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Matriculture: From Concept to Application

Introduction

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Broadly understood, matriculture is a Geertzian cultural framework of symbols and meanings pertaining to women.

As a concept and methodology with tremendous potential for future development, however, matriculture deserves more in-depth exploration. This issue is devoted to the development of the concept of *matriculture*, which refers to a cultural framework – in the sense proposed by the ethnologist Clifford Geertz, that is, a symbolic framework – encompassing everything within a cultural context that relates to women.

The term signifies both that it is a system distinct from other systems (such as religion, art or kinship) and that it is centred on women's lived experiences, perceptions, perspectives and knowledge. The concept enables us to discuss the feminine cultural dimension in any society, since women are necessary for social (as well as individual) reproduction.

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A Brief Historical Overview

We began by following the line of thought proposed by Peggy Reeves Sanday (2002), who had observed that the systems of kinship and governance among the Minangkabau, a matrilineal society in Indonesia, could not be reduced to the organisation of communities into matrilineal lineages granting political, financial and moral power to the female lineage heads without necessarily including a cosmography, social practices, and a ritual context guiding the moral order. We tested different concepts over several years from the mid-2000s, most particularly in a series of workshops organised at the University of Ottawa by the InterCulture Research Centre, whose members were beginning to consider the establishment of *Matrix*. We continued to explore their potential in the years that followed.

It was during a session of CASCA 2016 (the Canadian Anthropology Society) that we officially used the word ‘matriculture’ for the first time, a term proposed by the anthropologist Marie-Françoise Guédon to refer to the cultural system centred on the feminine, women, gender, motherhood, and other cultural aspects associated with them. The community of researchers working with this concept subsequently developed its methodological implications. Like other cultural systems, the matricultural system is rooted in the symbolic realm but manifests itself in human behaviour and lived space, leaving material traces that can inform and transform the human material environment, thereby paving the way for a variety of approaches.

Encouraged by our links with the researchers and community members of the (matrilineal) Mosuo people in the Lugu Lake Valley (between Yunnan and Sichuan in southwest China), the Pygmy peoples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Dene Indigenous nations (speakers of Athabaskan languages), and with the involvement of First Nations researchers from central and eastern Canada, we initially turned our attention to matrilineal societies and examined the cultural conditions that enabled them to develop and preserve matrilineal kinship systems while other societies moved towards patrilineality or even patriarchal governance. These kinship systems revealed themselves to be also systems of thought in which matrilineality or patrilineality was underpinned by explicit values, ritual cycles, and mythologies – systems that could therefore no longer be viewed as a collection of traits independent of one another.

Approaching Clarity

At first glance appearing to be disparate, these traits form systems of interdependent elements, particularly on a symbolic level, which corresponds to the notion of a cultural

system as defined by Geertz. The systemic nature of the cultural components that define women and their living conditions within a society and enable them to define themselves*[no comma]* may seem obvious today; this was not the case up until the late 1990s, when it was perfectly normal to write a monograph on a cultural community with one chapter on modes of subsistence or the economy, another on kinship, then on the system of governance or political life, followed by chapters on the life cycle and associated rituals, on religion, the arts and sometimes medicine or local ethno-sciences, and a final chapter on the current or contemporary situation. One was obliged to glean information about women from across these sections or wait for a summary added at the end of the book. Once we draw on the accounts of women themselves, however, a cultural sphere emerges that is distinct enough from that of men and masculinity to warrant attention, dynamic enough to be taken into account, and diverse enough for researchers to recognise its capacity to influence the general cultural context of a society.

Geertz uses the term ‘cultural system’ to refer to the components of a cultural context (traits, symbols, meanings and representations, and even a more or less explicit philosophy or world view) organised around a particular focus which can be identified (at least by researchers) because it recurs and is recognised in one form or another in other cultural contexts as part of the same whole. Such systems include religion, art, kinship, as well as war, royalty, mythology, or even jokes, amongst many others, which could be regarded as invariants.

In fact, despite the diversity of their expression and, at times, the absence of institutions or even specific terms to give concrete form to their manifestation, the concept of cultural systems enables us to structure our ethnological descriptions, analyse socio-cultural processes in various contexts, and, above all, compare societies with one another. They may also be partially institutionalised by a group seeking to control their expressions and consequences. Matriculture as a cultural system can therefore be seen as a multidisciplinary tool that enables us to bypass assumptions imposed by an outside commentator, by placing its components within a broader context that is closer to the experience of those who live it.

Whether a human society is matrilineal, patrilineal, bilateral or otherwise; whether it can be described as patriarchal or egalitarian; whether it places women at a disadvantage or offers them effective protection, women will find ways to define themselves, their bodies and their environment (including their cultural settings), to forge bonds amongst themselves and with men and other members of their society, to articulate the meanings of sexual differentiation and the implications of motherhood, among other subjects, and to speak of their world (and that of men), if only because they must care for their children

and enculturate them. All these considerations are interwoven to form the matricultural system.

