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Matrix: a Journal for Matricultural Studies

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Matriculture: From Concept to Application



Caption: Untitled, *Baranozdemir, Turkey 2018.*

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About *Matrix*

Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies (*Matrix*) is an open-access, peer-reviewed and refereed scholarly journal published by the International Network for Training, Education, and Research on Culture (Network on Culture), Canada. *Matrix* is published online twice yearly (Spring and Autumn).

Matrix is a journal in the humanities and social sciences founded to provide an interdisciplinary forum for those who are working from the theoretical stance of matriculture as a Geertzian cultural system. Matriculture refers to the cultural system that brings together all cultural aspects informing the lives of mothers, usually women, of a given society, and by extension, the lives of women. Talking about matricultural systems allows us to consider as primary the cultural context of a given society as perceived, constructed, and lived by its women.

Similar to other cultural systems such as art, religion, or mathematics, employing the heuristic of matriculture allows for, among other things: cross-cultural comparisons; fresh insights into the social roles of women, men, otherwise identified, children, and the entire community of humans, animals, and the environment; and/or renewed understandings of historically mis-labelled cultures. With Guédon's work in mind, then, and based on Geertzian principles, the concept of matriculture is both a model *of* reality by rendering the structure of matricultures apprehensible and a model *for* reality, where psychological relationships are organized under its guidance.

We encourage submissions from scholars around the world who are ready to take a new look at the ways in which people - historically and currently - have organized meaningful relationships amongst themselves and with the natural environment, the myths, customs, and laws which support these relationships, and the ways in which researchers have documented and perhaps mis-labeled the matricultures they have encountered.

For more information about *Matrix*, visit our website here.

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Matrix: une revue d’études matriculturelles

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Matriculture : du concept à l’application

Introduction

MARIE-FRANÇOISE GUÉDON

Au sens large, la matriculture est un cadre culturel geertzien composé de symboles et de significations liés aux femmes.

En tant que concept et méthodologie présentant un immense potentiel d’évolution, la matriculture mérite toutefois d’être explorée plus en profondeur. Ce numéro est consacré au développement du concept de *matriculture*, qui désigne un cadre culturel, dans le sens proposé par l’ethnologue Clifford Geertz, donc un cadre symbolique, qui désigne tout ce qui dans un contexte culturel, a trait aux femmes.

Le terme dénote à la fois qu’il s‘agit d’un système distinct des autres systèmes (tel que la religion, l’art ou la parenté) et qu’il est centré sur le vécu, les perceptions, les points de vue et les connaissances des femmes. Le concept nous permet de parler du culturel féminin dans n’importe quelle société, puisque les femmes sont indispensables à la reproduction sociale (ainsi qu’individuelle).

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Un bref aperçu historique

Nous avons commencé par suivre la piste proposée par Peggy Reeves Sanday (1998, 2002), qui avait remarqué que les systèmes de parentés et de gouvernance chez les Minangkabau, société matrilinéaire en Indonésie, ne pouvait se réduire à l'organisation des communautés en lignages matrilinéaires assurant un pouvoir politique, financier et moral aux chefs féminins des lignages sans inclure nécessairement une cosmographie, des pratiques sociales et un contexte rituel guidant l'ordre moral. Nous avons mis à l'essai différents concepts pendant plusieurs années à partir du milieu des années 2000, notamment dans une série d'ateliers organisés à l'Université d'Ottawa, et avons continué à explorer leur potentiel durant les années suivantes avec l'équipe du Centre de recherche InterCulture, qui travaillait déjà à l'établissement de la revue *Matrix*. Nous avons continué à explorer leur potentiel au cours des années qui ont suivi.

C'est en 2016 durant une session de la CASCA (Société canadienne d'anthropologie) que nous avons utilisé officiellement pour la première fois le mot 'matriculture,' un terme proposé par l'anthropologue Marie-Françoise Guédon pour désigner le système culturel qui se déploie autour du féminin, des femmes, du genre, de la maternité et des autres aspects culturels qui leurs sont associés. La communauté de chercheurs et chercheuses travaillant avec ce concept en ont par la suite développé les conséquences méthodologiques. Comme les autres systèmes culturels, le matriculturel est enraciné dans le symbolique mais il se déploie dans les comportement humains et dans l'espace vécu, laissant des traces matérielles qui peuvent informer et transformer l'environnement matériel humain, ce qui ouvre la voie à des approches variées.

Encouragés par nos liens avec les chercheuses/chercheurs et la communauté (matrilinéaire) des Mosuos, dans la vallée du lac Lugu, entre le Yunnan et le Sichuan dans le Sud-Ouest Chinois, avec les peuples pygmées du Congo RDC, avec les nations autochtones des Dénés (de langues athabascanes), avec aussi l'intervention de chercheuses et chercheurs des Premières Nations du centre et de l'est canadien, nous avons d'abord orienté le projet vers les sociétés matrilinéaires, et avons questionné les conditions culturelles ayant permis d'une part à ces sociétés de développer et conserver des systèmes de parenté matrilinéaires tandis que d'autres sociétés s'orientent vers la patrilinealité sinon une gouvernance patriarcale. Ces systèmes de parenté se révélaient être aussi des systèmes de pensée où le matrilinéaire ou le patrilinéaire était supportés par des valeurs explicites, des cycles rituels, des mythologies, des systèmes qui ne pouvaient donc plus être vus comme une collection de traits indépendants les uns des autres.

Vers une plus grande clarté

À première vue disparates, ces traits forment des systèmes d'éléments interdépendants en particulier sur le plan symbolique, ce qui correspond à la notion de système culturel telle que définie par Geertz. La nature systémique des composantes culturelles qui définissent les femmes et leur milieu de vie dans une société, et leur permet de se définir elle-mêmes, peut paraître évidente aujourd'hui, mais elle ne l'était pas au siècle dernier et jusqu'à la fin des années 1990 où il était tout à fait normal d'écrire une monographie sur une communauté culturelle avec un chapitre sur les modes de subsistance ou l'économie, un autre sur la parenté, puis sur le système de gouvernance ou la vie politique, suivi de chapitres sur le cycle de la vie et les rituels attenants, sur la religion, les arts et parfois la médecine ou les ethno-sciences locales et un chapitre final sur la situation actuelle ou contemporaine. Il fallait glaner à travers les sections les informations sur les femmes, ou attendre un résumé ajouté à la fin de l'ouvrage. Dès lors que l'on s'appuie sur le témoignage des femmes elles-mêmes, émerge un champ culturel suffisamment distinct de celui des hommes et du masculin pour que l'on y prête attention, suffisamment dynamique pour que l'on en tienne compte, et suffisamment diversifié pour qu'on remarque sa capacité à influencer le contexte culturel général d'une société.

Geertz utilise l'expression 'système culturel' pour désigner les composantes d'un contexte culturel (traits, symboles, sens et représentations, voire philosophie ou vision du monde plus ou moins explicite) organisées autour d'un focus particulier qui peut être identifié (au moins par les chercheuses et chercheurs) parce qu'il se retrouve et se reconnaît sous une forme ou sous une autre dans d'autres contextes culturels comme faisant partie d'un même ensemble. De tels systèmes incluent, entre autres, la religion, l'art, la parenté, ainsi que la guerre, la royauté, la mythologie. ou même les plaisanteries, parmi beaucoup d'autres, qui pourraient être considérés comme des invariants.

En fait, malgré la diversité de leur expression et parfois l'absence d'institutions ou même de termes spécifiques pour concrétiser leur manifestation, la notion de systèmes culturels nous permet de structurer nos descriptions ethnologiques, d'analyser des processus socio-culturels dans divers contextes, et surtout de comparer les sociétés les unes aux autres. Ils peuvent aussi être institutionnalisés en partie par un groupe cherchant à en contrôler les expressions et les conséquences. Le matriculturel en tant que système culturel peut donc être perçu comme un outil multidisciplinaire permettant de court-circuiter des pré-suppositions imposées par un commentateur extérieur, en replaçant ses composantes dans une contexte plus large et plus proche de l'expérience de celles et ceux qui la vivent.

Q'une société humaine soit matrilinéaire ou patrilinéaire ou bilatérale ou autre, qu'elle puisse être décrite comme patriarcale ou égalitaire, qu'elle place les femmes dans un

position désavantageuse ou qu'elle leur offre une protection efficace, les femmes trouveront des moyens de se définir, de définir leur corps, et leur environnement (y compris leur milieux culturels), de créer des liens entre elles et avec les hommes et autres membres de leur société, d'articuler les significations de la différenciation sexuelle et les implications de la maternité, entre autres questions, et de parler de leur monde, (et de celui des hommes) si seulement parce qu'elles doivent prendre soin de leurs enfants et les enculturer. Toutes ces considérations sont entrelacées pour former le système matriculturel.

Nos recherches préliminaires avaient suggéré l'extrême diversité des systèmes matriculturels. En mettant l'accent sur la façon dont les femmes elle-mêmes pensent, expriment et décrivent leurs mondes, on perçoit mieux la spécificité, et de leurs situations, et de leurs réponses. On découvre aussi que les perceptions du genre issues du socio-culturel indo-européen, qu'Anne Augereau a qualifié récemment de « conception binaire hétéronormative et androcentrée » (2026: 23), ne suffisent pas à rendre compte du matriculturel tel que nous le rencontrons sur le terrain. Nous avons cependant préféré garder la référence primaire au maternel qui s'est imposée en raison de l'universalité de la nécessité pour une société d'assurer une descendance, et des contraintes imposées par la biologie humaine de la reproduction.

Si le maternel est assumé et défini de façons diverses dans le monde, il implique toujours gestation, naissance, lactation et contacts physiques prolongés avec une ou des personne humaines. Les enfants doivent être nourris, portés, élevés, et exigent une communauté de soins et de conversations. Il est rare que la mère soit considérée la seule responsable des soins maternels; dans les sociétés matrilinéaires, par exemple, les gens utilisent fréquemment le même terme pour désigner la mère et les tantes maternelles. Dans nombre de sociétés autochtones, ce sont en fait les grand-mères qui assurent les soins et l'éducation culturelle des enfants (par exemple chez les Tlingit), et dans la plupart des sociétés qui dépendent du travail agricole des femmes, ce sont leurs sœurs plus âgées qui s'occupent des nourrissons. Finalement, un nombre non négligeable de sociétés permettent aux hommes de porter leurs enfants et d'assurer leur socialisation. Chez les gens de langes athabascannes, le père est vu sur le plan affectif comme une figure plus proche de ses enfants que la mère biologique, et c'est lui par exemple qui initiera la petite fille à la chasse. Le cercle social entourant l'enfant en est élargi. Comme on l'entend couramment dans les villages autochtones de la côte pacifique canadiennes: Ça prend un village pour élever un enfant.

Ceci dit, et prenant pour acquise la notion de genre dans son acception non-binaire, nous continuerons dans la suite de ce numéro à parler de femmes et d'hommes, de féminin et

de masculin simplement parce que nos auteurs et autrices parlent de sociétés où le genre binaire est imposé par les structures religieuses et politiques dominantes.

Perçu de l'intérieur, et comme c'est le cas pour tous les systèmes culturels, le matriculturel crée un 'langage' commun pour, d'une part, penser, décrire, interpréter et refléter la réalité - un modèle *de* la réalité - et d'autre part pour prescrire comportements et attentes - un modèle *pour* la réalité. Nos disciplines savantes, guidées par des visions du monde masculines, ont souvent traité le domaine des femmes comme un dérivé d'un domaine masculin universel, et n'ont pas facilité la reconnaissance des aspects matriculturels en tant qu'éléments d'un système à la fois imbriqué dans les autres systèmes comme le religieux ou le politique, mais distinct - encore moins en tant que milieu d'émergence du culturel.

À écrire l'histoire d'une nation, ou d'un empire à partir des mouvements des armées et des prises de pouvoirs des princes, on oublie la présence des gens dits 'ordinaires,' cette 'masse' indifférenciée qui soutient, transmet, et tisse la toile culturelle. De fait, la contribution des femmes en tant qu'acteurs culturels autonomes s'annonce autant dans les cas où elles ont leur propres langues (Tucanos), leurs propres traditions artistiques (Hopi), ou leurs propres systèmes religieux (Jeju), que dans les exemples plus célèbres de leur présence dans le passé éloigné telle qu'attestée par les représentations féminines du Paléolithique supérieur en Europe, dans les grands mythes babyloniens comme la descente d'Inanna dans le monde inférieur, dans la transmission endogame du pouvoir politique en Égypte ancienne, et dans les dynasties matrilinéaires des reines dans les Marches sino-tibétaines.

Si toutes les sociétés humaines entrelacent - et systématisent - leurs systèmes de parentés, leur organisation sociale et politique, leurs systèmes de valeurs et leur vie cérémonielles et rituelles, avec la façon dont elles définissent et gèrent la présence des femmes, ce ne sont pas toutes les sociétés qui permettent aux femmes de développer des milieux culturels, des matricultures, qui soient fertiles, pérennes et bénéfiques pour les femmes et leurs dépendants. Notre équipe de recherche a donc pris l'habitude de juger de la qualité et de la richesses des systèmes matriculturels comme on le fait couramment avec les autres systèmes culturels. De la même manière que l'on parle, par exemple, de sociétés profondément religieuses ou de systèmes religieux néfastes, ou encore de sociétés créatives sur le plan artistique ou de sociétés où l'expression artistique est restreinte, contrôlée par l'État ou par l'élite religieuse, on observe des systèmes matriculaires ouverts partagés par l'ensemble de la communauté, des systèmes matriculturels réprimés officiellement mais déployés à l'écart du contrôle masculin (voir les contributions dans ce numéro de Sandra Skurvida et de Jinoos Taghizadeh sur l'utilisations des films video par les femmes iraniennes), et des systèmes matriculturels affaiblis sinon étranglés par la main-

mise masculine. Ce dernier se trouve, par exemple, lorsqu'on empêche la transmission des connaissances féminines en envoyant les filles dès leur puberté vivre chez leur mari et une belle-mère qui n'est pas nécessairement accueillante. Les familles et les enfants sont évidemment directement touchés par la qualité et la santé du matriculturel (voir les travaux de Sanday en Afrique tropicale).

Enfin, on ne pas penser le matriculturel comme un système qui contrebalance nécessairement la brutalité ou la souffrance qui peuvent résulter de pratiques jugées acceptables par le reste de la société. Certains systèmes matriculturels sont fortement hiérarchisés. Les belles-mères sont parfois les premières à maltraiter les jeune épouses de leur fils, et quand les normes sanctionnant mutilations génitales des filles sont acceptée par les femmes dominantes (pour assurer un mariage convenable aux filles), les filles seront excisées avec l'assentiment de leur mère, ce qui viendra rompre la relation de soutien entre mère et fille. C'est seulement quand la vision du monde sous-jacente amène à considérer les fille et les femmes avec respect que l'on trouve des systèmes matriculturels nourriciers et sécuritaires. À ce propos, le traitement des enfants, des gens âgés, des serviteurs et esclaves, et des animaux domestiques est un bon indice de la santé du matriculturel.

Les acquis méthodologiques

Depuis 2016, le concept à fait son chemin, bien qu'il soit encore jeune, et n'ait pas encore atteint son plein développement. Dix ans plus tard, le thème de ce numéro de *Matrix* permet de tester son horizon et d'accueillir les perspectives qu'apportent un groupe renouvelé de chercheuses et chercheurs.

Certains acquis sont confirmés. Comme le terme 'culture,' qui reste central dans le discours anthropologique et ethnologique, 'matriculture' est à la fois un mot (parfois utilisé dans d'autres contextes), un concept qui permet des synthèses prenant en compte des aspects très divers de la vie des femmes, et une perspective qui permet d'accéder à un éventail d'approches depuis le culturel vécu à la première personne, jusqu'à l'examen à grande échelle des mouvements sociaux, toujours en partant du point de vue des femmes. C'est donc d'abord un outil méthodologique, avec trois réserves importantes :

1 - C'est un outil qui repose sur une conception générale du culturel qui privilégie le symbolique. Il ne peut y avoir de culture sans des personnes qui la pensent et la parlent (voir les théories fondatrices d'Edward Sapir, 1924, et d'Irving Hallowell, 1955). Comme les autres systèmes culturels, tels que proposé par Geertz, le matriculturel demeure fondamentalement défini comme un système symbolique. Il s'adresse à la façon dont les

gens pensent, et spécifiquement la manière dont les femmes conçoivent leur monde. Il s'appuie sur des ensembles de connaissance, d'expériences partagées, de transmissions et de communication. C'est pourquoi la voix est sa principale métaphore; la communication, par tous les moyens et selon tous les modes disponibles, est son support indispensable. Ce thème est évoqué par la plupart des auteurs collaborant à ce numéro.

À ce propos il est intéressant de constater la distribution de l'un des aspects de la matriculture, celui de ses liens avec le système de parenté - liens qui furent l'objet d'un projet de recherche sur les rapports entre langue et systèmes de parenté (Guédon-Kalulambi; la première partie de ce projet de recherche fut publiée dans le premier numéro de *Matrix*; Guédon 2020). Après plusieurs tentatives pour explorer et revisiter les corrélations suggérées entre les types de système de parenté (en particulier les systèmes de parenté matrilinéaires) et le reste du contexte socio-culturel, il s'avère que ni le contexte géographique, ni le mode de subsistance, ni l'organisation sociale, ni le niveau développement économique, ni le type de système politique ne permettent de prédire la présence d'un système matrilinéaire. La seule variable fiable qui puisse être associée à la matrilinealité se trouve être la langue parlée par cette société, ou plus précisément son appartenance à une famille linguistique où on trouve déjà une organisation matrilinéaire. Les gens de la même famille linguistique ont des chances très élevées de partager le même système de filiation. C'est donc, du moins dans le présent, un facteur culturel supporté par la langue (qu'il s'agisse de principes de base, de champs sémantiques, de visions du monde, ou de valeurs) hérité d'une même origine parfois lointaine, qui facilite les tendances vers une orientation ou une autre d'un système de parenté, avec des répercussions immédiates sur le matriculturel.

2 - Dans le sens où nous l'entendons ici, le mot ne désigne pas un type de société; encore moins un type de société limité à celles qui seraient favorables aux femmes, par exemple, en leur offrant une sorte de matriarcat; il ne dénote pas une organisation sociale matrilinéaire, ou une gouvernance féminine. Nous comprenons maintenant q'on ne peut donc pas parler de société matriculturelle.

