward the younger men who will assume their duties. The *Èró* festival symbolizes the emasculation of the older men as they enter a new lifestyle characterized by rest. However, it does not carry any stigma or effeminization, according to Abiona, nor does this ostensible saturnalia violate the cultural importance of heteronormativity. He writes, "Cross dressing in this context is not an everyday practice but a spectacle in ritual context."[10] Thus, men's participation in the *Èró* festival and women's performances within it ultimately maintain and sustain the culturally defined roles of males and females.

The Akan society of Ghana, on the other hand, is matrilineal, but as Shin asserts, it is a "matrilineal patriarchy" without a patriarch.[11] Shin presents a complex portrait of Akan life

[9] Ayodeji Abiona, "Inside Women's Robes: Masculinity and Dress During *Èró* Festival," *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*, Special Issue: Men and Masculinities from Matricultural Perspectives, 4(2) (Autumn 2025): 62-82 (qtd. 64).
[10] Abiona, "Inside Women's Robes," 77.
[11] Mihye Shin, "What Does It Mean To Be a Family Man in a Matrilineal Society? Masculinity and Women's Empowerment in Akan, Ghana," *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*, Special Issue: Men and Masculinities from Matricultural Perspectives, 4(2) (Autumn 2025): 21-61 (qtd. 30).

in which women serve as household heads, with men largely absent. Patriarchy among the Akan stems from several sources, including historical and cultural factors such as the introduction of Christianity and inheritance practices that tend to favor men even within this matrilineal kinship system. Indeed, women's brothers tend to wield greater authority in a household than men who have married into it, and men transmit property and wealth to their sisters' sons, leaving women largely out of the line of inheritance. Marriages tend to be weak, and intimate unions are often little more than temporary, casual relationships. Therefore, men tend to have far less authority in their conjugal households (from which they are frequently absent) than in their natal households. Financial loss and poverty often prevent men from fulfilling their roles as breadwinners, producing what Shin calls "disempowered masculinity" in Akan society.[12] Women, as heads of household, can step into these absences to carve out their sphere of autonomy, even if this sphere is circumscribed by various patriarchal elements that exist within this matrilineal society. Women thus remain central to the management of their intergenerational households. Shin concludes that within Akan society, women are "in the centre of the family even if they are not at the centre of power."[13] My own observations after reading Shin's research suggest that men and women among the Akan engage in an awkward dance, and male missteps create opportunities for women to fill the gaps left by men's shortcomings. Such "disempowered masculinity" thus weakens the ideal notion of patriarchy in Akan society, and in the process shapes and defines the roles of women, even if the mechanism is one of male absence rather than presence.

The interviews published in this special issue make another phenomenon abundantly evident: women in Indigenous and non-Western societies have played—and continue to play—essential roles in cultural revitalization and preservation among peoples who have experienced cultural loss due to colonialism. This is true regardless of whether the society has a matrilineal, patrilineal, or bilateral kinship system. As I listened to the interviewees' recordings, I reflected on a 1984 article by Michael Allen, who, after a comprehensive review of Melanesian societies, noted that matrilineal systems have "the greatest evolutionary potential." He also added that "it is worth repeating that despite numerous early prognoses to the contrary, the matrilineal areas of Melanesia have been among the most successful in adapting to the traumas of European contact."[14] I have long believed that this conclusion warrants more in-depth research across a larger number of global regions. At the macro level, Allen's research suggests that societies with strong matricultures are better able to manage the stresses and strains of colonialism. The interviews in this special issue indicate the same is true at the micro level, and that women

[12] Shin, "What Does It Mean To Be a Family Man in a Matrilineal Society?", 43.
[13] Shin, "What Does It Mean To Be a Family Man in a Matrilineal Society?", 38.
[14] Michael Allen, "Elders, Chiefs, and Big Men: Authority Legitimation and Political Evolution in Melanesia," *American Ethnologist* 11 (February 1984): 20-41 (qtd. 37).

across the globe appear better able to cope than men when confronted with the vagaries of colonialism. They are also taking the lead in decolonizing efforts in the contemporary world.