Our preliminary research suggested an extreme diversity of matricultural systems. By focusing on the ways in which women themselves think about, express, and describe their worlds, we gain a better understanding of the specificity of both their situations and their responses. We also discover that perceptions of gender stemming from the Indo-European socio-cultural framework, which Anne Augereau recently described as a "heteronormative and androcentric binary conception" (2026: 23), are insufficient to account for the matricultural system as we encounter it in the field. We have, however, chosen to retain the primary reference to the maternal, which established itself due to the universal necessity for a society to ensure the continuation of its lineage, and the constraints imposed by human reproductive biology.

While motherhood is understood and defined in various ways around the world, it always involves gestation, birth, lactation and prolonged physical contact with one or more human beings. Children must be fed, carried, and brought up, and require a community of care and conversation. It is rare for the mother to be considered solely responsible for maternal care; in matrilineal societies, for example, the same term is frequently used to refer to both the mother and maternal aunts. In many Indigenous societies, it is actually the grandmothers who provide care and cultural education for the children (for example, among the Tlingit) and in most societies that rely on women's agricultural labour, it is their older sisters who look after the infants. Finally, a significant number of societies allow men to carry their children and ensure their socialisation. Among the Athabaskan-speaking peoples, the father is emotionally viewed as a figure closer to his children than the biological mother, and it is he, for example, who will introduce a young girl to hunting. The social circle surrounding the child is thus broadened. As is commonly said in Indigenous villages along the Canadian Pacific coast: It takes a village to raise a child.

That said, and taking the concept of gender in its non-binary sense as a given, we shall continue throughout this issue to speak of women and men, of the feminine and the masculine, simply because our authors are discussing societies where binary gender is imposed by dominant religious and political structures.

Viewed from within, and as is the case with all cultural systems, the matricultural system creates a common 'language' for, on the one hand, thinking about, describing, interpreting and reflecting on reality – a model *of* reality – and, on the other hand, for prescribing behaviours and expectations – a model *for* reality. Our academic disciplines, guided by masculine worldviews, have often treated the realm of women as a derivative of a universal masculine realm, and have not facilitated the recognition of matricultural aspects

as elements of a system that is both interwoven with other systems (such as the religious or the political), yet distinct - let alone as a milieu from which culture emerges.

When writing the history of a nation or an empire based on the movements of armies and the ascents to power of princes, one overlooks the presence of so-called 'ordinary' people —that undifferentiated 'mass' which sustains, transmits, and weaves the cultural fabric. Indeed, the contribution of women as autonomous cultural actors is evident both in cases where they have their own languages (the Tucanos), their own artistic traditions (the Hopi), or their own religious systems (Jeju), and in the more famous examples of their presence in the distant past, as attested by the clay depictions of women from the Upper Palaeolithic in Europe, in the great Babylonian myth of Inanna's descent into the underworld, in the endogamous transmission of political power in ancient Egypt, and in the matrilineal dynasties of queens in the Sino-Tibetan Marches.

While all human societies intertwine – and systematise – their kinship systems, their social and political organisation, their value systems and their ceremonial and ritual life with the way in which they define and manage the presence of women, not all societies allow women to develop cultural environments – 'matricultures' – that are fertile, enduring, and beneficial to women and their dependants. Our research team has therefore adopted the practice of assessing the quality and richness of matricultural systems, just as is commonly done with other cultural systems. Just as one can refer to highly religious societies or harmful religious systems, for example, or to societies that are artistically creative or societies where artistic expression is restricted and controlled by the state or the religious elite, we observe open matricultural systems shared by the whole community, matricultural systems that are officially suppressed but practised outside male control (see the contributions by Sandra Skurvida and Jinoos Taghizadeh on the use of video films by Iranian women, this issue), and matricultural systems that are weakened, if not stifled, by male domination. This last is found, for example, when the transmission of women's knowledge is prevented by sending girls to live with their husbands as soon as they reach puberty, with a mother-in-law who is not necessarily welcoming. Families and children are, of course, directly affected by the quality and health of the matricultural system (see Sanday's work in tropical Africa).

Finally, the matricultural system should not be viewed as one that necessarily counterbalances the brutality or suffering that may result from practices deemed acceptable by the rest of society. Some matricultural systems are highly hierarchical. Mothers-in-law are sometimes the first to mistreat their sons' young wives, and when norms sanctioning the genital mutilation of girls are accepted by dominant women (to ensure a suitable marriage for the girls), the girls will be excised with their mothers' consent, which severs the supportive relationship between mother and daughter. It is only

when the underlying worldview leads to girls and women being treated with respect that we find nurturing and secure matricultural systems. In this regard, the treatment of children, the elderly, servants and slaves, and domestic animals is a good indicator of the health of the matricultural system.