Il faut noter que notre équipe de recherche a jusqu'ici refusé de promouvoir une sémantique focalisée autour d'un seul terme central tel que 'femme' ou 'mère' ou encore 'maternité' ou même 'genre,' préférant aligner toutes les facettes que peuvent présenter les notions de genre, de féminité, de procréation, de maternité, de soins aux enfants, qu'encore de famille, de parenté, de sexualité, de domesticité, ou de transmission culturelle. Ce choix est dû partiellement au fait que chacune de ces notions demeure liée à des contextes culturels précis, et varie selon ces contextes, et d'autre part, à l'impression que selon nos enquêtes sur le terrain et dans la plupart des cas, ce que nous cherchons à délimiter par matriculture est constitué, comme la plupart des système culturels, par un

enchevêtrement d'habitudes, de connaissances, d'intentions, de responsabilités, de devoirs, et de créativité, à court et à long terme, qui rend impossible, ou même irresponsable, la concentration ou simplement l'emphase sur un seul aspect. Il se peut que les versions masculines du matriculturel - oserions nous l'appeler le patriculturel ?— soient plus enclines à simplifier les choses ou à les organiser autour de quelques principes explicites, comme le suggère l'étude de Helen Lachal, 'Motherhood in *Murzilka*: Constructing Maternal Ideals for Soviet Children, 1956 – 1964' (« La maternité dans *Murzilka* : construction d'idéaux maternels pour les enfants soviétiques, 1956–1964 », ce numéro, pp. 213-239). Cette discussion des instructions données aux enfants russes à l'intention de leurs mères décrit des femmes dont le monde, d'après le modèle prescrit par des autorités masculines, se réduirait simplement à être des mères nourricières en même temps que des travailleuses manuelles et anonymes. (Voir aussi Mary Bateson (1973) sur les femmes iraniennes et la nécessité de préserver une temporalité longue et relativement informelle, comparé à celle des hommes, plus courte mais plus explicite.) Ce même thème est repris à un niveau plus théorique par Yolande François-Schwab dans sa revue du livre par Susan Ackerman *Maturity, Marriage, Motherhood, Mortality: Women's Life-Cycle Rituals in Ancient Israel* (« Maturité, mariage, maternité, mortalité : les rituels du cycle de vie des femmes dans l'Israël antique », ce numéro, pp. 281-289).

Cependant, comme concept, et comme la culture dont il est une composante, et comme la parenté, comme l'art, la religion, et tous les autres systèmes culturels, le matriculturel rassemble des éléments qui resteraient dispersés, ou dont la convergence serait voilée dans nos analyses, sans un point focal identifiant leur interdépendance. Mais ce point focal doit demeurer assez flou pour qu'on puisse l'identifier d'une culture à l'autre. Par exemple, si certaines sociétés vont identifier le religieux avec leurs institutions associées avec la notion d'un Dieu unique, l'anthropologue ou l'historien peut se permettre d'élargir son champs de vision pour accueillir comme religieux toute manifestation culturelle ou rituelle associée à la relation avec le spirituel, le surnaturel, le sacré ou même les relations rituelles avec tout ce qui se tient au delà de l'espace humain.

3 - On peut parler de matriculture dans le contexte de la culture matérielle ou de l'environnement physique à condition que cet environnement physique soit habité, c'est à dire appréhendé comme signifiant. À cet égard plusieurs thèmes sont en voie d'émergence dans ces premiers numéros de *Matrix*, entre autres autour de la notion de domesticité, qui ne serait plus considérée comme un invariant de la condition des femmes; la notion de site sacré, qui est très ancienne mais n'est pas universelle, surtout chez les chasseurs cueilleurs et les nomades; et, aujourd'hui, les engagements communautaires visant la protection de l'environnement naturel, et la lutte contre les changement climatiques, en passe d'être revendiquée comme une responsabilité féminine au vu de la faillite des dirigeants des états et des institutions économiques et financières mondiales.

Les thèmes émergeant de ce numéro

Ce numéro s'ouvre sur des situations dissonantes où l'oppression politique se conjugue aux pertes culturelles et linguistiques, et à la dislocation des communautés. Cet horizon plus sombre démontre la capacité du concept du matriculturel à rejoindre non seulement la diversité des systèmes matriculturels (ce qui a été démontré dès le début de nos recherches) mais aussi l'éventail des problèmes parfois extrêmement sévères qui les affectent, situations problématiques par ailleurs souvent renforcées par les systèmes religieux ou idéologiques. Les réponses des femmes sont diverses et chaque fois spécifiques, ce qui pourrait permettre de mettre en lumière le fait que le matriculturel est en dialogue avec le contexte socio-culturel de toute la communauté et avec le monde extérieur, d'une part, et d'autre part de témoigner des conséquences pour toute la société, et non seulement pour les femmes, d'un système matriculturel malmené.

Les contributions rassemblées dans les textes qui suivent sont diverses mais elles abordent directement ou indirectement plusieurs perspectives communes .Au delà des sujets de recherche annoncés, trois thématiques en particulier émergent de ces articles qui sont autant de témoignages sur les sociétés qu'ils décrivent: les difficultés de la condition féminine dans les sociétés en question, la résilience physique et morale des femmes, et les stratégies de résistance.

Mais le constat est là, et il s'exprime immédiatement et sans détour en un raccourci saisissant dans le poème de Gloria Macher: 'Mending for Unity' (« Réparer pour l'unité », ce numéro, pp. 261-265). Il fait écho à la somme du travail physique imposée par les structures sociales dominantes locales, à l'urgence concrète du soutien aux réseaux de support féminins, et à l'urgence globale de protéger la terre elle-même de la folie destructrice des dirigeants mondiaux actuels. Le poème affirme la nature dynamique du monde culturel féminin et la pérennité de ses inquiétudes, tissant et ravaudant la fabrique globale du vivant. Le culturel d'habitude pris pour acquis devient visible.

Les femmes décrites par nos auteur(e)s répondent en affirmant leur résilience. En traversant et croisant les paysages religieux, par example du Judaïsme à l'islam, et les zones géographique, de l'Iran à la Roumanie avec des excursions vers la Russie de l'Union Soviétique et vers l'Afrique tropicale, nos contributrices et contributeurs démontrent que l'image de 'la femme forte' n'est pas seulement une image et qu'elle s'installe parfois très tôt dans les vie des filles. La résilience, l'endurance et la force des femmes peuvent être source de fierté, mais elles signalent aussi par leur nécessité la présence constante des difficultés.

Etim Ekpenyong Mfon, dans son article 'From Concept to Practice: Visual art as an Applied Site of Matriculture,' (« Du concept à la pratique : les arts visuels en tant que terrain d'application de la matriculture », ce numéro, pp. 41-82), explore à partir d'une série de ses peintures, la capacité de l'art visuel à rendre compte du matriculturel et de l'éco-féminisme au Nigéria. Il écrit: « 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 (« En cela, le studio [d'art] fonctionne comme un espace où les significations culturelles sont non seulement représentées mais aussi assujetties à une examen visuel et une vérification pouvant mener à les repenser.» (P. 46)

C'est aussi un espace méthodologique qui documente une transformation dans la société comme dans l'analyse que l'artiste propose : chaque peinture fonctionne comme une vignette qui dépeint une étape dans un processus qui s'ouvre sur l'affirmation du caractère dynamique du matriculturel en démontrant comment insérer une perspective matriculturelle dans un effort de communication visuelle et non verbale d'une part, et d'autre part en apportant une dimension dynamique dans ce qui aurait pu être simplement l'illustration d'une héritage culturel. Reconnaissant que cet héritage peut à la fois soutenir les femmes et les restreindre, la révérence pour les femmes conteste certaines habitudes sanctionnées par les traditions et crée une ouverture sur l'avenir et sur de nouvelles interprétation des anciens symboles.

Suivant une approche historique centrée sur les femmes, dans 'Jewish and Muslim Women in Habsburg Lands: Historiographical Essay and Research Directions' (« Femmes juives et musulmanes dans les terres des Habsbourg : essai historiographique et pistes de recherche », ce numéro, pp. 108-148), Alison Rose retrace les cheminements complexes et parallèles des communautés et des femmes juives d'une part et musulmanes d'autre part durant les quatre derniers siècles dans les Territoires des Habsbourg en Europe centrale. Marqué par la résilience, l'endurance et la force de caractères des femmes, cet essai historiographique dépeint un contexte de marginalisation ethnique combinée avec l'imposition de normes compilées par les pouvoirs religieux (chrétiens catholiques et orthodoxes, juifs, et musulmans), et le déplacement forcé par l'état de communautés entières, contexte avec lequel les femmes doivent composer tout en contribuant à la continuité culturelle et sociale. Selon Rose, elles prennent leurs places individuelles et collectives en accumulant et transmettant leurs connaissances et leur expérience, en prenant soin les unes des autres, partageant les responsabilités et créant des réseaux féminins qui les accompagnent au dedans et au dehors. Car en dépit de restrictions, les femmes juives et les femmes musulmanes sortent de chez elles, et ce d'abord en profitant des institutions scolaires imposées pas l'état.

Comme le remarque Rose, chez les juifs orthodoxes en Europe de l'Est, à considérer les filles comme moins importantes que les garçons, on en arrivait à leur accorder un accès à la culture et aux langues dominantes, avec une éducation plus libre, plus séculaire, et plus ouverte sur le monde, que la seule culture judaïque à laquelle les garçons étaient strictement tenus. Lorsque elles maîtrisent des langues européennes ou lorsque elles peuvent assister leur père dans sa comptabilité, les filles sont valorisées par leur famille.

Mais elles ont acquis en même temps les moyens de sortir de leur milieu. Car la continuité culturelle et les liens serrés intra-communautaires qu'on demande aux femmes de défendre, parfois contre leurs propres intérêts. amène parfois paradoxalement les femmes et souvent les jeunes filles à prendre la décision de quitter leurs famille ou leur communauté religieuse, voir à s'exiler, ou même à se convertir à l'islam ou au christianisme, si elles veulent suivre leurs propres cheminements. Qu'il s'agisse de refuser un mariage, de poursuivre une vocation, ou simplement d'acquérir les moyens financiers de fonder leur propre familles, si nécessaire par la prostitution, ces décisions apparaissent souvent imposées par des questions de survie individuelle.

Mais au delà d'une comparaison formelle entre juives et musulmanes qui révèle des parallèles, on devine dans les histoires de vie des juives comme des musulmanes qu'à l'insu des communautés officielles familiales ou religieuses tout un réseau de filles et de femmes répand les nouvelles sociales en même temps que des modèles de comportement qui, tout en étant ouvertement désapprouvés peuvent communiquer des options et les connaissances nécessaires pour les exercer. C'est donc parfois dans la désobéissance assumée que ces femmes vont trouver leur propre continuité.

Dans un contexte totalement différent, celui de villages roumains retirés dans les montagnes loin des routes et des agglomérations, Oana Alexandra Borlea-Stancioi a recueilli les histoires de vie de femmes qui assument la responsabilité de demeurer dans leurs villages et de les garder en vie en dépit de l'éloignement ("remoteness") géographique et social dans son article 'Remaining on the Mountain: Women, Memory, and the Transformation of Remoteness in Rural Romania' (« Demeurer sur la montagne : femmes, mémoire et transformation de l'éloignement dans la Roumanie rurale » (ce numéro, pp. 83-107). Ces femmes sont - et se savent - fortes, indépendantes,capables physiquement et mentalement de survivre. Ce sont souvent des femmes âgées que les changements sociaux et la cassure des traditions et des structures parentales traditionnelles ont laissées seules pour assumer la préservation des fermes et de l'expertise nécessaire pour leur gestion. Autrefois cette continuité passait par les belles-filles qui emménageaient avec leur mari, mais les jeunes couples descendent dans la vallée et n'habitent plus la maison familiale, sauf pour des visites temporaires. Aujourd'hui ces femmes qui choisissent de continuer à vivre dans des villages isolés en altitude, assument

la responsabilité de veiller non seulement sur le patrimoine immobilier, la terre et les fermes, mais aussi et surtout sur les connaissances qu'elles ont accumulées, et qu'elles veulent transmettre à une nouvelle génération de descendants dont la présence est cependant incertaine. C'est là une composante essentielle de leur identité et raison d'être.

En plaçant l'emphase sur la perception qu'ont ces femmes de leurs options et du prix à payer pour les exercer, l'auteure est capable de parler d'un thème que l'on ose rarement mentionner et qui est pourtant toujours d'actualité, celui de la solitude, qu'elles abordent comme une composante de ce qu'elles nomme 'Remoteness' (l'éloignement), c'est à dire recul et distance. Ce recul qu'est vécu comme la condition de la continuité sociale et culturelle est aussi sûr le résultat d'une vie relégué loin des communautés plus proches des routes et des centres urbanisés, mais on devine que les femmes elles-mêmes l'attribue aussi à la quantité de travail qu'elle doivent fournir juste pour maintenir la maison et survivre; le temps manque pour d'autres entreprises. La perception de cet éloignement, dit l'auteure, affecte plus particulièrement le femmes :

> 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)
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> (Que les craintes des habitants se concrétisent ou non, la perception de l'éloignement façonne leur identité et leurs univers vécus. Ce processus s'opère selon une logique de genre : les femmes se retrouvent ancrées sur place, en raison de leurs savoirs et de leur autorité dans la sphère domestique, tandis que les hommes et les jeunes jouissent d'une plus grande mobilité, leur présence au sein du foyer étant jugée moins indispensable.)

Mais que faire d'un patrimoine intangible dont les descendants ne veulent plus? Une femme privée de la présence de sa belle-fille peut créer des liens affectifs avec les touristes ou les familles nouvellement-venues de façon à pouvoir transmettre ses connaissances à quelqu'un. Mais elle sort alors du système patrilinéaire traditionnel. Elle peut aussi confier ses histoires à des ethnographes qui tenteront de les écrire et de les préserver. Ces récits évoquent sa langue maternelle et son histoire, la féminité et le pouvoir.

En contrepoint avec les femmes retirées dans les montagnes roumaines, et à l'autre côté du monde, une autre femme de Roumanie, Michela Enache, immigrée en Nouvelle-Zélande pour une nouvelle vie loin de la société oppressive et des souvenirs douloureux de

son enfance, apporte un témoignage sur celles qui partent. Dans ‘Being and Becoming Kin with an Ancient Matricultural Artefact’ (« Tisser des liens de parenté avec un artefact matricultural ancien », ce numéro, pp. 266-271), elle décrit comment elle a pu recréer de nouveau liens avec son pays et sa culture d’origine à partir de la confection d’un seul artéfact, une blouse traditionnelle qui “encapsule” la mémoire de son identité passée et la créativité qu’elle peut désormais assumer dans son nouveau rôle d’enseignante. En défiance à la politique du régime communiste qui voulait faire de ces blouses un objet de production de masse symbolisant une identité collective et uniforme, elle a fabriqué et brodé le vêtement de ses mains et selon les règles traditionnelles, avec les symboles qui lui parlent de sa langue maternelle et de son histoire, de féminité et de pouvoir, un lien quasi-vivant plutôt qu’une relique.

Dans ‘Echoes of Resilience, Women’s Voices and Agency in Nso Cultural Traditions of the Bameda Grassfield of Cameroon’ (« Échos de résilience : voix et pouvoir d’agir des femmes dans les traditions culturelles Nso des Grassfields de Bamenda, au Cameroun », ce numéro, pp. 183-212), Happiness Ninyuy analyse les formes de participation des femmes à la vie sociale, formes qui persistent en dépit de l’exclusion des femmes, par les hommes. des institutions politiques et des appareils de décision publiques .Les femmes se font entendre, comme mères, comme porteuses de culture et gardiennes des traditions orales, comme héritières d’une fondatrice historique et mythique de la société Nso, la princesse Ngonnso, et comme participantes dans les rituels communautaires, tous roles qu’elles assument délibérément, tous rôles culturels.

Mais leur voix n’aurait pas grande portée, sans le levier qu’elles ont trouvé dans le travail agricole, avec des conséquences directes sur l’économie du pays, un levier identifié dans la remarque de Phyllis M. Kaberry, citée par Yinyuy, à propos de la façon dont les hommes Nso rationalisent la division du travail: « Nso men claimed that preparing land for the planting of crops was “a woman’s job which is too strenuous for the men. » (« Les hommes Nso affirmaient que la préparation des terres pour la culture était « un travail de femme, trop pénible pour les hommes ».) (P. 188)

Ainsi, les hommes possèdent les champs mais ce sont les femmes qui les travaillent. Ce point de vue masculin ouvre aux femmes le contrôle de la production agricole : les semailles, les moissons, la transformation et la gestion des surplus incombent aux femmes, ce qui leur assure une autonomie économique réelle fondée sur leur expertise technique et les expertises connexes acquises au fil des générations. La participation des femmes à la gestion économique de l’état demeure informelle, mais elle est vitale pour leur familles et pour l’état.

Le prix à payer par les femmes, comme dans les cas cités ci-dessus, est le travail qu'elles doivent fournir et qui s'inscrit en filigrane dans l'article; il transparait dans la construction et la reconstruction des réseaux féminins de communication, d'apprentissage et de soutien, qui se continuent aujourd'hui dans les associations de fermières, les coopératives agricoles et même des institutions financières locales. Tous ces organismes, de même que les marchés locaux sont des espaces de rencontre et de réseautage.

La hiérarchie sociale et le contrôle masculin, de l'état aux conseils régionaux, et jusque dans la famille patrilocale, renforcée par la polygamie et le mariage des fillettes, d'une part, et l'insécurité imposée par les conflits armés, la guerre civile provoquée par la Crise Anglophone en 2016, et la destruction de centaines de villages avec les déplacements subséquents de population d'autre part, n'ont pas réussi à affaiblir la solidarité féminine. Comme l'auteure le souligne, même dans ce contexte difficile, « female agency is constitutive rather than marginal » (« l'agentivité du féminin est constitutive plutôt que marginale. » (P. 194). Les femmes Nso ne tentent pas de confronter les institutions patriarcales, elles assument plutôt délibérément ce que l'auteur, comme les femmes elles-mêmes, identifie comme des 'pouvoirs culturels.' Dans l'organisation socio-politique patriarcale officielle, le refus des hommes de travailler les champs entretient une faille immense que les femmes ont investie, de façon non officielle mais soutenue publiquement par les normes culturelles. En contrôlant par ailleurs le champs identitaire de la culture traditionnelle avec leurs festivals et leur compétences rituelles, les femmes peuvent se faire entendre de façon régulière sans avoir à s'opposer aux homme en pouvoir. Mais c'est toute la communauté féminine qui est engagée collectivement dans l'entretien et la reproduction des rouages culturels et des traditions qui leur assurent de pouvoir promouvoir leurs intérêts dans la vie collective.