The Aleut (Unangax̂) are traditionally a patrilineal culture. Still, Carter Price, reflecting on his journey of reclaiming and learning more about being and becoming an Aleut man, credits the women in his life, particularly his maternal grandmother (nicknamed "Honey"), with anchoring him firmly in his culture. Like many Native people in the United States, his grandmother attended a government boarding school that sought to strip children of their natal cultures. Price inherited his tattoos from his mother's family, and his female relatives have been eager to keep the craft of Aleut basketweaving alive. Price also credits his maternal uncle with teaching him the traditional subsistence activities of the Aleut people. Price, through the conventional avenue of academic research, has also endeavored to learn more about the Aleut people before the "colonial times" and "boarding school times" disrupted the flow of cultural knowledge between the generations. Nevertheless, his testimony makes clear that the strong women in his life (including his wife) have been essential to his personal journey of reclaiming his cultural heritage.[15] Douglas Cardinal, who claims Blackfoot descent from his father's family, tells a similar story. The Blackfoot possess a largely bilateral system of kinship with some patrilineal characteristics. Cardinal credits the women from his father's family with ensuring that he remained connected to his Blackfoot heritage. He met his paternal grandmother at age five when she lived in a small cabin with her husband. She prayed with Cardinal over her husband's medicine bundle and taught Cardinal about the "little souls" it contained, such as the objects carved from pipestone. She would go on to teach her young grandson the Blackfoot language.[16]

Geralt Cloete relates a similar story concerning his people, the Nama Khoe society of South Africa. Cloete was born in 1993 in the Richtersveld Municipality north of Cape Town. He learned Afrikaans as his first language, although his maternal and paternal grandparents spoke Nama, as did his parents. Cloete relates that Christian missionaries forbade the children of his parents' generation from speaking the Nama language, calling it 'demonic.' Cloete realized as he learned the language that, "I'm sitting with a tongue that's not my mother's tongue [Nama]. I'm sitting with some other mother's tongue [Afrikaans] in my mouth."[17] Cloete labels himself a 'theatre maker' who uses theatre as a mechanism of cultural preservation. He founded Nama Khoi Productions in 2022 to reclaim his culture

[15] Carter Price, "Personal Reflections on Unangax̂ (Aleut) Men and Matriculture," *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*, Special Issue: Men and Masculinities from Matricultural Perspectives, 4(2) (Autumn 2025): 15:45.
[16] Douglas Cardinal, "Personal Reflections on Blackfoot Men and Matriculture," *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*, Special Issue: Men and Masculinities from Matricultural Perspectives, 4(2) (Autumn 2025): 10:54.
[17] Geralt Cloete, "Personal Reflections on Nama Khoe Men and Matriculture," *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*, Special Issue: Men and Masculinities from Matricultural Perspectives, 4(2) (Autumn 2025): 04:30.

and heal the trauma left by colonialism in South Africa.[18] Kai Monture has taken a similar tack among his people, the Tlingit. Monture says that the matrilineal nature of the society creates the core identity among his people. As in many matrilineal societies, a woman's sisters are also considered mothers to Tlingit children, who refer to them as 'little mothers.' While Tlingit children have relatively warm and loving relationships with their fathers (who come from different clans), children's relationships with their maternal uncles are more proper and formal. Maternal uncles are responsible for raising boys in the Tlingit warrior tradition, which includes respect for women. Colonialism among the Tlingit led to a breakdown of traditional Tlingit values rooted in matrilineality. Monture believes returning to that tradition is the key to reducing the gendered violence manifest among the Tlingit and other Native societies of Alaska. He has been active in reviving traditional warrior training in Tlingit communities as a means of ridding these communities of what he calls 'toxic masculinity' and returning to true masculinity informed by the matrilineal traditions of the Tlingit.[19]