Methodological Advances

Since 2016, the concept has gained ground, although it is still in its infancy and has not yet reached its full potential. Ten years on, the theme of this issue of *Matrix* provides an opportunity to 'test its horizons' and welcome the perspectives offered by a new generation of researchers.

Certain findings are confirmed. Like the term 'culture', which remains central to anthropological and ethnological discourse, 'matriculture' is simultaneously a word (sometimes used in other contexts), a concept that facilitates syntheses taking into account a wide variety of aspects of women's lives, and a perspective that provides access to a range of approaches, from first-person accounts of lived culture to large-scale examinations of social movements, always from the perspective of women. It is therefore, first and foremost, a methodological tool, with three important provisos:

1- It is a tool based on a general conception of culture that prioritises the symbolic. There can be no culture without people who think and speak it (see the foundational theories of Edward Sapir, 1937, and Irving Hallowell, 1955). Like other cultural systems, as proposed by Geertz, the 'matricultural' remains fundamentally defined as a symbolic system. It addresses the way people think, and specifically how women conceive of their world. It is based on bodies of knowledge, shared experiences, transmission, and communication. This is why the voice is its principal metaphor; communication, by all means and in all available forms, is its indispensable foundation. This theme is addressed by most of the authors contributing to this issue.

In this regard, it is interesting to note the distribution of one of the aspects of matriculture, namely its links with the kinship system – links which were the subject of a research project on the relationship between language and kinship systems (Guédon-Kakulambi; the first part of this research project was published in the first issue of *Matrix*; Guédon 2020). After several attempts to explore and re-examine the suggested correlations between types of kinship systems (in particular matrilineal kinship systems) and the wider socio-cultural context, it appears that neither the geographical context, nor the mode of subsistence, nor social organisation, nor the level of economic development, nor the type of political system can predict the presence of a matrilineal system. The only reliable

variable that can be associated with matrilineality is the language spoken by that society, or, more precisely, its belonging to a language family in which a matrilineal organisation is already found. People belonging to the same language family are very likely to share the same system of descent. A tendency towards one orientation or another with regard to kinship system is, therefore, at least at present, a cultural factor underpinned by language (be it basic principles, semantic fields, worldviews, or values) inherited from a common, sometimes distant, origin, with immediate repercussions on the matricultural sphere.

2- In the sense in which we use it here, the term does not refer to a type of society, still less to a type of society limited to those that would be favourable to women, for example, by offering them a form of matriarchy; nor does it denote a matrilineal social organisation or female governance. We understand now that we cannot, therefore, speak of a matricultural society.

It should be noted that our research team has thus far refused to promote a semantics centred on a single key term such as 'woman' or 'mother' or 'motherhood' or even 'gender', preferring instead to bring together all the facets that the concepts of gender, femininity, procreation, motherhood, childcare, as well as family, kinship, sexuality, domesticity, or cultural transmission may encompass. This choice is due partly to the fact that each of these concepts remains linked to specific cultural contexts and varies according to those contexts, and partly to the impression that, according to our field research and in most cases, what we seek to define as 'matriculture' consists, like most cultural systems, of a tangle of customs, knowledge, intentions, responsibilities, duties, and creativity (both short-term and long-term), which makes it impossible, or even irresponsible, to focus on or simply emphasise a single aspect. It may be that the male versions of the matricultural – dare we call it the patricultural? – are more inclined to simplify matters or to organise them around a few explicit principles, as suggested by Helen Lachal's study, 'Motherhood in *Murzilka*: Constructing Maternal Ideals for Soviet Children, 1956–1964' (this issue, pp. 213-239). This discussion of the instructions given to Russian children for their mothers' benefit describes women whose world, according to the model prescribed by male authorities, is reduced simply to being nurturing mothers whilst also being anonymous manual labourers. (See also Mary Bateson (1973) on Iranian women and the need to preserve a long and relatively informal sense of time, as compared to that of men, which is shorter but more explicit.) This same theme is taken up at a more theoretical level by Yolande François-Schwab in her review of Susan Ackerman's book *Maturity, Marriage, Motherhood, Mortality: Women's Life-Cycle Rituals in Ancient Israel* (this issue, pp. 281-289).

However, as a concept, and like the culture of which it is a component, and like kinship, art, religion and all other cultural systems, the matricultural brings together elements that

would otherwise remain scattered, or whose convergence would be obscured in our analyses, were it not for a focal point identifying their interdependence. But this focal point must remain sufficiently fluid to allow it to be identified across different cultures. For example, whilst certain societies may identify the religious sphere with their institutions associated with the notion of a single God, the anthropologist or historian may broaden their field of vision to include as religious any cultural or ritual manifestation associated with a relationship with the spiritual, the supernatural, the sacred, or even ritual relationships with everything that lies beyond the human realm.