Helen Lachal, dans 'Motherhood in *Murzilka*: Constructing Maternal Ideals for Soviet Children, 1956 – 1964,' examine la maternité telle que représentée dans le magazine *Murzilka* destiné aux enfants, et, par leur intermédiaire, à leurs mères. Elle souligne l'écart entre la vision communiste des femmes et leur réalité quotidienne. Le but de la recherche n'est pas de documenter la réaction des femmes face à cet endoctrinement, mais de faire la lumière sur les contradictions inhérentes entre la femme soviétique idéale, présenté dans la propagande de l'état soviétique, et la vie réelle avec la somme de travail imposée aux femmes, à la fois ouvrières à plein temps, de préférence manuelles et de bas échelon, au service de l'état, et domestiques au service de leurs mari et de leurs enfants, mais épouse attrayante. L'individualité est effacée par les normes, et les mères n'existent plus en tant que personnes. Avec un accès limité à une éducation améliorée, sans la permission de se déplacer, encore moins de déménager, et avec des journées pleinement occupées, elles n'ont ni le temps ni les moyens d'envisager une autre vie. Cette version masculine d' un système matriculturel revu et simplifié par les stratèges soviétiques était enseignée aux

enfants par le magazine pour être transmise aux générations suivantes comme une norme désirable, qui de fait reproduit et perpétue la même mise en service des femmes dans un avenir qui paraît sans issue.

Avec '*Good Night*, *The Indivisible Sky*: Women, Video, Iran' (« *Bonne nuit*, *Le ciel indivisible* : femmes, vidéo, Iran », ce numéro, pp. 240-260), Sandra Skurvida, conservatrice de collections d'art visuel, se base sur la situation de deux artistes iraniennes, Jinoos Taghizadeh et Anahita Razmi. Ces femmes ont choisi l'art vidéo comme moyen d'expression et de communication--un medium précaire, mobile, difficile à préserver, mais aussi difficile à contrôler--pour témoigner des messages qu'elles transmettent et du milieu culturel qu'elles soutiennent. Elles font face au contexte insidieux et tout-puissant d'un système politique théocratique engagé dans la suppression active de tous ses opposants, et qui s'emploie en particulier à faire taire les femmes, avec la peur, le deuil et le féminicide comme outils de répression. Dans ces conditions extrêmes, les femmes, les artistes et les minorités représentent une cible immédiate et officielle pour les forces policières. Skurvida ne tente pas de décrire un sytème matriculturel mais à en dévoiler quelques rouages. Comme elle l'annonce elle-même, elle cherche à appréhender comment les systèmes symboliques et culturels s'entrecroisent avec le politique. Elle décrit comment les artistes utilisent les films vidéo, qui ne sont pas particulièrement surveillés, comme moyens d'exploiter les félures dans l'appareil répressif et de les remplir de contenu subversif qui progressivement élargit les failles et effrite la forteresse idéologique.

L'une de ces artistes, Jinoos Taghizadeh, dans 'Making Art in the Void: Iranian Women Artists Between Repression and Creation' (« Créer dans le vide : les artistes iraniennes, entre répression et création », ce numéro, pp. 272-280), la transcription d'une présentation orale, fait sienne cette observation qu'elle présente comme une stratégie déterminante pour la constitution de l'art vidéo féminin iranien. Elle conclut en élargissant ce qui était au départ une tactique d'attaque--utilisant les failles du système--pour en faire un mode de survie :

> 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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> (À travers l'histoire, les femmes ont souvent été exclues des centres du pouvoir, de la culture et de la prise de décision. Par conséquent, nous avons

> appris à survivre, à communiquer, et à créer dans les espaces négligés. Nous avons appris a trouver les fentes dans le mur, et comment nous y glisser. Nous occupons les territoires délaissés. Nous construisons des communautés et des langages là où d'autres ne voient qu'un espace vide.)

Sous une variation ou une autre, cette sorte de stratégie se retrouve dans toutes les communications de ce numéro. Les femmes vont occuper les territoires reculés, repérer les occasions de sortir de l'espace domestique, exploiter, et ce de façon délibérée, l'absence des hommes dans les champs, ou leur manque d'attention, de façon à récupérer les zones qui leur sont plus favorables. Dans plusieurs cas, dont celui des femmes du Cameroun, les femmes échappent à l'attention des autorités masculines en occupant des espaces informels, des réseaux interpersonnels peu institutionalisés, des événement qui, tout en étant public ne sont pas officiels.

Margaret Mead avait déjà souligné la difficulté d'étudier l'informel culturel par rapport au formel, les fêtes célébrant un succès ponctuel par rapport aux fêtes inscrites dans le calendrier, les rituels individuels marquant la puberté par rapport aux initiations collectives, les rites de chasse par rapport aux célébrations des moissons, les pratiques chamaniques par rapport aux déploiement rituels des religions d'état. Elle avait alors souligné la caractère déceptif de l'informel, et la tentation intellectuelle de le considérer comme la marque d'une composante culturelle moins importante, en particulier lorsqu'il s'agit de pouvoirs politiques ou religieux. Si le pouvoir informel est souvent présenté comme un succédané, un substitut de moindre valeur du pouvoir formel conféré par une autorité visible et confirmée, il n'est pas négligeable et le pouvoir formel officiel et institutionnalisé est souvent fragilisé par des structures plus lourdes et moins flexibles. L'état camerounais en est un exemple.

Un autre exemple, qui met en valeur les difficultés méthodologiques associées à l'invisibilité de l'informel, est celui du traitement des rituels féminins dans les sociétés bibliques tel que discuté par Yolande François-Schwab. François-Schwab part du livre récent de Susan Ackerman *Maturity, Marriage, Motherhood, Mortality: Women's Life-Cycle Rituals in Ancient Israel* pour inviter le lecteur à revisiter des a-priori théoriques. Dans ses commentaires**,** François-Schwab se penche avec Ackerman sur l'absence de description de rituels féminins dans les textes bibliques anciens, absence d'autant plus notable que les prescriptions, interdictions, et normes rituelles concernant les femmes sont nombreuses dans les textes rabbiniques plus tardifs comme la Mishnah et le Talmud.

S'agit-il d'une absence des rituels eux-mêmes? Ou bien est-on en présence d'une omission délibérée de la part des premiers auteurs de ces textes? Ackerman utilise deux modes de recherche pour aborder la question, le premier est une ré-interprétation des textes

bibliques, narratifs et prescriptifs en identifiant les non-dits Le second est une reconstitution des rituels manquants à partir de comparaisons avec des systèmes rituels féminins dans d'autres cultures. Pour ce faire, Ackerman mobilise les grandes théories anthropologiques classiques du rituel avec les trois phases distinctes identifiées par Arnold Van Gennep : séparation, phase liminale, réintégration - phases qui sont visibles, collectives et ponctuelles - et la notion de liminalité introduite pas Victor Turner qui soutient la transformation sur laquelle se fonde le processus rituel. Cette approche met en lumière la difficulté de faire rentrer les rites de passages hébreux féminins dans le schéma théorique classique, en particulier, elle souligne le caractère diffus, moins théâtrale, moins public que domestique, moins ponctuel et plus continu, en somme « 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. » (P. 283)

Plutôt que des versions atténuées des rites masculins, la vie rituelle des femmes correspond à son inscription dans le corporel, le domestique et le privé, ce qui demande une remise en question de l'application des théories classiques de l'anthropologie du rituel. Le rituel n'est plus ici un événement ponctuel mais un vécu quotidien qui peut être fait l'objet d'une "mise en récit" plutôt que de codifications. François-Schwab conclut que le travail d'Ackerman « 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. » (Pp. 286-287)

Vu à partir du contexte général des autres prestations, on peut constater ici d'abord un renvoi, pour les femmes, du public au privé, au corps, et au domestique. On pourrait ensuite questionner la part que joue les principes de base de la vision du monde hébraïque dans la formation du complexe rituel féminin dans le monde hébreu (entre autres la définition du pur et de l'impur) et la mesure dans laquelle une nouvelle définition du rituel pourrait s'appliquer au matriculturel en général. On devrait certainement considérer que les théories classiques du rituel sont infléchies par les divers contextes culturels où elles sont appliquées. Mais cela ne nous amène pas à considérer les valeurs bibliques comme universelles et le repli des femmes vers le domestique comme un fait accompli.

Il serait en effet tentant de proposer que les systèmes matriculturels comportent généralement un réflex de détour, de retrait, de retranchement, ou d'informalité, sinon de méfiance vis-à-vis de la vie publique, politique et collective; on pourrait faire de l'informel et de la seconde place une caractéristique universelle des systèmes matriculturels, une position qui a la faveur de plusieurs féministes européennes, mais qui découlerait d'un constat de dominance masculine quasi universelle. Ce constat doit être relativisé au vu des

modèles d'indépendance proposés, inscrits, et propagés, dans les systèmes matriculturels que nous connaissons, y compris dans des société patriarcales.

Et cette position mènerait à trois pièges: Le premier serait de définir le culturel comme équivalent à sa version officielle, celle qui s'affirme en public et dispose des moyens de se diffuser, celle dont la voix peut mobiliser l'attention, celle qui dispose de l'autorité politique, comme le lieu principal sinon primaire des processus socio-culturels et de considérer les action des femmes et des minorités, comme des strategies d'appoint ou de survie sans conséquence à long terme. (Les empires deviendraient les principaux facteurs de développement humain et la guerre le principal vecteur de changement culturel.) Les archéologues ont montré que même à l'échelle des millénaires et depuis le paléolithique, c'est toute la société qui participe à l'élaboration d'un mode de vie et de pensée. Et l'effondrement des empires ne correspond pas à la mort de leurs populations, mais peut conduire à une transformation sociale des peuples concernés.

L'anthropologie a démontré que le culturel est bien plus que les institutions qui le supportent. Il est multiforme et pour la plus grande part implicite, non verbal et inscrit dans le corps, les émotions, et l'intangible. L'invention de l'écriture a permis pour un temps de ralentir la perte de mémoire et de réifier puis d'imposer une vision du monde hiérarchisée, collective et uniforme. Mais tout ethnographe doit reconnaître que, lorsqu'on tente de décrire, de transcrire, de traduire et d'analyser la culture d'une société à travers des textes, ces derniers – y compris toutes les observations, déclarations et conversations, aussi soigneusement consignées soient-elles – ne couvrent qu'une infime fraction de l'expérience vécue par les gens. Sans ce constat, on réifie la culture et on la réduit à une mosaïque de données.

Le deuxième piège serait de confondre les stratégies féminines d'occupation des zones négligées par le pouvoir économique politique ou religieux, avec une infériorité intériorisée dans une identité collective. Ces stratégies qu'on retrouve aussi dans les classes sociales les plus basses ou les plus pauvres, les peuples minoritaires, les réfugiés, ou les gens âgés ne sont pas pour autant regardées avec mépris. Au vu des positions décrites dans les articles qui suivent, il est évident que la stratégie d'utilisation des zones négligés par les pouvoirs officiels n'est pas nécessairement un repli et qu'elle n'est pas intériorisée comme une infériorité essentielle, au contraire. D'où l'intérêt de la présence de sociétés matrilinéaires qui offrent des modèles de gouvernance plus égalitaires (sans pour autant tomber dans un matriarcat binaire, symétrique mais opposé au patriarcat), et qui relativisent les prétentions des autorités à se proposer comme la seule version authentique de la réalité.

Le troisième piège serait de présenter le matriculturel comme un système construit pour maximiser le bien-être des femmes ; en tant que système culturel, il reste inscrit dans la vie de la société toute entière et dans les logiques et principes de base de sa culture. Ce n'est pas parce que des femmes sont impliquées dans son développement qu'elle n'auront pas à cœur d'abord leur propre intérêts personnel ou ceux de leurs familles, ou qu'elles auront conscience de la portée de leurs interventions. Au delà de leurs responsabilités individuelles et collectives envers les nouvelles générations, et de la discrimination dont elles sont souvent victimes, elles ne sont pas si différentes des autres membres de leur société.

Une dernière remarque en guise de conclusion : Il est d'usage aujourd'hui de présenter les femmes comme les gardiennes de leur héritage culturel, et pour les femmes d'entériner cette responsabilité, de façon visible et politiquement revendiquée du moins chez les minorités ethniques et les peuples autochtones. Mais ce serait une erreur de cataloguer les femmes seulement ou principalement comme les gardiennes du culturel traditionnel. Les exemples présentés ici montrent des femmes qui, si elles sont prêtes à transmettre les traditions et coutumes qu'elles jugent positives, sont tout aussi prêtes à innover, et même à abandonner des usages qu'elles jugent délétères.

Même si Karen Coody Cooper, l'auteure de *Cherokee Women in Charge: Female Power and Leadership in American Indian Nations in Eastern North America* (« Les femmes cherokees aux commandes : pouvoir et leadership féminins au sein des nations amérindiennes de l'est de l'Amérique du Nord »), dont Patrick Jung fait la critique dans ce numéro (pp. 291-293), ait choisi de présenter les femmes Cherokee, du sud des États Unis américains, comme des gardiennes de leur traditions, il est clair que les femmes dont elle résume la vie ne se sont pas confinées à enseigner la poterie et la vannerie, aussi importantes que puisse être ces compétence sur le plan identitaire. Ces femmes considéraient l'inauguration du Cherokee Female Seminary en 1851, par lequel passèrent environ 3000 femmes, comme une étape importante de leur histoire; cette éducation leur permettra d'accéder à des postes officiels, et d'affronter les Euro-américains sur leur propre terrain. Des femmes comme Wilma Mankiller, première chef élu de la nation Cherokee à Oklahoma, et Joyce Dugan. première chef de la Eastern Cherokee Band of Indians en North Carolina démontrent amplement leur capacité à s'adapter à un nouvel environnement culturel nouveau, aussi hostile soit-il.

Rappelons les femmes juives et musulmanes de l'Europe centrale, qui, si leur situation l'exige, abandonneront leur culture et les contraintes religieuses de leur communauté au profit de leurs survie physique et de la survie de leurs enfants; les femmes roumaines des villages reculés qui transmettent leurs connaissances à des nouveaux-venus étrangers; les fermières du Cameroon qui transfèrent la loyauté due à la parenté vers les coopératives et

les groupes d'entraide. Les artistes iraniennes mentionnées et citées par Sandra Skurvida dont Jinoos Taghizadeh ne sont pas seulement les occupantes d'un espace entre les espaces, elles en font un espace ouvert, compétent, public, international, et contemporain. Leur utilisation et leur maitrise de l'art vidéographique, des média sociaux internationaux ainsi que des rouages de leur propre société font d'elles des citoyennes du monde autant que de leur propre pays. Parmi les artistes iraniennes, comme le conclut Skurvida,

> Video art emerging from the resistance offers an alternative to the mass-media iconicity of femicide as martyrdom, as it appropriates the symbolic into the personal, secular realm, speaking about life rather than glorifying sacrificial death -[…] Such reorientation from the woman-as-martyr toward woman as a living, speaking, and acting being is carried out by many Iranian women artists. (P. 256)
>
> (L'art vidéo issu de la résistance propose une alternative à l'iconicité médiatique du féminicide en tant que martyre : il réapproprie la dimension symbolique pour l'inscrire dans une sphère personnelle et séculière, privilégiant l'évocation de la vie plutôt que la glorification d'une mort sacrificielle. […] Ce glissement — de la figure de la femme-martyre vers celle d'une femme vivante, qui s'exprime et agit — est au cœur de la démarche de nombreuses artistes iraniennes.)

En d'autres termes, toutes ces femmes choisissent les composantes du culturel qu'elles transmettent, et qu'au besoin elles remplacent et renouvellent. Elles nous rappellent alors que le culturel n'est pas nécessairement une fin en soi, mais qu'il est un moyen de devenir et demeurer humain. Si le culture traditionnel est mis au service d'un oppresseur, et surtout s'il met en danger la survie et l'humanité des plus jeunes, les femmes sont capables de le remettre en question et le matriculturel peut devenir un instrument de transition en relativisant des principes même si ceux qui détiennent le pouvoir les considèrent comme absolues. De même, dans les débuts de l'anthropologie, on présentait le religieux comme un facteur de stabilité, ancrant les systèmes culturels en place, jusqu'à ce que des ethnologues comme Sir Evans-Pritchard fassent remarquer que le religieux peut aussi faire éclater un statu quo intolérable et que naissent alors de nouveaux points de vue (Evans-Pritchard, 1965).

Edward Sapir, en 1924, présentait la culture comme un environnement nécessaire à la survie des enfants et des jeunes, et comme un échafaudage qu'il faut gravir avant de l'abandonner pour voler de ses propres ailes et devenir pleinement adulte et humain

(Sapir, 1924), Certains systèmes matriculturels semblent capables de s'ouvrir sur cette perspective.

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Novembre 2026

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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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From Concept to Practice:

Visual Art as an Applied Site of Matriculture

ETIM EKPENYONG MFON

Abstract

The purpose of the article is to examine studio-based visual arts as a venue for social awareness and cultural transformation with regard to the concept of matriculture. In this case, the notion of matriculture is broadened from its ethnographic context to include visual arts as symbolic practice, in which meanings of women are symbolized and reworked. Eight paintings, made in the period from 2007 until 2026 and based on Etimpaste, an eco-conscientious material created by means of the research, are analysed. In early paintings, including Milk Maids, Fruit-bearer, *and* Beauty in Diversity, *textured surface highlights reproductive, domestic, and informal work of women and their impact on community life. In later paintings,* including Hands That Hold the Earth, Bearer of Worlds, Threads of Memory, *and* Rewriting the Frame, *the use of diluted Etimpaste helps to analyse issues of fluidity, interdependence, memory, ecology and transformation. Mainly, the research is based on*

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matriculture, while an ecofeminist view provides ecological support. Thus, medium and message are shown to be connected to each other.