Jeff Gray, a Texan of Muskogee descent, similarly discusses toxic masculinity and how reclaiming the matrilineal customs of his people has provided him with an avenue for a balanced and healthy way of life. Like other interviewees, Gray asserts that colonialism disrupted the generational transmission of Muskogee culture and, like Carter Price, much of what he has reclaimed has come through reading and research. From one of his female relations, he learned that he was a descendant of great Muskogee leader William Weatherford, also known as Red Eagle. Gray was particularly influenced by Dr. Martin Luther King, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Women's Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s as a young teen, as were his sisters. Living in an environment that was four-sixths female—himself, his father, grandmother, mother, and two sisters—was particularly important. He eventually came to the realization, "What's good for the matriarchy is actually good for me."[20] Gray largely grew up at a distance from his Muskogee family in Oklahoma. Even though Xabi Otero, a Basque, now lives in the heart of his native Basque culture on the Iberian Peninsula, a Hispanic education system deprived him of his language. He grew up in Erratzu, in the Baztan Valley of Navarre and remembers as a young boy sitting by the fire listening to the stories of his *amatxi*, or grandmother, Maria. He learned of the *Basa Jaun* (the lord of the forest), the *Intxisus*, elves who lived in the thickest depths of the forest, and the *Lamiak*, women who reclined on the rocks of the

[18] Cloete, "Personal Reflections," 06:30.
[19] Kai Monture, "Personal Reflections on Tlingit Men and Matriculture," *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*, Special Issue: Men and Masculinities from Matricultural Perspectives, 4(2) (Autumn 2025): 13:24, 20:15.
[20] Jeff Gray, "Personal Reflections on Muskogee Men and Matriculture," *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*, Special Issue: Men and Masculinities from Matricultural Perspectives, 4(2) (Autumn 2025): 29:43.

streams, singing and combing their golden hair.[21] He credits women today with maintaining the historical presence of Basque culture in Canada through the Jauzarrea Basque Culture Program at the Louisbourg National Historic Site. He notes:

> Since we started this program in 2019, only women have been interested in it. We have only sent women, a couple of them each year, to fulfill their role as representatives of Basque culture. Not a single man, from 2019 to 2025…. It could be the updated example of what our *amatxis* (grandmothers) represented: there are no more fires in the houses, there is no opportunity to share those moments of knowledge transfer, but they, these young women of today, are doing it differently…. They are educating us in this society, adapting to the changing course of life, every day, every moment.[22]

Otero's comments echo those of the Basque scholar Idoia Arana-Beobide, whose work on the office of the *serora* in *Euskalerria* (the Basque Country) during the medieval and early modern periods highlights the role of the women who held this office as caretakers of churches, hermitages, and other religious sites. Arana-Beobide argues that the *seroras* were "valuable assets in Basque social and religious life."[23] Otero's observations indicate that these Basque women in Canada have inherited a role somewhat similar to that of their *serora* predecessors.

Thus, the interviews in this special issue provide a strong basis for undertaking what I believe is a rich and vital field of study: the role of Indigenous women in today's world in the reclamation of cultures disrupted and traumatized by colonialism. What particularly caught my attention was the fact that women have been so central to this process, regardless of the society's kinship system. Each of these societies has, traditionally, demonstrated various matricultural configurations, some of which were stronger and more clearly defined than others in the past. Of great interest to me is how, even in strongly patrilineal societies such as the Aleut, women have, since the advent of colonialism, assumed leadership roles in the reclamation, preservation, and continuation of their cultural heritages. Men have also played (and continue to play) a significant role in this process. However, women appear to be leading these efforts today and have been leading them for several generations. In the process, they have created stronger, more defined matricultures. The information presented in these interviews is, of course, tentative and

[21] Gray, "Personal Reflections," 13:53; Xabi Otero, "Personal Reflections on Basque Men and Matriculture," *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*, Special Issue: Men and Masculinities from Matricultural Perspectives, 4(2) (Autumn 2025): forthcoming.
[22] Otero, "Personal Reflections," forthcoming.
[23] Idoia Arana-Beobide, "*Seroren Buruz*: The Challenge of *Serora* in *Euskalerria*," in *Matriculture, Shamanism, and the Authority of Women*, 79-120 (qtd. 113).

anecdotal, but compelling. Just as important, interviews such as these provide an essential archive for future scholars. Those grounded in the discipline of history can attest to how much of the human experience has passed away with every generation, in every human society, over the breadth of time. Preserving the voices and experiences of individuals in the present is vital for future generations to understand us and, perhaps, for us to shape those who will follow.