3 - We can speak of matriculture in the context of material culture or the physical environment provided that this physical environment is inhabited, that is to say, understood as meaningful. In this regard, several themes are emerging in these first issues of *Matrix*, including, among others, the notion of domesticity, which is no longer considered an invariant of women's condition; the notion of the sacred site, which is very ancient but not universal, particularly among hunter-gatherers and nomads; and, today, community initiatives aimed at protecting the natural environment and combating climate change, which are increasingly being claimed as a women's responsibility in light of the failure of state leaders and global economic and financial institutions.

Themes Emerging From This Issue

This issue opens with discordant situations in which political oppression is compounded by cultural and linguistic losses and the dislocation of communities. This bleaker prospect demonstrates the capacity of the concept of matriculture to encompass not only the diversity of matricultural systems (which has been evident from the outset of our research) but also the range of problems—sometimes extremely severe—that affect them, problematic situations which are, moreover, often exacerbated by religious or ideological systems. Women's responses are diverse and specific to each situation, which may help, on the one hand, to highlight the fact that the concept of matriculture is in dialogue with the socio-cultural context of the entire community and with the outside world, and on the other hand, to demonstrate the consequences for society as a whole—and not just for women—of a matricultural system that has been battered.

The contributions brought together in the following texts are diverse, yet they address, directly or indirectly, several shared perspectives. Beyond the stated research topics, three themes in particular emerge from these articles, each theme serving as a testimony about the societies they describe: the difficulties faced by women in the societies in question, women's physical and moral resilience, and strategies of resistance.

But the reality is clear, and it is expressed immediately and unambiguously in a striking and compressed form in Gloria Macher's poem 'Mending for Unity' (this issue, pp. 261-265). It echoes the sheer volume of physical labour imposed by dominant local social structures, the practical urgency of supporting women's support networks, and the global urgency of protecting the earth itself from the destructive folly of today's world leaders. The poem affirms the dynamic nature of the women's cultural world and the enduring nature of its concerns, weaving and mending the global fabric of life; cultural aspects usually taken for granted are brought into view.

The women described by our authors respond by asserting their resilience. As they traverse and intersect religious landscapes—from Judaism to Islam, for example—and geographical regions, from Iran to Romania, with forays into Soviet Russia and tropical Africa, our contributors demonstrate that the image of the 'strong woman' is not merely an image, and that it sometimes takes root very early in girls' lives. Women's resilience, endurance, and strength can be a source of pride; yet their very necessity also signals the constant presence of difficulties.

Etim Ekpenyong Mfon, in his article 'From Concept to Practice: Visual Art as an Applied Site of Matriculture' (this issue, pp. 41-82), explores through a series of his paintings the capacity of visual art to give voice to matriculture and eco-feminism in Nigeria. He writes: "In this respect, the [art] studio functions as a space where cultural meanings are not only represented but also subjected to visual scrutiny and possible rethinking." (p. 46)

It is also a methodological space that documents a transformation both in society and in the analysis proposed by the artist: each painting functions as a vignette depicting a stage in a process that opens up to the affirmation of the dynamic nature of the matricultural, on the one hand, by demonstrating how to incorporate a matricultural perspective into an effort at visual and non-verbal communication, and on the other, by introducing a dynamic dimension into what might otherwise have been merely an illustration of a cultural heritage. Recognising that this heritage can both empower and constrain women, a reverence for women challenges certain customs sanctioned by tradition and creates an opening towards the future and towards new interpretations of ancient symbols.

Adopting a women-centred historical approach, in 'Jewish and Muslim Women in Habsburg Lands: Historiographical Essay and Research Directions' (this issue, pp. 108-148), Alison Rose traces the complex and parallel trajectories of Jewish and Muslim communities and women, respectively, over the last four centuries in the Habsburg Lands of Central Europe. Reflecting the resilience, endurance, and strength of character of these women, this historiographical essay depicts a context of ethnic marginalisation combined with the imposition of norms established by religious authorities (Catholic and Orthodox

Christian, Jewish, and Muslim), and the forced displacement of entire communities by the state—a context with which women must contend whilst contributing to cultural and social continuity. According to Rose, they carve out their individual and collective spaces by accumulating and passing on their knowledge and experience, by caring for one another, sharing responsibilities and creating women's networks that support them both within and outside their communities. For despite restrictions, Jewish and Muslim women venture out of their homes, primarily by making use of the educational institutions imposed by the state.

As Rose observes, among Orthodox Jews in Eastern Europe, the tendency to view girls as less important than boys paradoxically led to them being granted access to the dominant culture and languages, through an education that was freer, more secular, and more open to the world than the exclusively Jewish culture to which boys were strictly bound. When girls master European languages or are able to assist their fathers with their bookkeeping, they are valued by their families.