Keywords: Nigerian matriculture, visual art practice, cultural symbolism, women and social transformation, arts-based research

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Résumé

Cet article examine les arts visuels — tels qu'ils sont pratiqués en atelier — en tant qu'espace propice à une prise de conscience sociale et à une transformation culturelle, à la lumière du concept de matriculture. Ici, la notion de matriculture est élargie au-delà de son contexte ethnographique pour englober les arts visuels en tant que pratique symbolique, au sein de laquelle les significations associées aux femmes sont symbolisées et retravaillées. L'étude analyse huit peintures réalisées entre 2007 et 2026, conçues à partir de l'Etimpaste — un matériau écoresponsable mis au point dans le cadre de cette recherche. Dans les premières œuvres, telles que Milk Maids *[« Laitières »],* Fruit-bearer *[« Porteuse de fruits »] et* Beauty in Diversity *[« La beauté dans la diversité »], la texture des surfaces met en lumière le travail des femmes — qu'il soit reproductif, domestique ou informel — et son incidence sur la vie communautaire. Dans des œuvres plus récentes, comme* Hands That Hold the Earth *[« Mains qui soutiennent la Terre »],* Bearer of Worlds *[« Porteuse de mondes »],* Threads of Memory *[« Fils de la mémoire »] et* Rewriting the Frame *[« Réécrire le cadre »], l'utilisation d'Etimpaste sous une forme diluée permet d'explorer des enjeux liés à la fluidité, à l'interdépendance, à la mémoire, à l'écologie et à la transformation. La recherche s'appuie principalement sur le concept de matriculture, tandis qu'une perspective écoféministe lui confère une dimension écologique. On constate ainsi que le médium et le message sont liés l'un à l'autre.*

Mots-clés : Matriculture nigériane ; pratique des arts visuels ; symbolisme culturel ; femmes et transformation sociale ; recherche fondée sur les arts

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Introduction

The idea of matriculture was created by Marie-Françoise Guédon as an extension of the theory of culture as a system of symbols as articulated by Clifford Geertz (1973, p. 89). Geertz described culture as a system of symbolic heritage that is expressed in symbolic form and used to interpret reality and to direct social action. Thus, in the process of interpretation, the idea of culture is not restricted to social structures or institutions, but understood as a complex web that directs perception, action, and values. Symbols are not merely used to represent social reality; they actually contribute to its construction.

Matriculture is built on this theoretical base: Guédon describes matriculture as a set of symbols in a particular society connected with women, maternity, and femininity (Guédon, CfP n.d. p. 3). It is noteworthy that the concept of matriculture is not about a certain social form, such as matrilineality, matriarchy, or matrifocality. The concept is used to investigate the symbolic role of women in a society and, in this sense, every society has a matriculture, whether or not women hold dominant, marginalized, or ambiguous positions in the social structure. An important tenet of the matriculture analysis lies in the distinction drawn by Geertz between "culture as a model of reality" and "culture as a model for reality" (Geertz, 1973, p. 93). While the first refers to the manner in which a given society understands its social roles, relationships, and hierarchies, the latter refers to the manner in which a given society views its culture as a model to be emulated by its members. In the context of the matricultural approach, this distinction indicates the manner in which the symbolic construction of femininity both reflects the experience of women in a given society and defines the scope of their experience.

Thus, employing a matricultural heuristic shifts the focus of analysis beyond the participation of women in social, economic, or political systems to the symbolic codes that make such participation meaningful. Symbolic codes are present in a variety of areas, such as rituals, mythology, language, law, aesthetics, and everyday life. Repetition and cultural reinforcement cause symbolic associations related to women, such as care, fertility, sacrifice, endurance, or moral authority, to assume a normative character. The symbolic associations related to womanhood determine what behaviours by women are socially valued or devalued in that society. This focus on the symbolic character of matriculture sets it apart from structural or materialist analyses of gender. That is, structural analyses may show that women have access to resources or positions of power, whereas a matricultural analysis would explore the symbolic systems that justify or normalise such arrangements. In doing so, matricultural research acknowledges that symbolic systems can be as effective in maintaining inequality as economic or legal systems and that cultural

transformation begins with a transformation in meaning before institutional transformation is possible.

Within this conceptual understanding, visual art holds analytical interest. Artistic production can be understood as a site of symbolic condensation in which cultural meaning is materialized through form, colour, composition, texture, and image. Visual art may imitate matricultural codes that prevail within the culture; however, it may also deconstruct such codes through providing alternative symbolisms. By analyzing visual art in relation to matriculture, one should see art not only as representation but as an actor in the process of meaning-making. Thus, the use of the notion of matriculture in the context of artistic activity broadens its application beyond the ethnographic scope. Instead of concentrating on myths, kinship systems, and narratives of ritual, this perspective acknowledges the materiality of artistic production and visuality as symbolic systems. This expansion of the concept of matriculture has particular resonance in contemporary African contexts, in which historical, colonial, and postcolonial processes have redefined the symbolic construction of gender.

The use of a matricultural analysis of the visual art form allows for a complex examination of the ways in which the cultural meanings of the past intersect with the modern, the environmental, and gender. By using the concept of matriculture as a conceptual framework, the current study places emphasis on the symbolic architecture of women's lives as culturally constructed and understood, and the visual art form as a field of dynamic activity in which the systems of matriculture are revealed and re-imagined, thereby highlighting the value of the concept of matriculture as a form of interdisciplinary analysis.

In this study, matriculture is therefore used not simply as a conceptual description of women's cultural position but as an analytical heuristic for reading the visual and material systems through which femininity, labour, care, memory, ecological responsibility, and agency are constructed. The analysis will take into account the symbols present in the paintings, the cultural associations of those symbols, and how the images in terms of form and materiality reinforce, renegotiate, or rewrite the meanings associated with those symbols which are inherited with regard to women. It is this method that allows for the analysis of the paintings as spaces of matriculture and not examples of a pre-existing theory.

Matriculture as a cultural and analytical concept

The concept of matriculture has been useful in the study of visual arts, since culture does not manifest itself merely through verbal discourse. Culture also manifests itself through

gestures, artifacts, actions, space, colour, material, and symbols. The carrying of a basket on one's head, for instance, can simultaneously be an artifact of labour, a symbol of sustenance, and a symbol of a culturally transmitted activity. Moreover, the image of hands holding the earth could be used to express messages of caring and environmental conservation beyond the mere depiction. This concept therefore offers a way of studying how symbols contribute towards the construction and transmission of cultural meanings with regard to women and their connection to family, community, environment, memory, and continuity.

The distinction between "culture as a model of reality" and "culture as a model for reality" made by Geertz (1973 p. 93) is especially relevant in this context. Cultural symbols are not only representations of the existing social order, but also serve as models that help people comprehend, reproduce, negotiate, or change the social order. When used in terms of visual representation, the above distinctions make it possible to analyse the paintings used in this research not only as representations of agriculture's social reality but also as alternatives to it.

Therefore, the analysis of matriculture within the context of this research is undertaken in terms of three interrelated questions. The first question concerns the symbols, gestures, objects, bodies, and material formations that make up the visual language of each painting. The second question relates to the cultural associations and value systems contained within the visual language. The third question involves whether or not the painting reproduces, engages with, or redefines the meanings of the Nigerian cultural value systems.

The paintings in this study are not treated as isolated aesthetic works: each painting is interpreted in its relationship to specific cultural meanings. The analysis is based on women's positioning with regard to Nigerian notions of labour, nourishment, embodiment, memory, environment, community, technical knowledge, and cultural continuity. Much emphasis is laid on recurrent motifs in the paintings, including vessels, fruit, hands, the Earth, threads, frames, machine shapes, and the female body. The meaning of these motifs lies not so much in their formal nature as in the cultural relationships they create in each particular painting.

In this regard, matriculture can be defined as a process rather than an institution and not only about the preservation of traditional imageries of women. While some of the paintings confirm traditional symbolic connections between women and nurturing care, others challenge them. In this way, the matricultural heuristic allows for an identification of both the empowering *and* restricting aspects of cultural symbolism. Such a distinction is very important, since the reverence for women as nurturers and supporters of community

may recognize their significance and, at the same time, may impose the invisibility of duty upon them.

The chosen works therefore create a series whereby meanings of matriculture can be analysed as they shift from labour and provisioning toward issues of collective identity, ecology, cultural memory, storytelling, and technology. In this respect, the studio functions as a space where inherited cultural meanings are not simply represented but also subjected to visual scrutiny and possible rethinking.

Ecofeminism as a supporting perspective

Ecofeminism in this research is used as a secondary theoretical framework. The importance of an ecofeminist analysis here is mainly in its ability to bring forth the connections between gender, environmental accountability, embodied knowledge, and caring systems. Ecofeminist researchers have been challenging cultural systems in which women and nature become objects of exploitation, while at the same time highlighting the relational perspective of ecological existence (Plumwood, 1993, p. 47; Shiva, 1988, p. 47).

In this current study, however, ecofeminism becomes an important analytical tool in those cases where artworks relate female identity to environmental care and material sustainability. *Hands That Hold the Earth*, for instance, creates a visual link between the hand of the human being and the Earth, and makes care into ecological action rather than domestic behaviour. In the same way, the environmental motivations of creating Etimpaste expand the ecological theme from the realm of depiction to that of studio practice.

Ecofeminism thus supplements the matricultural perspective by focusing on the connection between care, embodiment, environment, and material sustainability. Ecofeminism does not supersede the matricultural perspective as the main mode of analysis. Rather, it offers another perspective in those instances where ecological themes become important elements in the visual and material evidence.

Practice-based research and artistic epistemology

The theory of practice-based research legitimates the practice of art as a means of knowledge production. Sullivan (2010) argues that art practice constitutes a kind of inquiry, which produces knowledge not accessible through discourse. Barrett & Bolt (2007) highlight the reflexive character of practice-based research, while Smith & Dean (2009) describe the relationship between theory and practice as iterative. Candy &

Edmonds (2018) describe practice-based research as a means of creating a kind of knowledge as material. Practice-based research underpins the methodological approach taken in this research, where the artworks do not function as examples but as sites of knowledge. As a consequence, matriculture is not only theoretically but also physically explored.

Practice-led inquiry and material experimentation

This research undertakes a practice-led approach to its methodology, wherein the production of a work of art functions as both a form of investigative practice and an epistemic outcome. Practice-led research overcomes the traditional positivist distinction between subject and object by highlighting the embedded position of the artist-researcher as a cultural agent whose knowledge production takes the form of iterative cycles of production and reflection (Barrett & Bolt, 2007; Sullivan, 2010). While positivist forms of research position the work of art as a form of illustration of pre-existing theory, practice-led research, as a methodology, recognizes the work of art as a form of production that gives rise to theory (Smith & Dean, 2009).

Knowledge production as a type of outcome takes the form of material engagement, wherein the production of the work of art functions as a form of thinking through materials, as Ingold (2013) suggests. Here, the relationship between intention, control, and the unanticipated becomes a dialogue. For example, the development of Etimpaste as an eco-friendly form of painting medium functions as a way to challenge the environmental impact of traditional forms of artistic materials. The methodological structure of the article operates across three interconnected phases:

1. Material innovation (development of Etimpaste)
2. Iterative studio experimentation (texture vs. dilution)
3. Reflexive visual analysis (thematic and theoretical interpretation)

Material as method

Etimpaste is not considered here as a neutral substrate, but rather as a methodological tool. This is due to the fact that, according to feminist materialist theory, which recognizes the agency of matter (as opposed to its inertness) (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010), the process of material experimentation is considered as an epistemological practice. Moreover, the change in the viscosity of the Etimpaste, from dense and impasto to diluted and translucent, is not considered as a technical change but rather as an epistemological practice related to issues such as weight, memory, and change. Furthermore, the dense and impasto Etimpaste is related to issues such as the tactile and the issues of the body

and labour, while the diluted and translucent Etimpaste is related to issues such as memory, narrative rewriting, and interdependencies, which are related to the ecological.

This is in accordance with Candy and Edmonds (2018), who describe the process of research through the act of creating. From this perspective, the production of insights is considered to be the result of the iterative cycles of action and critical reflection.

Reflexive analysis and theoretical integration

Next, the artwork is subjected to reflexive visual analysis, drawing on matriculture, feminist political economy, African visual epistemologies, and ecology (Federici, 2012; Fraser, 2016; Mbembe, 2001; Kagan, 2011). This is not an analysis of the artwork as an object, but as a site that is constantly being negotiated. The analysis attends to:

i. Compositional structure
ii. Symbolic motifs
iii. Material behaviour
iv. Thematic progression
v. Socio-cultural resonance

This reflective aspect is in keeping with the proposition by Sullivan (2010) that artistic production produces complex knowledge structures that exist and function at the same time on an experiential, conceptual, and critical level.

Ethical and ecological positioning

Etimpaste becomes an additional aspect of the methodology, one pertaining to ethics. Sustainable material development is closely connected with the notion of ecological art in terms of the necessity to use ecologically safe production methods (Gablik, 1991; Kagan, 2011). In such a way, the issue of sustainability becomes not only the theme of a piece of art, such as *Hands That Hold the Earth*, but a core process of the methodology as well. In this example, there is no difference between the medium and the message of the piece of art.

From studio to society

Ultimately, this methodology places the studio as a locus of cultural intervention. Through a series of iterative processes, the research offers a model of the ways in which practice-led research can offer a form of critical understanding of the symbolism of matriculture, gender, environmentalism, and futurity. The artist-researcher-author does not observe

culture but becomes a participant in it through a series of material and symbolic negotiations. In this way, the very act of the studio becomes a form of methodology and argument itself.

Analytical framework

The analytical framework is established through the lens of matriculture, which draws on the distinction made by Geertz (1973) between culture as a model *of* reality and a model *for* reality. Three interrelated aspects of the interpretive matrix are considered:

1. Materiality and Symbolic Labour
   This concerns the ways in which the materials used, as well as the textures, and processes employed in the artworks, carry symbolic meanings related to womanhood.

2. Representation and Cultural Positioning
   This refers to the ways in which the representations of the female figures, their gestures and spatial relations, and the hierarchical composition of the artworks may be understood as placing the woman within the symbolic space of the piece.

3. Transformative Potential
   This concerns the ways in which the work of art may be understood as a model of reality and the potential it offers to propose alternative forms of social reality related to gender, agency, and value.

Reflexivity and positionality

In the capacity as the visual artist and the researcher embedded in the cultural context that is the focus of this research, the author occupies a position both as a cultural producer and an analyst of symbolic forms. This positionality is recognized as an essential feature in the research process. Detachment is not a feature that the research aims to achieve; instead, it seeks reflexivity in the research process, as it is recognized that cultural representation is a product of embodied experience, cultural intention, and historical location. Reflexivity in the research process reduces the danger of essentialism in the representation of women and the concept of matriculture. Rather, it highlights the dynamic nature of matriculture as a product of colonial history, postcolonial transformations, and the current socio-economic situation.

Ethical considerations

This research does not involve human subjects, but ethical considerations are relevant in the representation of cultures. Caution is exercised in the representation of 'African' womanhood as a monolithic category and in the application of essentialist notions of femininity. Complexity, diversity, and multiplicity in cultural representation are recognized in the research process. Symbolic references to common cultural motifs are treated in a culturally sensitive manner.

Methodological contribution

By combining matricultural theory and practice-based artistic research, this methodology has the ability to extend the boundaries of matriculture beyond the realm of ethnography. This methodology demonstrates the viability of the use of visual art as a legitimate site of analysis in relation to the study of the symbolic and the feminine in relation to women.

Matricultural Analysis of the Selected Paintings

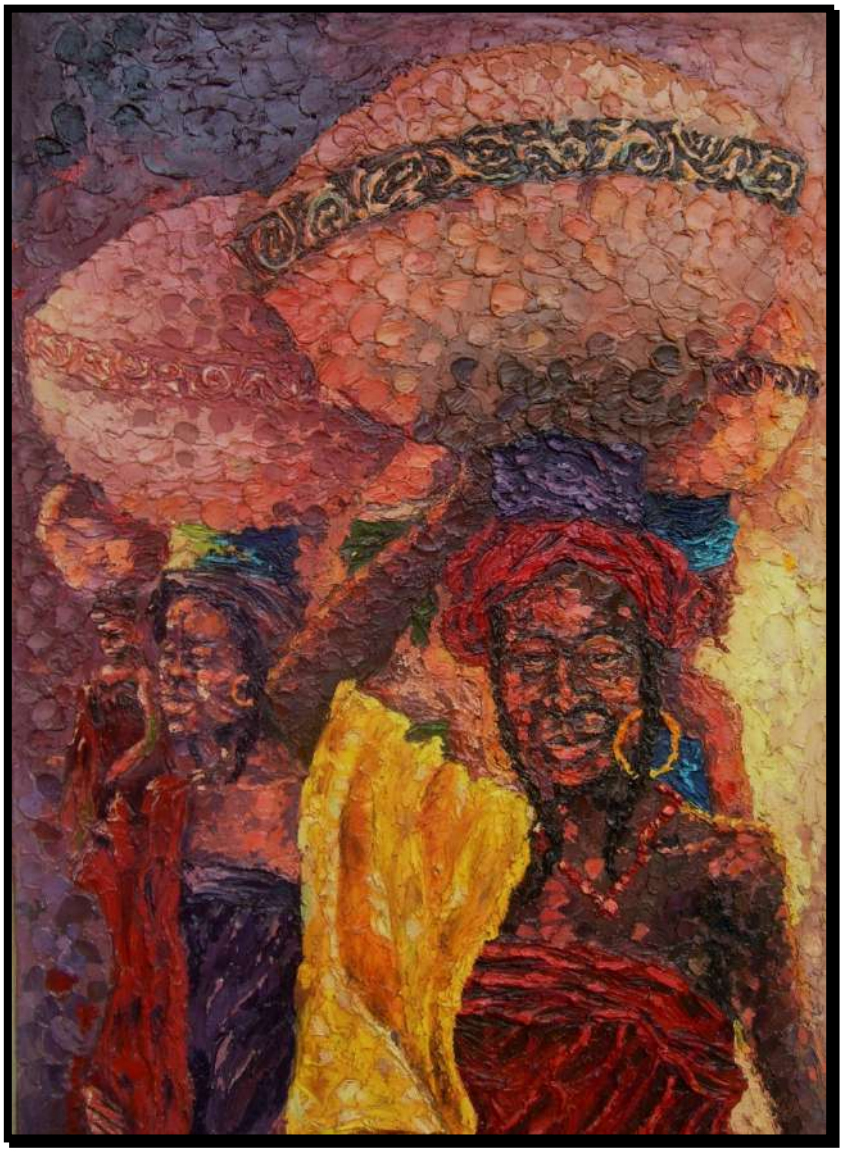
The eight paintings described in this part of the study were created by the researcher from 2007 until 2026. They mark distinct moments in the progression of the researcher's involvement in matricultural ideas, material exploration, and representations of the labour, care, memory, identity, and agency of women. Thus, the analyses take into account the artworks not only as visual artifacts but also as research results.