Book reviews constitute the final section of this special issue, and they are of two types. The first, by Marcel Blanc, reviews a recent work of scholarship, namely, a book by Heide Goettner-Abendroth on matriarchy, an anthropological concept to which Goettner-Abendroth has dedicated her career.[24] The other two works are review essays of landmark ethnographic works that have influenced generations of cultural anthropologists. Marie-Françoise Guédon examines *Son of Old Man Hat A Navaho Autobiography*, first published in 1938. Walter Dyk recorded the life story of the Navajo man Left Handed, the son of Old Man Hat, who recounted his life among his people. What emerges from its pages is the importance that Left Handed ascribed, without drama or flourish, to kinship and the various relationships this network created in his day-to-day life within this matrilineal society. Fathers and paternal aunts treated children with great affection and kindness. Mothers—the source of one's clan identity—and maternal uncles had more formal and even authoritarian relationships with their children. Navajo women exhibited levels of "authority, independence, and power" that were unknown to their White counterparts in 1930s America.[25] My own original contribution to this special issue is a review essay that similarly examines two other well-known autobiographical works through the lens of matriculture. Both are considered classics within the corpus of American ethnographic literature: *The Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian*, edited by Paul Radin, and *Mountain Wolf Woman*, edited by Nancy Oestreich Lurie. These works describe the lives of Sam Blowsnake and his sister, Mountain Wolf Woman, Ho-Chunks (Winnebagos), who lived in the changing socio-cultural landscape of Wisconsin as the settler-colonial regime was established. While the Ho-Chunks possessed a patrilineal society, they retained essential matrilineal elements from earlier in their history. What emerges from a reading of the two works is a matriculture in which men had to balance relationships with both their wives and their sisters, to whom they had obligations that often trumped those of their wives. A man could divorce his wife and find a new spouse, but his obligations to his sisters lasted for a lifetime.[26]

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[24] Marcel Blanc, Recension du livre: Heide Goettner-Abendroth, «Sociétés matriarcales du passé et émergence du patriarcat – Asie occidentale et Europe», *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*, Special Issue: Men and Masculinities from Matricultural Perspectives, 4(2) (Autumn 2025): 83-95.
[25] Marie-Françoise Guédon, "Book Review: *Son of Old Man Hat: A Navaho Autobiography*, Recorded by Walter Dyk," *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*, Special Issue: Men and Masculinities from Matricultural Perspectives, 4(2) (Autumn 2025): 96-104.
[26] Patrick J. Jung, "Review essay: Men and Matriculture among the Ho-Chunks," *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*, Special Issue: Men and Masculinities from Matricultural Perspectives, 4(2) (Autumn-Winter 2025-2026): 105-111.

It has been a great honor to be an integral part of this special issue, and I have been enriched as an academic researcher by my association with the Network on Culture, the publisher of *Matrix*. Hopefully, the pieces published here will prompt further examination of this topic, and in the future, the journal can again explore the lives of men in societies with strong matricultures. Listening to the oral interviews, I was particularly struck by how essential women have been to the decolonization, preservation, and maintenance of Indigenous cultures, both in the past and the present. This topic also deserves additional consideration as we move forward into the twenty-first century. As I noted at the beginning of this essay, we are just starting to scratch the surface with matriculture and its possibilities as both a cultural concept and a methodology. It is exciting to be part of a network of scholars who are sincerely endeavoring to make this a reality.