At the same time, they acquire the means to break away from their social background. For the cultural continuity and close intra-community ties that women are expected to uphold – sometimes against their own interests – paradoxically lead women, and often young girls, to decide to leave their families or religious communities, or even to go into exile, or to convert to Islam or Christianity, if they wish to follow their own paths. Whether it is a matter of refusing a marriage, pursuing a vocation, or simply acquiring the financial means to start their own families – if necessary through prostitution – these decisions often appear to be dictated by matters of individual survival.

But beyond a formal comparison between Jewish and Muslim women—which reveals parallels—we can discern in the life stories of both Jewish and Muslim women that, unbeknownst to official family or religious communities, a whole network of girls and women spreads social news alongside behavioural models which, whilst openly disapproved of, can convey options and the knowledge necessary to exercise them. It is therefore sometimes through deliberate disobedience that these women find their own sense of continuity.

In a completely different context, that of remote Romanian villages nestled in the mountains, far from roads and built-up areas, Oana-Alexandra Borlea-Stancioi has collected the life stories of women who take on the responsibility of remaining in their villages and keeping them alive despite their geographical and social remoteness in her article 'Staying on the Mountain: Women, Memory, and the Transformation of Remoteness in Rural Romania' (this issue, pp. 83-107). These women are – and know themselves to be – strong, independent, and physically and mentally capable of surviving.

They are often elderly women whom social changes and the breakdown of traditions and traditional family structures have left alone to take on the task of preserving the farms and the expertise required to manage them. In the past, this continuity was ensured by daughters-in-law who moved in with their husbands, but young couples now move down to the valley and no longer live in the family home, except for temporary visits. Today, these women who choose to continue living in isolated high-altitude villages take on the responsibility of safeguarding not only the property, land, and farms, but also, and above all, the knowledge they have accumulated, which they wish to pass on to a new generation of descendants whose presence, however, is uncertain. This is an essential part of their identity and their *raison d'être*.

By emphasising these women's perception of their options and the price they must pay to exercise them, the author is able to address a topic that is rarely dared to be mentioned yet remains highly relevant: that of loneliness, which they approach as a component of what they term 'Remoteness,' that is to say, isolation and distance. This isolation, which is experienced as a prerequisite for social and cultural continuity, is certainly the result of a life spent far removed from communities closer to roads and urban centres. Yet one senses that the women themselves also attribute it to the sheer volume of work they must undertake simply to maintain their homes and survive; there is no time left for other pursuits. According to the author, the perception of this isolation affects women in particular:

> Whether or not the locals' fears come true, the perception of remoteness shapes the identity and life-worlds of the inhabitants. It does so in a gendered way by tethering women in place through their domestic knowledge and authority, while men and youth are more mobile, being expendable in the domestic sphere. (P. 88)

But what is to be done with an intangible heritage that descendants no longer want? A woman deprived of her daughter-in-law's presence may form emotional bonds with tourists or newly arrived families so that she can pass on her knowledge to someone. But in doing so, she steps outside the traditional patrilineal system. She may also entrust her stories to ethnographers who will attempt to record and preserve them. These stories speak of her mother tongue and her history, of femininity and power.

In contrast to the women who have retreated to the Romanian mountains, and from the other side of the world, another woman from Romania, Michela Enache, who migrated to New Zealand in search of a new life far from an oppressive society and the painful memories of her childhood, shares a testimony about those who leave. In 'Being and Becoming Kin with an Ancient Matricultural Artefact' (pp. 266-271), she describes how she

has been able to re-establish links with her country and culture of origin through the creation of a single artefact: a traditional blouse that 'encapsulates' the memory of her past identity and the creativity she can now embrace in her new role as a teacher. In defiance of the communist regime's policy, which sought to turn these blouses into mass-produced items symbolising a collective and uniform identity, she made and embroidered her garment by hand according to traditional methods, using symbols that speak to her of her mother tongue and her history, of femininity and power – a quasi-living link rather than a relic.

In 'Echoes of Resilience: Women's Voices and Agency in Nso Cultural Traditions of the Bameda Grassfield in Cameroon' (pp. 183-212), Happiness Ninyuy analyses the ways in which Nso women participate in social life – forms of participation that persist despite women's exclusion by men from political institutions and public decision-making bodies. Women make their voices heard as mothers, as bearers of culture and guardians of oral traditions, as heirs to a historical and mythical founder of Nso society, Princess Ngonnso, and as participants in community rituals – all roles they deliberately assume, all of which are cultural in nature.

But their voices would carry little weight without the leverage they have found in agricultural work, which has a direct impact on the country's economy – a leverage identified in the remark by Phyllis M. Kaberry, quoted by Yinyuy, regarding the way in which Nso men rationalise the division of labour: "Nso men claimed that preparing land for the planting of crops was "a woman's job which is too strenuous for the men." (P. 188)

Thus, whilst men own the fields, it is the women who work them. This male perspective grants women control over agricultural production: sowing, harvesting, processing and the management of surpluses fall to women, which ensures them genuine economic autonomy underpinned by their technical expertise and related skills acquired over generations. Women's participation in the economic management of the state remains informal, but it is vital for their families and for the state.