Visual matricultural symbol matrix

Painting	Principal visual elements	Matricultural concern
Milk Maids	Women, vessels, head-carrying	Labour, nourishment, communal sustenance
Fruit-bearer	Female body, fruit, vessel	Provision, fertility, embodied cultural value
Beauty in Diversity	Women, ethnic dress, collective formation	Cultural plurality and solidarity
The Innovators and the Space Fish	Women, mechanical forms, tools, fish, cosmic imagery	Intellectual agency, innovation and futurity
Hands That Hold the Earth	Hands, earth, organic forms	Ecological care and stewardship
Bearer of Worlds	Female figure, world-bearing	Responsibility, relationality and

Painting	Principal visual elements	Matricultural concern
	imagery	continuity
Threads of Memory	Threads, overlapping forms	Cultural memory and intergenerational transmission
Rewriting the Frame	Female figure, frame, fluid boundaries	Agency, visibility and cultural transformation

Milk Maids



Title: *Milk Maids*
Year: 2007
Medium: Etimpaste
Dimensions: 2'x 3'

The painting *Milk Maids* serves as an entry point into a matricultural framework by situating women within a visible economy of physical labour, nourishment, and communal sustenance. Instead of presenting care in its passive, purely domestic, and biological sense, the image portrays care as a structured and skilled social activity which is critical for the sustainability of communal existence.

i. Containers and Physical Infrastructure: The large containers on top of the women's heads serve as important cultural artifacts which signify work, duty, and social continuity. The process of carrying converts the woman's body into a physical infrastructure – an instrument which connects the productive spaces with community spaces.

ii. Embodied Cultural Knowledge: The vertical stance of the figures shows learned physical balance, coordination, and endurance. Head carrying is illustrated as embodied cultural knowledge, that is, practical knowledge that has been passed down across generations through observation and practice, and which is critical to communal survival.

iii. Collective Identity vs. Individual Struggle: The lack of specific features on the figures redirects attention away from the individual identity of the figures to an embodiment of the work performed by women collectively. Although this reveals collective experiences of society, it also reveals a significant contradiction, that of the potential loss of identity in gendered roles.

iv. Textural and Material Resonance: The physical application of textured Etimpaste mirrors the subject matter. The thick, tactile layers of the medium give physical weight to concepts of accumulation, endurance, and earth, visually reinforcing the effort required by the labouring figures.

v. Broader Ecological Networks: The women's work is integrated within a wider ecological system linking physical bodies, animals, agricultural resources, and communal survival.

Ultimately, *Milk Maids* reveals four interconnected symbolic systems within the matricultural heuristic:

Matricultural Symbolic System	**Nigerian Cultural Function**
The Vessel	Symbolizes nourishment, provisioning, and social responsibility.
The Act of Carrying	Demonstrates embodied labour and inherited practical knowledge.
The Female Body	Acts as the infrastructure sustaining community life.
Reduced Individuality	Highlights the tension between cultural value and gendered expectation.

Fruit-bearer



Title: *Fruit-bearer*
Year: 2012
Medium: Etimpaste
Dimensions: 3’ x 1.5’

In *Fruit-bearer*, the matriculture outlined in the previous painting, *Milk Maids*, is expanded upon by shifting the focus from women’s labour to the link between the woman’s body, nutrition, fecundity, and culture. Where *Milk Maids* centred women’s labour in an economy external to their bodies, in *Fruit-bearer* the economy of sustenance becomes internalized within the body itself, making the figure herself one that nourishes.

i. Symbolism of the ‘Bowl of Fruit’ as the Central Image of the Painting: The fruit symbolizes agricultural plenty, growth, and continuity of the whole process including cultivation, harvesting, transportation, and consumption of the produce. As a direct burden on top of the woman’s head, the load turns the woman’s body

into a means of material and cultural support. In this painting, the act of provision is presented not as something outside of women's culture, but rather as her cultural responsibility.

ii. Fertility as an Ambivalent Issue: The combination of fruit with the female body introduces themes of fertility, ripening, and motherhood, but the visual text of the painting excludes any human features from the figure. On the one hand, the painting glorifies the female body for its role as life-bringer. On the other hand, it questions the implications of such cultural symbolism for individual identity.

iii. Collective Archetype Over Individual Biography**:** Like *Milk Maids*, the loss or diminishment of facial specificities means that the painting cannot be considered a traditional portrait. The subject serves both as an individual woman and as a cultural archetype. She is known for what she does, not who she is; thus, she runs the risk of becoming culturally anonymous.

iv. Shift from Collective to Individual Representation: Where *Milk Maids* depicts several women sharing labour, *Fruit-bearer* concentrates this symbolic burden onto a single figure, illustrating how widespread cultural expectations of care and provision become concentrated on individual women.

v. Textural Materiality (Etimpaste): The dense, tactile application of Etimpaste gives physical weight to the figure and fruit alike. Rather than presenting a smooth, idealized, or objectified body for visual consumption, the thick, accumulated medium emphasizes corporeality, physical presence, and the real weight of cultural responsibility.

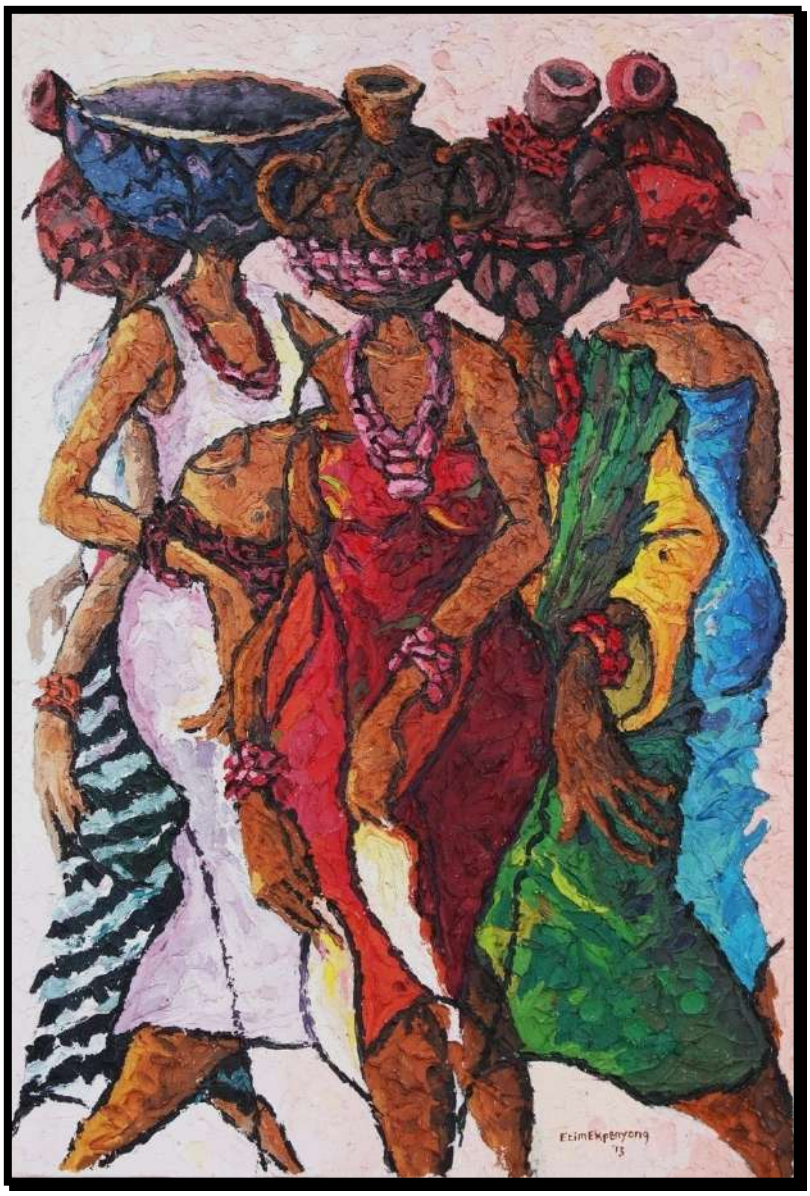
Within the matricultural heuristic, *Fruit-bearer* is defined by four interconnected systems:

Matricultural Symbolic System	**Nigerian Cultural Function**
The Fruit	Symbolizes nourishment, agricultural abundance, and life continuity.
The Act of Bearing	Represents embodied responsibility and culturally transmitted labour.
The Female Body	Functions as a site where expectations of care, fertility, and

Matricultural Symbolic System	Nigerian Cultural Function
	provision concentrate.
Symbolic Ambivalence	Highlights the tension between cultural reverence and individual anonymity.

In the end, *Fruit-bearer* moves toward the larger theme of matriculture as a whole. Whereas *Milk Maids* presents women as being vital labourers in an economy of feeding, *Fruit-bearer* demonstrates how the idea of nurturing sustenance is written on the body of woman herself. This poses the crucial question that will be developed through the rest of the series: How do you maintain cultural acknowledgement of the nurturing nature of women while avoiding the reduction of womanhood to the role of nurturer?

Beauty in Diversity



Title: *Beauty in Diversity*
Year: 2013
Medium: Etimpaste on canvas
Dimensions: 2.5’ x 3.5’

The theme of *Beauty in Diversity* transforms the focus of the matricultural analysis from the themes of individual work (*Milk Maids*) and individual expectations (*Fruit-bearer*) into that of collective identity and intercultural community and solidarity. Through combining individuals of different ethnic origins, differentiated by their distinctive costumes and physical appearances, in one single picture, the matricultural cultural system appears as alive, able to embrace differences and relations between its parts.

i. Ethnic Diversity and Co-existence: As opposed to imposing uniformity on the feminine culture, the picture stresses the diversity of the cultures. Ethnic diversity is presented not as a source of divisions, but rather as the basis of mutual recognition and cooperation beyond the family circle.

ii. Relational Identity and Solidarity: Placed in close proximity, the figures generate a rhythm of interdependence that moves beyond individual portraitures to a sense of structural interdependence. Individual identity is understood only in terms of relationships with others, which indicates a matricultural concept of solidarity that is achieved through the acknowledgment of differences.

iii. Recontextualizing the Vessel Theme: Although the repetition of the theme of carrying vessels links the painting to the previous images, its significance transforms into something different. Whereas the vessel in *Milk Maids* represented economic work and in *Fruit-bearer*, it symbolizes body-fertility and anticipation, in *Beauty in Diversity*, it stands for a cultural sign uniting different women.

iv. Embodied Cultural Knowledge and Agency: Clothing, body posture, and carrying techniques are cultural knowledge embodied in the form. The women take an active part in the organization of the pictorial space.

v. Material Interconnectedness (Etimpaste): The dense, layered surface of Etimpaste mirrors the conceptual core of the work. Individual textural marks merge into a unified material field, visually paralleling how distinct individual identities construct a cohesive social structure.

Within the matricultural heuristic, *Beauty in Diversity* reveals four key symbolic relationships:

Matricultural Symbolic System	**Nigerian Cultural Function**
Ethnic Differentiation	Functions as a marker of cultural identity, heritage, and plurality.
Shared Carrying Practice	Connects diverse figures through common embodied labor and sustenance.
Collective	Transforms isolated individuals into a structure of solidarity

Matricultural Symbolic System	Nigerian Cultural Function
Arrangement	and relational agency.
Coexistence of Difference	Proposes a dynamic model of communal continuity capable of social transformation.

The theme of *Beauty in Diversity* is one that represents a crucial turning point in the wider canon. Instead of remaining only a vessel carrying the burdens of labour and/or reproduction, the subject here becomes a player in the inter-cultural web. Though the women still bear vessels, they now do so collectively, transforming the previously isolated/gendered burden into a collaborative endeavour.

The Innovators and the Space Fish



Title: *The Innovators and the Space Fish*
Year: 2014
Medium: Mixed media on canvas (including eco-material composite)
Dimensions: 90 cm x120 cm

The Innovators and the Space Fish represents the point of no return for matriculture in the development of the corpus. Whereas previously in the corpus, the focus has been on labour (*Milk Maids*), body-oriented expectations (*Fruit-bearer*), and unity (*Beauty in*

Diversity), the present painting moves the scope of matriculture into innovation, intellectual labour, technology, teamwork, and the future.

i. Intellectual Collaboration and Agency: Expanding the communal aspect developed in *Beauty in Diversity*, here we see a community of collaborative women knowledge workers. Innovation here is not seen as something that belongs to a solitary (male) genius, but as an interactive and collaborative activity that fits perfectly well within the paradigm of matriculture.

ii. Hybrid Symbolism (Gear-Heads and Tools): Here, we see mechanical gears integrated in the heads of the female characters, thus symbolically merging female intelligence with technological intelligence. It does not mean that the women are being dehumanized – quite the contrary, in fact: the tools they hold prove that they are capable of shaping the physical world around them.

iii. Space Fish and Eco-feminist Synthesis: In *The Innovators and the Space Fish*, traditional ideas of nurturing and sustenance are carried into space from *Milk Maids* and *Fruit-bearer*. A productive tension exists between the mechanical gears and the fish. It implies that technological progress is not necessarily environmentally insensitive but can be present with environmental consciousness.

iv. Expanded Cultural Geography and Futurity: Set within a cosmic framework, the work liberates female identity from domestic or rural confines. By naming the figures 'innovators,' the painting defines women by what they create rather than what they sustain or reproduce, positioning futurity itself as an essential act of cultural agency.

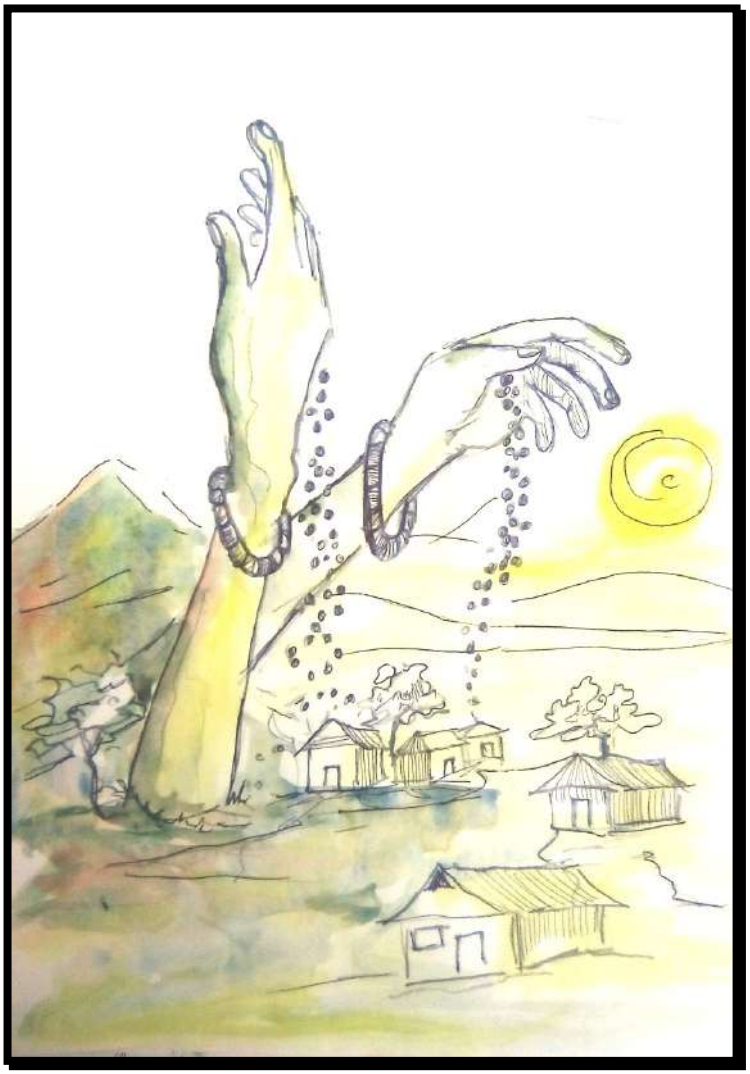
v. Material Innovation (Etimpaste): The experimental medium of Etimpaste directly mirrors the thematic focus on creation, establishing a harmony between represented technological invention and material artistic practice.

Within the matricultural heuristic, *The Innovators and the Space Fish* operates across four interconnected systems:

Matricultural Symbolic System	Nigerian Cultural Function
Mechanical gears integrated into the heads of the female figures	Connects women's intelligence with technological knowledge, challenging assumptions that innovation and technical expertise belong primarily to men.
Tools held by the female figures	Represents practical skill, productive labour, and women's capacity to create, repair, and transform their material environment.
The space fish	Connects the imagery of sustenance and living organisms with technological experimentation, suggesting that innovation can remain attentive to ecological relationships.
Female figures working together within the cosmic setting	Presents women as collaborative knowledge producers whose intellectual and creative agency extends beyond conventional domestic roles towards new social and technological possibilities.

Ultimately, *The Innovators and the Space Fish* transitions the corpus from asking how women sustain existing worlds to asking how they can create new ones. It proves that matricultural values—care, relationality, and ecological responsibility—are not backward-looking, but can serve as the foundation for modern technological and speculative futures, setting up the subsequent focus on ecological stewardship in *Hands That Hold the Earth*.

Hands that Hold the Earth



Title: *Hands that Hold the Earth*
Year: 2026
Medium: Etimpaste on Paper
Dimensions: 12” x 8”

Hands That Hold the Earth brings ecological stewardship directly into the matricultural framework. While earlier works focus on nourishment (*Milk Maids*), body-bound expectations (*Fruit-bearer*), solidarity (*Beauty in Diversity*), and technological agency (*The Innovators and the Space Fish*), this painting turns toward the fundamental planetary conditions necessary for social and cultural survival. Care shifts from an interpersonal or domestic labour into a broad, collective ecological responsibility.

i. Holding as Stewardship: The central motif—human hands cradling the Earth—transforms the planet from a distant object into a vulnerable entity requiring

protection. In contrast to gestures of grasping, exploiting, or extracting, 'holding' implies attentiveness, preservation, and temporary custodianship.

ii. The Scaling of Carrying: There is a scaling up of the act of carrying through the entire corpus: Carrying the milk in containers (*Milk Maids*) and carrying fruit (*Fruit-bearer)* to the extent of physically carrying the planet itself. The scale of matricultural nurturing goes from localized sustenance to planetary survival.

iii. The Avoidance of Gender Essentialism: It is emphasized that the painting does not imply any biological connection between women and nature but makes use of cultural stereotypes related to nurturing in order to formulate the universal moral ethos. Drawing from the tradition of ecofeminism, the painting uses the relational approach to replace hierarchical relations between humans and nature.

iv. The Collective Responsibility: The use of the word 'hands' in the title of the painting suggests a collective human responsibility as opposed to individual and gender-based obligations. Thus, the concept of a chain is clear:

Care → Stewardship → Continuity → Intergenerational Responsibility

v. Fluidity through Diluted Etimpaste: In contrast to the highly textural appearance of previous paintings, the current painting makes use of Etimpaste that was diluted with water. The translucent quality of the painting medium gives rise to visual connections with water and fluidity.