The price women pay, as in the cases cited above, is the labour they must provide, which is implied throughout the article; it is evident in the establishment and rebuilding of women's networks for communication, learning and support, which continue today in women farmers' associations, agricultural co-operatives and even local financial institutions. All these organisations, as well as local markets, serve as spaces for meeting and networking.

Social hierarchy and male control, from the state to regional councils, and right down to the patrilocal family, reinforced by polygamy and the marriage of young girls, on the one

hand, and the insecurity imposed by armed conflicts, the civil war triggered by the Anglophone Crisis in 2016, and the destruction of hundreds of villages with the subsequent displacement of populations on the other, have failed to weaken women's solidarity. As the author points out, even in this difficult context, "female agency is constitutive rather than marginal." (P. 194) Nso women do not seek to confront patriarchal institutions; rather, they deliberately assume what the author, like the women themselves, identifies as 'cultural powers.' Within the official patriarchal socio-political structure, men's refusal to work the fields creates a huge gap that women have filled, unofficially but with the public support of cultural norms. By also controlling the identity-defining aspects of traditional culture through their festivals and ritual skills, women are able to make their voices heard on a regular basis without having to oppose the men in power. But it is the entire female community that is collectively engaged in maintaining and reproducing the cultural mechanisms and traditions that ensure they can promote their interests in community life.

Helen Lachal, in 'Motherhood in *Murzilka:* Constructing Maternal Ideals for Soviet Children, 1956–1964,' examines motherhood as portrayed in *Murzilka*, the Soviet magazine for children and, through it, for their mothers. She highlights the gap between the Communist vision of women and their everyday reality. The aim of the research is not to document women's reactions to this indoctrination, but to shed light on the inherent contradictions between the ideal Soviet woman, as presented in Soviet state propaganda, and real life, with the heavy workload imposed on women, who were expected to be full-time workers, preferably in manual, low-level jobs in the service of the state, as well as domestic workers serving their husbands and children, whilst also being attractive wives. Individuality is erased by social norms, and mothers no longer exist as persons. With limited access to better education, no permission to travel, let alone relocate, and with days filled to the brim, they have neither the time nor the means to envisage a different life. This male-centred version of a matricultural system, revised and simplified by Soviet strategists, was taught to children through the magazine to be passed on to future generations as a desirable norm, which in fact reproduces and perpetuates the same subjugation of women in a future that seems to offer no way out.

In '*Good Night*, *The Indivisible Sky*: Women, Video, Iran' (this issue, pp. 240-260), Sandra Skurvida, curator of visual art collections, focuses on two Iranian artists, Jinoos Taghizadeh and Anahita Razmi. These women have chosen video art as a means of expression and communication - a medium that is precarious, ever-changing, difficult to preserve, yet also difficult to control - to bear witness to the messages they convey and the cultural milieu they support. They face the insidious and all-powerful context of a theocratic political system committed to the active suppression of all its opponents, and which strives in particular to silence women, using fear, bereavement, and femicide as tools of repression.

Under these extreme conditions, women, artists, and minorities represent an immediate and official target for the police. Skurvida does not attempt to describe a matricultural system but rather to reveal some of its inner workings. As she herself states, she seeks to understand how symbolic and cultural systems intersect with the political sphere. She describes how artists use video films – which are not particularly closely monitored – as a means of exploiting the cracks in the repressive apparatus and filling them with subversive content that gradually widens the fissures and erodes the ideological stronghold.

One of these artists, Jinoos Taghizadeh, in 'Making Art in the Void: Iranian Women Artists Between Repression and Creation' (pp. 272-280), the transcript of an oral presentation, embraces this observation, which she presents as a decisive strategy for the development of Iranian women's video art. She concludes by expanding what was initially an offensive tactic – exploiting the system's flaws – into a means of survival:

> Throughout history, women have often been excluded from the centres of power, culture and decision-making. Consequently, we have learnt to survive, to communicate and to create in overlooked spaces. We have learnt to find the cracks in the wall, and how to slip through them. We occupy neglected territories. We build communities and languages where others see an empty space. (P. 275)

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In one form or another, this sort of strategy is evident in all the contributions to this issue. Women occupy remote territories, identify opportunities to step outside the domestic sphere, and deliberately capitalise on the absence of men in the fields, or their lack of attention, in order to claim zones that are more favourable to them. In several cases, including that of the women of Cameroon, women evade the attention of male authorities by occupying informal spaces, loosely institutionalised interpersonal networks, and events which, whilst public, are not official.