Within the matricultural heuristic, *Hands That Hold the Earth* operates across four core dimensions:

Matricultural Symbolic System	**Nigerian Cultural Function**
Hands holding the Earth	Represents care, protection, and responsibility for sustaining the conditions that support human and communal life.
The relationship between the hands and the globe	Connects human responsibility with the natural environment, extending care beyond the household to ecological stewardship.

Matricultural Symbolic System	**Nigerian Cultural Function**
The merging or blurred boundaries between the hands and the Earth	Suggests the interdependence of humanity and nature, challenging the idea that the environment exists separately from human life.
The translucent, flowing application of Etimpaste	Visually reinforces connectedness and permeability, supporting an interpretation of ecological care as an ongoing relationship rather than a one-time act.

The painting represents an important point in the thematic development of the corpus: Women sustain humanity; Women are symbols of continuity; Women create solidarity; Women create innovations; Humanity should maintain the earth. Through transforming the metaphorical role of women as sustainers of human worlds to that of humanity as sustainers of a common world, *Hands That Hold the Earth* establishes the theoretical framework for the painting *Bearer of Worlds*.

Bearer of Worlds



Title: *Bearer of Worlds*
Year: 2026
Medium: Etimpaste on paper
Dimensions: 12” x 8”

Bearer of Worlds extends the idea of matriculture by turning the notion of ‘bearing’ into an abstract reflection on the responsibility for carrying things socially, culturally, emotionally, and relationally. Where other art works tackle visible labour (*Milk Maids*), physically bound obligations (*Fruit-bearer*), unity (*Beauty in Diversity*), innovation (*The Innovators and the Space Fish*), and ecology (*Hands That Hold the Earth*), *Bearer of Worlds* makes visible what remains unseen, what is not counted in the infrastructure of community existence.

i. ‘Worlds’ as an Extended Responsibility: The ‘worlds’ which are carried refer to non-physical environments such as families, cultural memories, relationships, traditions, and ways of knowing. Here the female body acts as the structure upon which these various scales of continuity rest and moves care from biological maternity into cultural creation.

ii. The Balance Between Honor and Responsibility: Acknowledging women as the bearers of worlds recognizes their fundamental social contributions; however, it also points to a narrow cultural responsibility that women have by nature to carry the emotional and social load.

iii. Conceptual Condensation of the Corpus: The work gathers all preceding thematic scales into a single metaphor—incorporating nourishment (*Milk Maids/Fruit-bearer*), culture (*Beauty in Diversity*), knowledge (*The Innovators and the Space Fish*), and ecology (*Hands That Hold the Earth*).

iv. Translucency of Diluted Etimpaste: Executed in a diluted, watercolour-like Etimpaste formulation, the painting’s translucent surface visually mirrors its central concept. Unlike the heavy texture that represents physical work in earlier paintings, this lighter material quality emphasizes intangible, hard-to-see responsibilities like emotional labour, memory, and relational care.

v. Temporal Agency and Continuity: Positioned between inheritance and futurity, the bearer carries past practices into the present while deciding what to transmit forward. This temporal bridging frames cultural continuity as an active process of both preservation and transformation.

Bearer of Worlds identifies four interconnected symbolic systems within the matricultural heuristic:

Matricultural Symbolic System	**Nigerian Cultural Function**
The Female Bearer	Frames the female figure as a structural foundation while questioning the weight of expected burdens.
The Vessels Balanced on Her Head	Makes visible emotional, cultural, and relational labour beyond formal economic production.

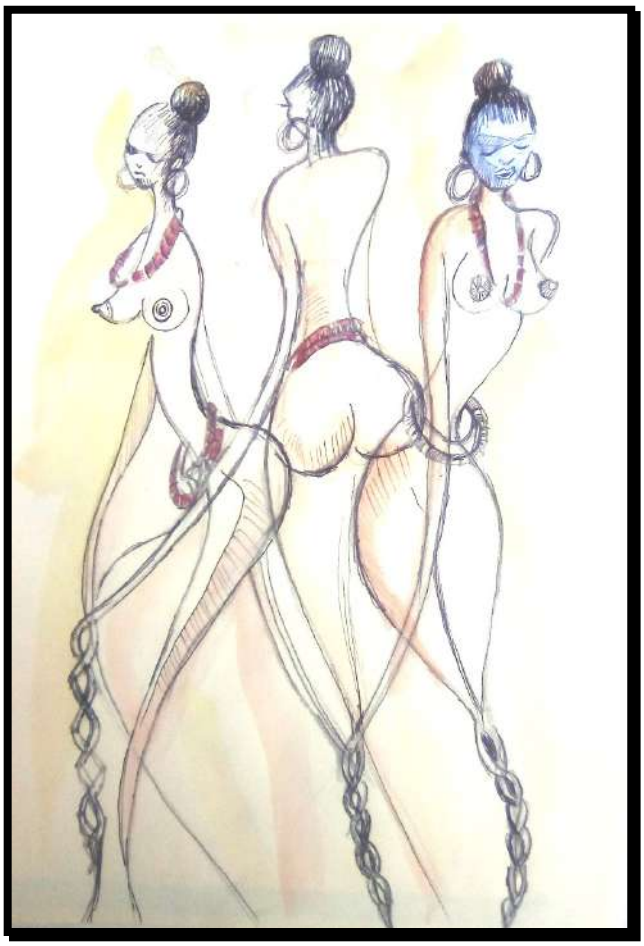
Matricultural Symbolic System	**Nigerian Cultural Function**
The Children on Her Back	The bearer and the 'worlds' signify continuity, relationality, and intergenerational transmission.
The Agricultural Instrument and Book in Her Hands	Positions the subject as an active agent who interprets, adapts, and reconfigures inherited worlds.

Consequently, *Bearer of Worlds* becomes the culmination of the thematic integration in the series:

Milk Maids (Labour) : *Fruit-bearer* (Embodiment) : *Beauty in Diversity* (Plurality): *The Innovators and the Space Fish* (Knowledge) : *Hands That Hold the Earth* (Ecology) : *Bearer of Worlds* (Relational Responsibility)

This turns the endurance of women into an active cultural role, one that shows that people bearing the inherited world have absolute authority over determining which aspects should remain, change, or be carried to the next generation.

Threads of Memory



Title: *Threads of Memory*
Year: 2026
Medium: Etimpaste on Paper
Dimensions: 12” x 8”

Threads of Memory serves as a pivotal conceptual development in the series, expanding the idea of matriculture from being a physical burden of carrying cultural worlds to the process of remembering, transmitting, reconstructing, and transporting them into the future. Not perceiving memory as a static and passive representation of the past, but rather as an ongoing practice of applying inherited knowledge in life.

i. Thread as a Metaphor for Cultural Transmission: In the dominant metaphor of the work, thread stands for connection, continuity, weaving, and transmission. The concept of a thread is derived from the property of connecting points; when interwoven with other threads, it makes a strong fabric. In terms of matriculture, this metaphor demonstrates the interconnection between individual, family, daily, and common memories throughout time.

ii. Embodied Knowledge: Cultural transmission does not usually depend only on formal institutions or writing. Rather, it is something that exists in everyday embodied practice – craft-making, household work, storytelling, food ways, ritual practices, and artistic performances. The thread shows the process of transmission of practical knowledge or 'ways of doing' across generations.

iii. Invisible Work of Continuity: Memory and transmission of culture involve hard work and constant attention to detail. Through this work, the process reveals the invisible work done for continuity of communal identity.

iv. Agency in Reinterpretation: The women are shown not as passive preservers of an immutable past, but as active agents in transmitting culture to the future. Since memory always involves a process of choosing and interpretation, they exercise agency in determining how the inherited knowledge finds its way into the present and adapts to changed conditions.

v. Materiality and Formal Analogy: The form and execution of *Threads of Memory* are directly reflective of its concept. Unlike the thick and heavy application of Etimpaste that we see in *Milk Maids*, where the material reflects weight and physical labour, this work uses a diluted version of the same paste, making it more fluid and translucent.

   This is directly analogous to the nature of memories. They do not stay fixed but tend to overlap and shift over time. Past experiences influence present actions, and present conditions change the significance of past events. The translucent and overlapping layers of the material allow visual elements to overlap without clear boundaries, indicating that culture is an interlinked field of experience rather than distinct compartments.

vi. Ambivalence and Temporal Belonging: *Threads of Memory* further develops the theme of productive ambiguity introduced in *Fruit-bearer* and *Bearer of Worlds*. In making women into the keepers of culture's memory, the important role played by women in the social context is emphasized, but at the same time there is a possibility of imposing societal duties on women. The text does not reduce this complex duality of recognition and duty to a binary opposition. Rather, *Threads of Memory* changes the concept of belonging. Belonging to a culture means being a part of a relational chain which connects us to our past, to our history, and our future generations. Yet, this chain is neither linear nor continuous, and threads can be connected, untangled, and knotted again.

vii. Structural Sequence and Conceptual Progression: In the larger context of the study, *Threads of Memory* serves to form a critical transitional element:

Milk Maids (Labour) : *Fruit-bearer* (Embodiment) : *Beauty in Diversity* (Plurality) : *The Innovators and the Space Fish* (Knowledge) : *Hands That Hold the Earth* (Ecology) : *Bearer of Worlds* (Relational Responsibility) : *Threads of Memory* (Active Memory & Transmission)

Within the matricultural heuristic, *Threads of Memory* operates across four core dimensions:

Matricultural Symbolic System	**Nigerian Cultural Function**
Thread or thread-like lines	Symbolises connection and the transmission of knowledge, memories, and cultural practices across generations.
Interwoven or overlapping thread forms	Represents the relationships among individual, family, and communal memories that contribute to cultural continuity.
Female figures associated with the threads	Positions women as participants in the preservation, interpretation, and transmission of cultural knowledge rather than merely passive carriers of tradition.
Translucent and overlapping layers of Etimpaste	Suggests that memory is fluid and open to reinterpretation, allowing inherited meanings to be adapted to changing circumstances.

The above progression shows how the concept of matriculture works on increasingly large scales, from the body to the planet itself, and then to the temporal scale of memory. *Threads of Memory* links the idea of carrying the structures that already exist (*Bearer of Worlds*) to the idea of rewriting those structures (*Rewriting the Frame*). In the end, the painting makes clear that cultural memory is both an inheritance and a responsibility—to remember what is given to you, but also to decide what to pass down.

Rewriting the Frame



Title: *Rewriting the Frame*
Year: 2026
Medium: Etimpaste on paper
Dimensions: 12” x 8”

Rewriting the Frame represents the intellectual apex of the whole collection. Where previous works have analysed issues related to labour, embodiment, community, innovation, ecology, responsibility, and memory, *Rewriting the Frame* focuses on the system of representation itself. Instead of asking what women do inside cultural boundaries, it asks how women are positioned, valued, and represented within the visual frames that define those boundaries.

i. The Frame: Cultural Boundaries. The primary symbol of the painting, the frame itself, is the metaphor of cultural limits passed down through generations. In a literal sense, the frame is a definition of what is included and what is excluded; figuratively, the frame determines which roles are culturally legitimate and which kinds of work are unrecognized. To ‘rewrite’ the frame means to intervene actively

and assert that cultural conventions are historical and negotiable. This shifts the framework established in *Threads of Memory*.

ii. Memory preserves, Interpretation negotiates, Rewriting transforms. Continuity does not demand static repetition; instead, a cultural system maintains true vitality through its capacity to adapt, allowing women to act not merely as custodians of inherited tradition, but as active authors of its future.

iii. Redefining Agency, Anonymity, and Visibility: The motif of the reduction or the masking of the faces of women is an important one in the overall body of work. Although anonymity enables a subject to take on the archetypal quality of being universally representative, it also runs the risk of erasing individuality from a particular role-playing subject. *Rewriting the Frame* highlights this problematic in order to make an essential move forward:

Woman as Cultural Symbol : Woman as Cultural Subject : Woman as Cultural Author

Rewriting the Frame does not merely celebrate the contributions made by women through their labour; rather, it poses an important question: who has the power to dictate what constituents of women's labour are deserving of recognition?

iv. Material Permeability through Fluid Etimpaste: The process of execution is carried out using a dilute form of Etimpaste to give an effect similar to watercolors that have a translucent, fluid, and permeable quality. The selection of this medium is a direct reflection of the theme of transformation:

Impasto (*Milk Maids / Fruit-bearer*): Physical weight, effort, and accumulation
to
Translucency (*Bearer of Worlds / Threads of Memory / Rewriting the Frame*): Overlapping memories, permeability, and fluid boundaries.

The fluid nature of the dilute Etimpaste denies any form of boundary, thus visually proving the idea that culture and representation may be transformed.

Within the matricultural heuristic, *Threads of Memory* operates across four core dimensions:

Matricultural Symbolic System	Nigerian Cultural Function
The frame or framing structure	Represents inherited cultural boundaries that influence which identities, roles, and activities receive recognition.
The female figure in relation to the frame	Draws attention to how women are positioned within cultural systems of representation and how their identities may be shaped by those systems.
The visual relationship between the figure and the frame	Suggests the possibility of questioning or negotiating established expectations about women's social roles and cultural identities.
The act or visual suggestion of rewriting the frame	Represents women's agency in reinterpreting inherited cultural meanings and participating in the creation of alternative representations for the future.

The shift marked by *Rewriting the Frame* transforms female agency from participation within existing systems to direct intervention in those systems.

Discussion

Comparing Matricultural Patterns Across the Paintings

The early works (*Milk Maids*, *Fruit-bearer*) portray women actively involved in and maintaining cultural systems. *Rewriting the Frame*, however, extends the conversation by portraying women actively questioning and transforming the cultural systems.

Earlier Works	*Rewriting the Frame*
Women participate in cultural systems	Women question cultural systems
Women sustain inherited traditions	Women reconsider inherited traditions
Women carry cultural meanings	Women reinterpret cultural meanings
Women are represented	Women help shape how they are represented

Earlier Works	*Rewriting the Frame*
Cultural continuity is emphasized	Cultural change and transformation are emphasized

The difference demonstrates a movement from preserving and sustaining culture to questioning and transforming culture.

Overall Thematic Developments of the Paintings as a Series

When the paintings are considered together, they form a connected progression rather than a collection of separate ideas. Each work focuses on a different aspect of women's cultural experience:

i. *Milk Maids* — Labour and visibility
ii. *Fruit-bearer* — The female body and provision
iii. *Beauty in Diversity* — Cultural difference and solidarity
iv. *The Innovators and the Space Fish* — Knowledge and innovation
v. *Hands That Hold the Earth* — Ecological care
vi. *Bearer of Worlds* — Responsibility and care
vii. *Threads of Memory* — Memory and cultural transmission
viii. *Rewriting the Frame* — Agency and authorship

The process can thus be seen as one moving from labour and care to agency and transformation of culture. *Rewriting the Frame* links the series through the central question it poses: Who has the authority to define women and their role in culture? The piece shows that women must not only be part of culture but also part of its definition.

From Bearing to Becoming

One common theme found in *Milk Maids*, *Fruit-bearer*, and *Bearer of Worlds* is that of women as carriers and nurturers. In *Milk Maids*, women carry objects which serve both to nourish and earn a living. In *Fruit-bearer*, the female figure serves as the source of nurture, fertility, and nourishment. And in *Bearer of Worlds*, carrying extends to the social and cultural obligations that keep societies thriving. Not only do these three models of reality demonstrate that carrying is more than just physically transporting something, it also means having responsibility, nurturing, and maintaining life and culture.

However, it is important to note the conflict created by the paintings: women often receive cultural recognition for their roles as caregivers and, as a result, the weight of their

individual identities and desires might be ignored. The paintings capture both sides of the story.

From Individual Labour to Collective Strength

The paintings also depict a transition from individual labour to collective cooperation. That is, *Milk Maids* shows women's physical labour and their involvement in the mundane economy. *Beauty in Diversity* expands from individual representation of women to the representation of women from various cultures, working and moving collectively. The painting implies that cultural diversity does not automatically lead to division. Rather, women can retain their own identity and work together. This concept is expanded in *The Innovators and the Space Fish*. There, women are depicted collectively as collaborators, inventors, and creators of knowledge.

Thus, the process can be simply described as:

Individual labour → Collective power → Cooperative innovation.

This demonstrates that matricultural agency is not just about nurturing existing community, but also involves working together to make new opportunities.

The Female Body: Symbol and Individual

The female body is a significant element in several artworks, specifically *Fruit-bearer* and *Bearer of Worlds*. In the artwork *Fruit-bearer*, the body is used to signify nourishment and fertility, while in *Bearer of Worlds*, the body conveys the role of women in carrying the burden of social and cultural life.

However, the manner in which the faces of the women have been represented in some of the artworks poses a significant question. That is, the lack of representation of individual women's facial features in the artworks makes the figure represent the larger category of women. At the same time, though, it makes the individual woman invisible. Thus, through the comparison, we find a significant contradiction: A woman may be visible as a cultural symbol but not as an individual.

It is this contradiction that helps us understand the significance of *Rewriting the Frame*. The artwork takes the discussion from the level of representations of women to their agency.

From Caring for People to Caring for the Earth

The concept of care is also explored through the paintings. *Milk Maids* explores the concept of women caring for people by feeding them. *Beauty in Diversity* explores the concept of women caring for society as a whole. *Hands That Hold the Earth* broadens the definition of care from a human-oriented approach to include care of the environment. The progression is, thus:

Caring for people → caring for communities → caring for the environment

Hands That Hold the Earth is crucial in this sequence because it brings together the concept of care and responsibility in the context of matriculture and care of the environment. The environment, in this case, is not just a source of resource but something that needs to be protected**.** This supports and enhances the ecological angle of the study.

Bearing, Remembering, and Rewriting

In the later works, there is another significant evolution involving *Bearer of Worlds*, *Threads of Memory*, and *Rewriting the Frame*. *Bearer of Worlds* centres the individual bearing responsibility and *Threads of Memory* deals with remembering and passing cultural knowledge from one generation to another. *Rewriting the Frame*, though, asserts that inherited knowledge is not static and can be changed with every generation. This evolution can be formulated in the following way:

Bearing → remembering → rewriting

The meaning of this for personal and communal growth is significant, as it means that cultural continuity does not imply preserving everything as it is. Instead, cultural knowledge can be both preserved and rethought according to changing conditions. Thus, matriculture implies continuity and change at the same time.

Cultural Difference and Unity

In *Beauty in Diversity*, the artist reveals another important aspect – the differences between women of various ethnicities. The painting does not imply that these differences disappear; the women are different, yet united. Thus, the painting indicates that matriculture can embrace diversity and difference. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing that women's cultural experiences should not be considered as singular or unified. Culture, ethnicity, history, environment, and social factors may play a role in any individual woman's cultural experience.

Etimpaste and the Development of the Visual Language

The application of Etimpaste in the paintings also shifts and contributes to the ideas in the artworks. In the earlier paintings, the thick application of Etimpaste results in a rough texture that is appropriate for themes such as labour, the body, weight, and physicality. In the later paintings, Etimpaste was made more fluid to create a softer and transparent effect like watercolour. Such techniques contribute to themes such as memory, ecology, relationship, and transformation. The progression in the materials used therefore can be described as:

Rough and thick → weight, labour, and physicality
to
Soft and transparent → memory, relationship, and transformation

Thus, the materials are not separate from the ideas in the paintings. The materials contribute to the ideas expressed in the artworks.

From Representation to Transformation

Overall, taking into account the whole sequence of paintings as a whole, we can see a process of development in the depiction of the female protagonist.

This process can be represented as follows:

Visibility → Recognition → Agency → Reinterpretation → Transformation

i. *Milk Maids* demonstrates the visibility of work done by women.
ii. *Fruit-bearer* draws attention to the cultural connotations of the female body.
iii. *Beauty in Diversity* shows solidarity among women despite their cultural differences.
iv. *The Innovators and the Space Fish* portrays women as creators and innovators of knowledge.
v. *Hands That Hold the Earth* depicts women as agents of environmental responsibility.
vi. *Bearer of Worlds* portrays the social and cultural responsibility of women.
vii. *Threads of Memory* discusses the function of women in transferring culture.
viii. Finally, *Rewriting the Frame* is moving towards representation, authorship, and transformation.

Therefore, it could be said that the main thematic development in the series lies in the transformation of the artist's representations of the roles of women.

Main Findings from the Comparative Analysis

This analysis of the works of art illustrates four important features of matriculture embodied by the works:

1. Matriculture is relational
   The significance of women is illustrated by their material and symbolic relationships to family, community, other women, cultural history, and the natural world, among other things.

2. Matriculture is productive
   Women are not mere recipients of the culture. Women are shown to produce and sustain knowledge, memories, cohesion, creativity, food, and ecological balance.

3. Matriculture is both empowering and constraining
   The paintings acknowledge the significance of women's nurturing and sustaining role in life, yet they also reveal that this role imposes important demands on women.

4. Matriculture is capable of change
   The paintings illustrate that cultural continuity does not mean staticity. Cultural meanings can be remembered, rethought, and reinvented.

Final Comparative Statement

Together, the paintings reveal that matriculture is not just the process of maintaining the traditional roles of women within the culture. The transition from *Milk Maids* to *Rewriting the Frame* is thus not only a series of paintings but an evolution in how the matricultural subject is understood. She is both the woman who holds the world in her hands and also the woman who has the power to rethink and recreate it.

This kind of analysis emphasizes the main thesis of the research in which visual art has the capacity to act as a practical means of identifying and encoding matriculture. It is through the process of painting that cultural values and meanings become evident and hence are available for analysis, questioning, and even redefining. Therefore, the artist's studio is not merely a site where culture finds representation, it is also a site of cultural inquiry.

Conclusions

In this study, we aimed to investigate the potential of studio-based visual practice as a vehicle of consciousness raising and transformative activity. Throughout this analysis of matricultural imagery and material experiment, it has become evident that artistic activity is not simply representational, but that it is inherently an act of intervention.

Through the examination of *Milk Maids*, *Fruit-bearer*, *Threads of Memory*, *Bearer of Worlds*, *Hands That Hold the Earth*, and *Rewriting the Frame*, the female body becomes revealed as economic infrastructure, cultural symbolism, archival mnemonics, and an ecologically vital agent. Together, the artworks question the essential role of female labour, embodiment, and caregiving economies, which - while central to cultural existence - are often over looked in Nigeria.

With thick impasto Etimpaste in the earlier paintings, weight and labour are emphasized; their dense material quality embodies the accumulation of historical survival economics. In contrast, the later paintings featuring a thin and diluted Etimpaste incorporate notions of fluidity, permeability, and the rewriting of epistemologies. This particular dialectic is key to the arguments presented in the paper. In creating a dynamic tension between dense and translucent Etimpastes, the studio becomes a think tank for social theory. Sustainability, instead of being approached from an external perspective, becomes a process inherent in the work because the medium itself acts in opposition to extractive modes of art making, further anchoring the ethics of the images themselves.

The works confront hierarchy in visual culture by placing domestic, agricultural, and reproductive work – usually at the margins of art making - back into centre stage. In the end, however, the matricultural transition from the studio into society is no mere metaphor, but an actual process that comes about through material, compositional, and symbolic decision-making. Visual art, according to the theory presented above, is an area where existing cultural discourses are interrogated, reinterpreted, and turned into something that is more conducive towards sustainability. This study has proven beyond doubt that studio practice can produce not only aesthetically new forms but also epistemologically new ideas through its engagement with the culture at large.

Biography

Etim Ekpenyong Mfon is a visual artist and researcher whose practice explores culture, sustainability, and social consciousness through painting and alternative materials. He is

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Staying on the Mountain:

Women, Memory, and the Transformation of Remoteness

in Rural Romania

OANA-ALEXANDRA BORLEA-STANCIOI

Abstract

This paper focuses on the lived experience of women in a remote mountain community in rural Romania. From working as hard as the men to being the ones remaining on the mountain year long, they have been described as the ones who hold the community together. In a settlement that is simultaneously hard to reach and widely sought after by tourists and lifestyle migrants, these women manoeuvre restrictions and reclaim their agency through mutual support, resilience and (re)tellings of their life stories.

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Using remoteness as a lens, my research explores how it shapes everyday life and social practice. Drawing on ongoing ethnographic fieldwork, I examine how transformations are reflected in local women's perceptions of remoteness. As a relational and affective category, it is also present in how they remember, reinterpret, preserve, and perform their day-to-day realities.

Approaching this through the concept of matriculture, the study highlights how seemingly stereotypical social roles are generated, reproduced, and transformed, bringing to light the often silenced or under-acknowledged contribution of women to the community. Situated in the wider Eastern-European context, these preliminary findings highlight experiences of women in relation to cultural change and identity in post-socialist rural societies.

Keywords: Remoteness, lived experience, transformations, women's memory, everyday life

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Résumé

Cet article se penche sur le vécu des femmes d'une communauté montagnarde isolée de la Roumanie rurale. Qu'il s'agisse de travailler aussi fort que les hommes ou d'être celles qui restent dans la montagne toute l'année, elles sont souvent décrites comme celles qui assurent la cohésion de la communauté. Dans un lieu à la fois difficile d'accès et très prisé par les touristes ainsi que par des personnes venues s'y installer en quête d'un nouveau mode de vie, ces femmes contournent les contraintes et reprennent leur agentivité par le soutien mutuel, la résilience et la (re)narration de leurs parcours de vie.

En utilisant l'éloignement comme prisme d'analyse, mes recherches explorent la manière dont celui-ci façonne le quotidien et les pratiques sociales. À partir d'un travail ethnographique en cours, j'examine comment les transformations se reflètent dans la perception que les femmes locales ont de cet éloignement. En tant que catégorie relationnelle et affective, celui-ci imprègne également la façon dont elles se remémorent, réinterprètent, préservent et incarnent leurs réalités quotidiennes.

En abordant cette question sous l'angle de la matriculture, cette étude met en lumière la manière dont des rôles sociaux, en apparence stéréotypés, sont générés, reproduits et transformés ; elle révèle ainsi la contribution des

femmes à la communauté — une contribution trop souvent passée sous silence ou insuffisamment reconnue. S'inscrivant dans le contexte plus large de l'Europe de l'Est, ces résultats préliminaires éclairent le vécu des femmes face aux mutations culturelles et identitaires au sein des sociétés rurales post-socialistes.

Mots-clés : Éloignement, vécu, transformations, mémoire des femmes, Roumanie

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Introduction

One winter day in 2025, I was visiting a new resident in one of the remote mountain hamlets in which I conduct fieldwork. Amongst the larger discussion about locals and incomers, the interviewee emphasised that it was the women that hold the community together. That statement made me think of the deeper implications of remoteness on local women, as well as what gendered forms it might take.

Remoteness is, anthropologically speaking, a much broader category than just an expression of geographical distances and accessibility. It is relative and subjective; in other words, if one *feels* a place is a long way away from amenities they consider relevant or gives them the sentiment of being disconnected from their starting place, it may receive the attribute of 'remote.' Hence, remoteness can be interrogated as an affective category (Harms et al., 2014, p. 365), and its effects on inhabitants and visitors of places deemed remote assessed anthropologically. Remoteness is also social and embodied/experienced, as well as a contested category, since its meaning shifts depending on the actors involved (insider, outsider, what part of the remote/isolated experience affects them most, etc), matters on which I will touch below.

Keeping in mind affective remoteness as a modifier, this paper explores how local women manoeuvre and (re)claim their agency through mutual support, as well as remember, reinterpret, and perform their day-to-day realities in a mountain community that is both hard to reach and, now, sought after by tourists and lifestyle migrants. It does so by employing the concept of matriculture (Rowlatt & Guédon, 2025, p. 2), defined as "part or those components of culture that sustain, express, and welcome women's participation in the socio-cultural fabric, whether it sustains a matrilineal kinship system or not" (Guédon, 2020, p. 6). In this sense, it argues that matriculture, facing diminished avenues of transmission within the local patriarchal societal structure, concentrates on maintaining the status-quo, and binds women in place as anchors to the community.

Background

In my view, Romania remains a land of contrasts. At the last census (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2023, Table 1.22), about half the population registered as living in rural areas, which counted some thirteen thousand villages. These numbers hide vast variability, encompassing peri-urban wealthy communes all the way through to depopulating and emptying hamlets. As a result, a dichotomic view of prosperous urbanites versus somewhat backwards ruralities persists in both public and private discourse. A historic tendency to consider the rural a repository of tradition and authenticity contributes to the perpetuation of the opposition, despite scholarly dissent (Mihăilescu, 2017, pp. 179–180). At the same time, increased globalisation and outmigration gave rise to a counter-culture of revivalism and 'traditionalism,' which reverberates all the way to the most out-of-the-way communes.

Against this backdrop, I conduct field research in several mountain hamlets spread among the slopes of a calcareous mountain range in south-western Romania. Although not officially classified as remote,[1] these settlements are famous for their apparent isolation, partly due to a mid-2000s television documentary on hard-to-reach villages. Located at various altitudes, somewhere between 400 and 800 metres above sea level, no paved roads reach them. Access requires all-terrain vehicles, or horses and hours of hiking. Until recently, there was no electricity, except a few water-powered generators, and no indoor plumbing. Solar panels made some household appliances possible, but ploughing, harvesting, and animal husbandry are still mostly done by hand. To date, I am familiar with thirty households, summing around sixty inhabitants, not all of which live permanently on the mountain.

While the focus of this paper and the space do not permit for an in depth look at socio-historical characteristics of the hamlets, it is worth mentioning that the events of the second half of the twentieth century were not experienced as major disruptions. The localities were never collectivised, owing to the difficulty of access and, presumably, their small population. As the locals recount, they were just subject to livestock quotas. As one participant remembered: "we used to take the calf over the mountain only to arrive and find out it hasn't reached the [prescribed] weight. And then back we came" (Interviewee, identity withheld, September 2025, day unrecorded). In this sense, similar to other mountainous areas in the country (Kligman and Verdery, 2011, pp. 396–399), many aspects of their lives remained largely unchanged. The local school was built in the 1960s and the valley road was widened and tarmacked in the 1970s and 1980s, allowing the younger generations at the time easier access to work in state owned companies. This

1 Under the 2021 census, *izolate* (remote localities) were those situated at 20km or more straight line distance from a national road or motorway (Institutul National de Statistica, 2021, online).

softer reach of the state means that their effective, affective, and perceived remoteness was a matter-of-fact, unnamed, aspect of their way of life, with neither communism nor the transition period registering with the interviewed locals as distinct periods in remembered stories.

Before we can explore further how remoteness reflects in matricultural spheres, one must first place the 'remoteness' of the hamlets in the existing literature. Firstly, the geographical constraint is ever-present. In the absence of paved, vehicle-accessible roads leading in and out of the hamlets, resources and infrastructure are limited. Considering these were lacking to begin with, and only more recently began to improve (i.e. access by well equipped off-road vehicles and quad bikes), the villages are less 'emptying' (Dzenovska, 2020, pp. 10–11), and more closely related to Driessen's "rural voids" (2018, pp. 63–64). That is to say, they have not fallen into a post-communist gap in resources due to the political economy, but continued in their relative obscurity until an outside force (the television documentary which featured them) plucked them out of their anonymity and opened the doors to (re)imagining and touristifying outside influences. It could be argued that they remain marginal, tucked away at altitude, in a county that generates around 11% of the West Region's gross domestic product and 1% of the national total, ranking last within the region by contribution to regional GDP (Comisia Nationala de Strategie si Prognoza, 2024, p. 5). To further illustrate that, the nearest hospital is a one hour car-ride from the nearest paved road, which is either one hour of off-roading in good weather or a hike of two to three hours, depending on your start and end point of access. There are no general practitioners and no veterinarians close by, and there is only one larger supermarket available, with a couple of smaller markets in neighbouring towns and villages. The region relies heavily on tourism, forestry, and some industrial output, though the latter is concentrated in the north of the county.

Despite the constraints of the landscape and the external label of *izolați* (isolated), which in Romanian serves in meaning as both remote and isolated, incorporating the duality of far-away and disconnected, the hamlets are, in fact, part of an extensive kinship network that extends to the nearby town, the mother-village across the mountain, day-labourers from across the valley, and beyond, and the inhabitants are actively constructing new networks with visitors, researchers, returning tourists, and newcomers. While they do not lack social and economic connections, the locals do feel remote/isolated, having taken up the identity following their feature in the documentary. In my view, this validated them and gave a name to what they regularly refer to as the 'hard life up the mountain,' presenting them with a neat word that encompasses all: where they live, how they live, how they feel generally, and how they feel about the place itself. It stayed in use because there is also a certain uneasy feeling: since the community is thinning, nature feels like it is threatening to engulf them and what remains is the relatively new identity that now

carries the promise of a future as a touristification catalyst. In this sense, the hamlets' isolation is close to what Drazin (2018, accepted manuscript, pp. 3, 10) brings to attention in his ethnographic work in Ireland: isolation is understood through people's engagement with places in particular social events. In Drazin's observed communities, the isolation is, in his own words, a bogeyman, but in the hamlets it has become a point of pride and a marker of resilience and of belonging.

While it appears that remoteness is their primary characteristic, one must also take into account that the settlements started as a form of chosen remoteness (Scott, 2009, pp. ix–x; Schweitzer and Povoroznyuk, 2019, pp. 246–249). That is, they grew out of temporary shelters and sheep folds in the later years of the Austro-Hungarian dualism, and, drawing from historical maps and secondary sources available to me (Munteanu, 2007, vol. II, p. 200; Bolovan and Gräf, 2023, pp. 327, 329; Tîrcovnicu, 1970, pp. 70–73, 164; Rusnac, 2025; Stoica de Hațeg, 1981, p. 301), relocations following land scarcity, and natural disasters.

The hamlets are in a process of depopulation, gentrification, and touristification, with each of these reshaping how remoteness is perceived and (re-en-)acted, by both male and female residents.[2] Their future remains an unknown, with some locals fearing being engulfed by the forest, while others are keen to lean into the tourism economy and small-scale eco-farms. This socio-economic background places the hamlets firmly in line with Podjed and Peternel's observations in Slovenia and Croatia (2024, pp. 9–10, 13), which highlights that isolation is a neutral descriptor which can be perceived and experienced both negatively and positively: some associate it with loneliness, difficulty, or marginalisation, while those who actively seek it tend to view it as a driver of more meaning. The similarity is especially strong to what Podjed and Peternel documented concerning remote villages, where these two valances co-exist. Their discussion highlights both economic challenges and benefits such as peace and strong interpersonal bonds (Podjed and Peternel, 2024, pp. 12–13): locals identify with some negative aspects, but also recognise the good ones, and newcomers identify and seek the positive aspects, while being aware of the challenges.

Uusitalo and Assmuth (2013, p. 62) note that we have yet to see the definitive demise of some villages predicted to cease to exist (Knuuttila and Rannikko 2008, p. 16, cited in Uusitalo and Assmuth, 2013, p. 62). 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

2 To my knowledge, there are no residents that identify as a differently gendered than the ones mentioned above.

sphere. This prompts the present look at how women in the community navigate this perception.

Methodology

In order to successfully cover as much of the hamlets as possible, considering their considerable spread distance-wise, I employ the multi-sited ethnography approach (Marcus, 1995, p. 96). Furthermore, as the potential participant pool is limited and I am interested in exploring perceptions of remoteness, I also follow locals' social connections outwards, tracing how remoteness is experienced through interactions with kin, tourists, NGOs, and more distant contacts. I use 'studying through' (Shore and Wright, 1997, p. 14) to describe this movement across connected social settings. The authors coined the term to indicate following a concept through institutions, policies and processes that influence them, in opposition to containing one's research to a bounded geographical area (i.e. one field site location).

Finding my residence in the hamlet also proved a challenge. With limited long-term hosting available, as houses usually have two or three rooms at most and locals prioritise accommodating tourists, especially in summer, I had to apply what Günel and Watanabe call "patchwork ethnography" (2024, pp. 131–133). This more flexible framework (shorter visits over a longer period, rather than one uninterrupted stay) differs from the long-term residency of classical anthropological fieldwork, but still allows the 'slow thinking' of longer immersions and preserves the relationships, familiarity, and partial insider status obtained by the researcher, while also reducing the pressure on the hosts and community.