Margaret Mead had already highlighted the difficulty of studying the informal cultural in as compared with the formal: festivals celebrating a one-off success as opposed to those fixed in the calendar; individual rituals marking puberty as opposed to collective initiations; hunting rites as opposed to harvest celebrations; and shamanic practices as opposed to the ritual displays of state religions. She emphasised the deceptive nature of the informal, and the intellectual temptation to regard it as indicative of a less significant cultural component, particularly where political or religious powers are concerned. While informal power is often presented as a lesser substitute for the formal power conferred by a visible and established authority, it is by no means negligible; by contrast, official, institutionalised, formal power is often undermined by structures that are more cumbersome and less flexible. The Cameroonian state is a case in point.

Another example which highlights the methodological difficulties associated with the invisibility of the informal is the treatment of women's rituals in biblical societies, as discussed by Yolande François-Schwab. François-Schwab takes as her starting point a recent book by Susan Ackerman, *Maturity, Marriage, Motherhood, Mortality: Women's Life-Cycle Rituals in Ancient Israel*, and invites the reader to re-examine theoretical assumptions. In her commentary, François-Schwab joins Ackerman in considering the absence of descriptions of women's rituals in ancient biblical texts, an absence all the more striking given that the prescriptions, prohibitions, and ritual norms concerning women are numerous in later rabbinic texts such as the Mishnah and the Talmud.

Does this reflect the absence of the rituals themselves? Or are we dealing with a deliberate omission on the part of the early authors of these texts? Ackerman employs two research approaches to address the question. The first is a reinterpretation of biblical texts, both narrative and prescriptive, identifying what is left unsaid; the second is a reconstruction of the missing rituals based on comparisons with female ritual systems in other cultures. To this end, Ackerman draws on the major classical anthropological theories of ritual, including the three distinct phases identified by Arnold Van Gennep (separation, the liminal phase and reintegration), phases which are visible, collective, and one-off – and the concept of liminality introduced by Victor Turner, which underpins the transformation on which the ritual process is based. This approach highlights the difficulty of fitting Hebrew female rites of passage into the classical theoretical framework; in particular, it emphasises their diffuse nature - less theatrical, less public than domestic, less one-off and more continuous - in short, "une forme de liminalité étendue [...] qui [...] peut s'inscrire dans la durée, notamment à travers les expériences corporelles liées à la menstruation, à la sexualité ou à la maternité" ("a form of extended liminality [...] which [...] can extend over time, notably through bodily experiences linked to menstruation, sexuality or motherhood"). (P. 283)

Rather than toned-down versions of male rituals, women's ritual life is characterised by its embodiment in the physical, domestic, and private spheres, which calls for a re-examination of the application of classical theories in the anthropology of ritual. Here, ritual is no longer a one-off event but a daily experience that can be 'narrativised' rather than codified. François-Schwab concludes that Ackerman's work "invite ainsi à repenser les catégories à partir desquelles les expériences féminines sont appréhendées, et ouvre un espace de réflexion qui dépasse largement le cadre de l'Israël" ("thus invites us to rethink the categories through which women's experiences are understood, and opens up a space for reflection that extends far beyond the context of Israel."). (Pp. 286-287)

Viewed within the broader context of the other contributions, we can observe here, first and foremost, a shift for women from the public to the private sphere, to the body, and to the domestic realm. One might then question the role played by the basic principles of the Hebrew worldview in shaping the complex of female ritual in the Hebrew world (including, among other things, the definition of the pure and the impure) and the extent to which a new definition of ritual might apply to the matricultural sphere in general. We should certainly recognise that classical theories of ritual are shaped by the various cultural contexts in which they are applied. However, this does not lead us to regard biblical values as universal, nor the withdrawal of women into the domestic sphere as a *fait accompli*.

It would indeed be tempting to suggest that matricultural systems generally involve a tendency towards diversion, withdrawal, retreat or informality, if not mistrust, towards public, political, and collective life; one might make informality and a secondary role a universal characteristic of matricultural systems (a position favoured by many European feminists) but this view would arise from an observation of quasi-universal male dominance. This observation must be put into perspective in light of the models of independence proposed, established, and propagated within the matricultural systems we know, including some in patriarchal societies.

Moreover, this position would lead to three pitfalls: The first would be to define ‘culture’ as equivalent to its official version, the one that asserts itself in public and has the means to disseminate itself, the one whose voice can command attention, the one that wields political authority; to identify it as the main, if not primary, locus of socio-cultural processes, and to regard the actions of women and minorities as merely supplementary or survival strategies with no long-term consequences. (Empires would thus become the main drivers of human development, and war the primary vehicle for cultural change.) Archaeologists have shown that even on a timescale of millennia and dating back to the Palaeolithic, it is society as a whole that participates in the shaping of a way of life and thought. And the collapse of empires does not correspond to the death of their populations, but can lead to a social transformation of the peoples concerned.

Anthropology has demonstrated that culture is far more than the institutions that underpin it. It is multifaceted and, for the most part, implicit, non-verbal and embedded in the body, the emotions, and the intangible. The invention of writing made it possible, for a time, to slow down the loss of memory and to reify and subsequently impose a hierarchical, collective, and uniform world view. But every ethnographer must recognise that, when one attempts to describe, transcribe, translate, and analyse a society's culture through texts, such texts, including all observations, statements and conversations, however carefully recorded they may be, cover only a tiny fraction of people’s lived

experience. Without acknowledging this, one reifies culture and reduces it to a mosaic of data.

The second pitfall would be to confuse women's strategies for occupying areas neglected by economic, political, or religious authorities with an internalised sense of inferiority within a collective identity. These strategies, which are also found among the lowest or poorest social classes, minority groups, refugees, and the elderly, are not, however, viewed with contempt. In light of the positions outlined in the following articles, it is clear that the strategy of utilising areas neglected by the official authorities is not necessarily a form of withdrawal, nor is it internalised as an inherent inferiority – quite the contrary. Hence the significance of matrilineal societies, which offer more egalitarian models of governance (without taking the form of a binary matriarchy symmetrical but opposite to patriarchy), and which put into perspective the authorities' claims to present themselves as the sole authentic version of reality.

The third pitfall would be to present the matricultural system as one designed to maximise women's well-being; as a cultural system, it remains embedded in the life of society as a whole and in the underlying logic and principles of its culture. It is not because women are involved in its development that they will not prioritise their own personal interests or those of their families, or that they will be fully aware of the implications of their actions. Beyond their individual and collective responsibilities towards future generations, and the discrimination they often face, they are not so different from other members of their society.

One final remark by way of conclusion: it is now common practice to portray women as the guardians of their cultural heritage, and for women to embrace this responsibility – visibly and as a political claim, at least among ethnic minorities and Indigenous peoples. But it would be a mistake to categorise women solely or primarily as the guardians of traditional culture. The examples presented here show women who, while willing to pass on the traditions and customs they regard as positive, are just as willing to innovate, and even to abandon practices they consider harmful.

Even if Karen Coody Cooper, the author of *Cherokee Women in Charge: Female Power and Leadership in American Indian Nations in Eastern North America (*reviewed in this issue by Patrick Jung. pp. 291-293) chooses to present Cherokee women from the southern United States as guardians of their traditions, it is clear that the women whose lives she summarises did not confine themselves to teaching pottery and basketry, however important these skills may be in terms of identity. These women regarded the opening of the Cherokee Female Seminary in 1851, through which some 3,000 women passed, as a significant milestone in their history; this education enabled them to hold official positions

and to stand up to Euro-Americans on their own terms. Women such as Wilma Mankiller, the first elected chief of the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma, and Joyce Dugan, the first chief of the Eastern Cherokee Band of Indians in North Carolina, amply demonstrate their ability to adapt to a new cultural environment, however hostile it may be.

Let us recall the Jewish and Muslim women of Central Europe, who, if circumstances demanded it, would set aside their culture and the religious constraints of their communities in order to ensure their own physical survival and that of their children; the Romanian women in remote villages who pass on their knowledge to foreign newcomers; the female farmers in Cameroon who transfer the loyalty traditionally owed to their kin to co-operatives and mutual-aid groups. The Iranian artists mentioned and cited by Sandra Skurvida, including Jinoos Taghizadeh, are not merely occupants of a space between spaces; they transform it into an open, competent, public, international, and contemporary space. Their use and mastery of video art, international social media, and the workings of their own society make them citizens of the world as much as of their own country. Among Iranian artists, as Skurvida concludes,

> Video art emerging from the resistance offers an alternative to the mass-media iconicity of femicide as martyrdom, as it appropriates the symbolic and transforms it into the personal, secular realm, speaking about life rather than glorifying sacrificial death -[…] This shift from the 'woman-as-martyr' towards the 'woman as a living, speaking and acting being' is pursued by many Iranian women artists. (P. 256)

In other words, all these women choose which elements of culture they pass on, and which they replace and renew as necessary. They thus remind us that culture is not necessarily an end in itself, but a means of becoming and remaining human. If traditional culture is used to serve an oppressor, and especially if it endangers the survival and humanity of the youngest members of society, women are capable of challenging it, and matriculture can become an instrument of transition by putting principles into perspective, even if they are regarded as absolute by those in power. Similarly, in the early days of anthropology, religion was presented as a factor of stability, anchoring existing cultural systems, until ethnologists such as Sir Evans-Pritchard pointed out that religion can also shatter an intolerable status quo, thereby giving rise to new perspectives (Evans-Pritchard, 1965).

In 1924, Edward Sapir presented culture as an environment necessary for the survival of children and young people, and as a scaffolding that must be climbed before being left behind so that one might fly on one's own wings and become a fully-fledged adult and

human being (Sapir, 1924). Certain matricultural systems appear capable of embracing this perspective.

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