The main research methods include participant observation and unstructured interviews. My approach also makes use of "engaged listening," and the "democracy of the senses" (Hockey and Forsey, 2012, pp. 71–72) to yield the richest data available. Participant observation remains the main form of engagement, allowing me to be a part of activities within the home (cooking, cleaning, preparing for visits, evening chats, watching TV), but also of communal labour (haymaking, foraging, ploughing).

Access is shaped by gender and my role as an anthropologist. I am mostly allowed in the women's sphere, with some entry to the men's when local women are also included or, on occasion, due to my outsider and researcher status. My access was also facilitated by my age, which is close to some of the women's own children. On some occasions, this dynamic gave me the impression my interlocutors were advising and treating me like a (proxy-)daughter, which supported the creation of a rapport hard to replicate in other circumstances. It should also be noted that, in part, serendipity also mediated the events and situations I was able to witness and participate in.

On the matter of interviews, I found that participants shy away from formal interviews, and only sometimes reply directly to targeted questions. Furthermore, they are uncomfortable being recorded, so I rely on extensive fieldnotes and thick description (Geertz, 1973, pp. 6–7), which I write as soon as possible after the interactions and on occasion, with longer term participants, while we are talking (if we are not also engaged in some form of work). To supplement, I use (historical) maps, family trees, and sketches to document the spatial and relational realities of the hamlets.

Strictly pertaining to the present article, the data draws from my current fieldwork (2025-2026), across two hamlet sub-clusters, and includes accounts and observations of fifteen women, a dozen of which were local, two incomers and one married into the hamlets. Not all live permanently on the mountain.

As Izabella Agárdi (2022, p. 27) notes there may not be room for a lot of objectivity when one researches people and their lived experience. However, in contrast to her work, which documents life stories among Hungarian-speaking women in Eastern Europe, my data comes from mostly unstructured interviews and fragments of day-to-day conversations about life in the hamlets, captured in the context of researching perceptions of remoteness. Within these interactions, participants were narrating and remembering events from their own point of view filtered by their memories, their experiences, and, potentially, through the self-image they wished to project when facing me, the anthropologist. In doing so, the local women also brought to light aspects of their lives that can be attributed to and discussed through the lens of matriculture.

In the following sections, I will be referring to all the collected data that pertains to matriculture, though the main focus will be on three older women. These three recurrently steered the discussion towards how the community functions, what they believe is the best way to go about certain tasks and interactions, and, generally, provided information on the (inner) workings of their lives and the community. Note that to best preserve anonymity I have opted to present a composite portrait of the local women and have decided to change certain biographical details to make situations and individuals less identifiable.

Findings

Local portraits

Imagine a high altitude mountain basin, with high, rocky peaks surrounding it from two sides, while the third one is closed by more mellow heights covered in woods. The fourth side is narrow and opens to the opposite mountain range, more than three hours hike away. Here, towards the end of the hamlet, or at least what is visible of it to the hiker, one can find Participant A's house. We will call her The Host. Her house was built by her grandfather, with rocks carried on his back or by horse from higher up the mountain. She and her husband hosts hikers, cyclists and tourist groups, which keeps her very busy, but also makes her life up the mountain more meaningful. "Here it feels like all you have to do is work," she says on one of my visits (Interviewee, identity withheld, 8 May 2025).

More than two hours away, in a different hamlet, among more mellow peaks with lots of pastures, fruit trees, and a lovely vista of high mountain ranges into the horizon, one finds Participant B's house. She is significantly older, having raised her children, who now have adult children, who also have children of their own. Participant B is one of the oldest residents and we will call her The Granny.

Somewhere, maybe mid-way between the two, one can find a more modest house, with a vernacular cookhouse a few metres away where one finds the hosts during the day, unless they are foraging for livestock fodder or engaged in agricultural work. The hens are running about the yard, there are pigs, and cows in the pasture, clothes to dry, and a wooden table outside the house for summer eating. The lady of the house is about the same age as The Host, and was born in The Host's hamlet, but married here. We will call her Participant C, The Anchor, as she is my first contact in the community; I met her many years prior when I was just a returning hiker in the region.

What does it mean to be a fifty-plus years old woman in the hamlets? As per my research, it usually means one is responsible for a household with livestock, usually cows, pigs, hens and other fowl, dogs, and cats, a vegetable garden to tend, fields to sow and harvest, pastures to which animals must be herded, and anywhere between one and three or four children. Older generations might have had more children, but with land being scarce and subdividing meaning smaller and smaller households who would not have enough land to feed themselves, families have come to prefer fewer children in order to keep the land in the family as much as possible. The running joke in the wider Banat area is that locals only have one child, since having half of one is impossible; this directly results from a preference to keep property undivided and passed on to the (preferably) only child, who is expected to provide and care for their parents as they age.

Returning to our female resident, we might find that she married an incomer, if no local men were available, or was married off across the mountain only to return to her native area and re-marry after suffering violence. She married around eighteen years of age or in

her early twenties, not too young, but not leaving it late and risk being looked down on by the community. She might have had her children at home or in a neighbour's home if she didn't make it over the mountain to the communal maternity ward, many hours hike away. Our archetypal resident may or may not have gone to school. If she did, she completed only around four years of schooling, as for more they would have had to be hosted by relatives or pay for live-in tenancies in the valley; it was not unheard-of for parents to stop their children's schooling for fear they would move away and deprive them of support in their old age.

Even if she married into the next hamlet, family would not be too far away. They are all used to navigating considerable distances by foot or on horseback, and she would have had help from neighbours and kin during peak times (harvest, animal slaughtering, giving birth, family deaths) and would have helped them in return in due course. When younger, she would routinely meet up with other local women to sew, spin, or embroider, as well as travel with produce to the market or go over the mountain to village fetes, weddings, christenings, and burials. She carried heavy loads on her back when needed and travelled distances with little complaint. She tended sheep with her husband and kin, helped mend fences, sowed, harvested, cut hay, made haystacks, took the cattle to graze, tended to the goats, but mostly cooked and cleaned, tended to the animals, and her garden and land. Of course, she raised her children and provided them with the best upbringing, education, and opportunities she could (we will discuss this in detail below). She is helped by her daughters(-in-law), if there are any. Perhaps, now, in older age, with the children having left, her husband helps with cooking, but not routinely. She observes the religious holidays, though she may not be particularly pious. After all, the local church was build around the same time she had her children and the priest only comes at major holidays. Some may say she or others dabble in some unsanctioned practices and witchcraft, but this is considered a serious misgiving and not commonly brought into discussion.

Contrastingly, the younger generation, her daughters or daughters-in-law, married at similar ages, but had fewer children, left the hamlets, or live only seasonally here. Nevertheless, they are similarly hard-working, they sewed their own dowry, and manage(d) their own households and livestocks. They may have attended school for longer, settled in town, and perhaps ran their own businesses. With the second generation, there is more variability, some of which I am not able to refer to, in order to keep the participants' anonymity.

Incomer women are roughly the same age as the younger generation, though, as with the age of my main interlocutors, there is a significant margin. The incomers are the least represented currently in my research, due to their smaller numbers, as well as limited access to date, so it is difficult to give a general picture. However, it could be said that they

usually chose to come to the hamlets with their life partners, mainly because of its famed picturesque surroundings, remote location, and what they perceive as opportunity for clean living. They are, usually, lifestyle migrants: former urbanites using their resources to build a 'slow life' (Honoré, 2004, pp. 14–15) closer to nature. They learn to rear animals, plant and harvest local crops, they sometimes act as a support network to the local folk, but they can also be a point of contention and perceived as a (temporary) source of income.

The matriculture of remoteness

Having painted a general picture of the relevant participants, let us take a look at how remoteness shapes these women's participation and roles within the hamlet community.

Firstly, I must note that Romanian society remains patriarchal, with higher relevance given to men, who, more often than not, occupy positions of power, though this tends towards more egalitarian practices in urban spaces. It is also mostly patrilineal and patrilocal, especially in the more rural contexts; however, there are increasing exceptions, especially as the preference for nuclear families is increasing from what I consider a combination of higher mother's age at first birth and decreasing birth rates.

The hamlets are not exempt from patriarchal practices. Most of the older participants moved to their husbands' houses and lived with their husbands' family, usually under the authority of the mother-in-law until older age limited their power and the bride took over as head of the female sphere. Traditionally in this area, the household would be passed on to the youngest son and his wife, but in the hamlets it is also dependent on who decided to settle on the mountain as opposed to afield. This situation changes if there is only one child, in which case, regardless of gender, they inherit the parents' household. If the child is a woman, she may seek or prefer an incomer husband, so that they can continue to live on her land, usually alongside the parents until their deaths. Similarly, childless couples may adopt a child from their relatives, who then comes to inherit their land and keep it in the wider family. So far, I have encountered four cases of locally decided adoptions in the hamlets, in almost all of which the adopting couple did not have any children of their own. Three of the adoptees were women who went on to inherit their adoptive parents' house and land. In this case, the preference to keep the land within the family, as opposed to being sold to outsiders, dictates how succession is brokered. The third option, if a family has no living descendants or they have decided to move away permanently, is to sell to neighbours, so the land remains in the community. It's also not uncommon for neighbours to be more distant kin, or kin by marriage, which is thought of as a better alternative than selling to newcomers.

As with most patriarchal societies, the women are relegated to care-giving and household management roles, as well as being keepers of moral norms, especially those pertaining to the female universe. As a result, the participants report staying local and taking care of the household as their primary role. Many a time have they highlighted the burden of their constant work in our chats: "*e greu traiu aici*" ('life is hard here;' Interviewee, identity withheld, 5 May 2025), "*aici dacă nu munceşti (într-una) n-ai*" ('up here, if you don't (constantly) work, you have nothing;' Interviewee, identity withheld, 5 May 2025), "*aici dacă stai 30 minute ai stat prea mult*" ('if you sit around for 30 minutes, you've sat too long;' Interviewee, identity withheld, 5 May 2025), and my personal favourite *"zborul e toporul," w*hich is rather cryptic if one is unfamiliar with the local dialect, and can be roughly translated to 'idle chatter is a time thief' (Interviewee, identity withheld, 20 July 2025). All of these show that the main concern is completing the household chores, the weight these tasks carry importance-wise and the (time) anxiousness they create for the local women. Additionally, but dependant on their age and the time of their life they reference, they would occupy themselves with crafting (sewing, spinning, etc.).

Overall, their (self-)stories reflect a societal pressure to pay their dues to society, through hospitality and maintaining and perpetuating its rules, as well as undertaking community level roles at times, such as tending to the dead. They also have to teach by example, though not necessarily active teaching (*se fură [nu te învață;* 'skills are picked up by observing, rather than explicitly taught']; Interviewee, identity withheld, 4 April 2026). One interesting deviation, which does find parallels in accounts from other authors, as I will illustrate in the Discussion section, is that the women of the hamlets do sometimes go against the norm, and I would argue that this is facilitated by remoteness, at least in part.

The domestic sphere

As mentioned above, in the domestic sphere, the women of the hamlet are usually the uncontested authority, slightly dependant on their status within the family. They are central to the household, which includes a degree of practicality and necessity, but their position is also one of power within this sphere. The young wife of the family son will learn from her mother-in-law. The mother of the family is usually the decider. She takes this position of authority when the older generation passes peak working age and retreats into the background.

In the hamlets, this shift in role, from main household decider to older generation, is marked externally by referring to a woman as *babă*. Meaning literally 'old lady,' in regular speech it has a negative connotation, indicating an old-looking woman, an aged woman, being a derogatory term, similar to 'crone' in English. In the hamlets, being called or referred to as *Baba* [First name] is an indication of old age and, potentially, of widowhood.

I am unaware of currently still married women who meet the age criteria (seemingly over 75 years old). All but one woman referred to as *babă* are widowed and three live alone, with children and relatives living away from the mountain. The fourth is The Granny, who made her dislike of being called so very clear, asking me and other visitors to call her *buni* (granny) instead. Yet, her family routinely uses the appellative *babă/babo* for her, both in her presence and absence, signalling her reduced status, relevance, and the shift in authority.

While her authority is diminished in favour of her daughter-in-law, she still shoulders a significant part of the household chores, but mostly around the house: feeding the pigs and tending to the chickens, tending to the vegetable garden, the flowers in the yard. She is also afforded the relative luxury of showing hospitality and chatting with tourists stopping to buy refreshments or lunch, since the daughter-in-law is tasked with more physically demanding tasks: taking the cows to pasture at altitude and returning them, finding and catching the horses, cooking the large meals for tourists (sometimes with community help), hoeing, sowing, and hay gathering, and in high summer, getting water from streams uphill.

For these women, who closely follow the traditional norms applicable in the hamlets, the matter of passing on this behaviour is uncertain. Both have significant crafting skills, but their sons and nephews no longer favour local handcrafted decorations, tablecloths, and bedsheets, but prefer store and town bought goods. Moreover, the younger men of the family work abroad or in town, promoting their mother to worry that even if they marry, she will not benefit from having the support of a daughter-in-law. “Who would come here as my daughter-in-law, to tend the cows?!”, she lamented one time (Interviewee, identity withheld, 10 August 2025). In this phrase, she condensed both the perceived remoteness of the location, the hard, physical work involved, and the perceived less desirable status of living in a hard-to-access hamlet as opposed to the town nearby. One could also say that she included a nuance of grief as well, as it suggests that in the future the mountain house, which so many generations before kept going, will become a seasonal or vacation home at best.

Contrastingly, The Anchor has support from her unmarried daughter who still lives at home most of the time. More often it is the other way around: daughters are free to travel as needed, while the mother tends to the household, but the opposite is also true. The Anchor expressed a desire to visit a local landmark and to come visit my hometown alongside her husband, both of which would be possible in theory only because they have a daughter living locally to tend to the household in their absence.

At the opposite end sits a neighbour of The Host. Due to her health, she cannot stray too far from her house and, thus, is far more restricted than her peers, to the extent that she passed some of the household chores onto her husband.

Drawing from the above, we are looking at a community with a diminishing number of women, all of whom struggle to find kin to receive their knowledge and responsibilities. This restricts their mobility and increases the household's dependence on them.

Staying on the mountain

The women's uninterrupted living on the mountain seems to me a mixture of social expectation, ingrained habits, and personal preference, as well as circumstance. Not only are they limited by the geographical constraints, but also everyday responsibilities which demand their interrupted attention (cattle, guests, fieldwork). As interviews revealed, even with the promise of gender equality in the socialist society (Hurubean, 2015, pp. 9, 19–20), the women on the mountain had little room to pursue schooling or formal employment, since that would have meant disrupting the household. The Host was held back from further schooling to support her parents' household. In another family, the move of the woman-of-the-house to the valley resulted in the move of the entire household. As these examples illustrate, both in the past and at present, the women cannot overcome restrictions, since they are anchored in place due to limited support and established responsibilities with almost no one to take over even temporarily.

Granny and her daughter-in-law have not been to the valley in years. The son and the grandsons regularly go for work, supply runs, entertainment, etc. The Host has not gone to her son's house in the valley or, more relevant to her, the cemetery in over a year. The household, livestock, and tourist influx demand all of her time. Quite the opposite, family members come up the mountain to help her with larger tourist groups. The men, many of whom had jobs in the valley as foresters or in other industries when younger, have always been more mobile, presumably because they shoulder less of the household and hosting chores and therefore are more expendable in the home sphere.

One of the women said that she will keep cows as long as she can, with no intention of giving that up yet, despite her family's wishes. Younger generations, though, acknowledge the limitations of this lifestyle. So do the older widowed women, since they cannot even visit the doctor due to livestock needing daily care. One incomer, who has taken up goat rearing and supplemented her available food sources by buying and keeping a cow as well as chickens, mentioned that she cannot leave her house even for a day or so as the animals need feeding and taking care of, and she cannot rely on any of her neighbours and she has no kin on the mountain. Her experience highlights two distinct aspects: the

importance of family and community support and community self-regulation, and the role of the matricultural sphere in regulating local-incomer interactions and upholding the local moral economy. Both throw light on how care, labour, and (dis)trust (Umbreș, 2022, pp. 60–65) shape participation in the community.

In a world where, until very recently, "all that one had was what one grew or made themselves" (Interviewee, identity withheld, April 2026), having a continuous presence at home meant that the household and its younger members were safe, tended, and supplied with any necessary produce and household goods. Being able to continue this way of life is a point of pride to many, at least as long as they are still able-bodied. Hence, in the face of diminishing numbers, this practice has become central to the long-term continuity of local families, becoming an aspect of the normal local matriculture. The practice has indirectly helped preserve local communities, despite hollowing tendencies, by reinforcing women's authority over the domestic sphere to the point where they are irreplaceable.

Upholding the moral order

The women share, with the men, the duty to uphold the local moral order, but are positioned more centrally in its perpetuation through their role as mothers(-in-law). While the men concern themselves to observing religious holidays ("We must not work today, it's a holiday that our grandfathers kept and it will bode ill" (Interviewee, identity withheld, 5 May 2025)), making sure they get fair pay for the various odd jobs they perform, and on occasion, defusing or solving conflicts, the women have a less visible, but more impactful role.

As caregivers to the next generation, they are expected to provide a positive example in all aspects of life. The Host and The Granny were most active as moral gatekeepers, with notable contributions from The Anchor, mostly in relation to my actions and some of her own family.

By far the most talkative among my interviewees, an attribute which, alongside her openness and friendliness endear her to her visitors, The Host is often concerned with her duty to society, her efforts to do things right, uphold morality and religious norms, and provide positive examples to follow for those around her. For example, in the early months of 2026, a female neighbour's death put her in a position to forfeit her duty to society due to a livestock emergency. That is, unable to leave the animals, she could not perform the rites that womenfolk would carry out when one of them passed on. Not only was she unavailable, but because of the diminished population and some animosities between the departed lady and her neighbour, there was no other woman to be called on to do these

tasks, which then fell on male kin. The Host saw this as very regrettable but unavoidable under the circumstances and, surprisingly, a result of the deceased's moral failings, as she was said to have driven family members away. In The Host's mind, this was, in a way, a divine punishment for failing to uphold the moral order and a direct result of her being a bitter, angry, resentful person during her lifetime: not only did she not have female kin around to help, but she did not have her neighbour's goodwill and the two other women who would have placed duty above judgment were unable to attend.

There are, of course, other situations for which The Host has readily available examples of how to conduct one's life in the appropriate, praiseworthy manner. She herself strives to be tolerant, to serve her community, and to be accommodating of her daughter-in-law, and she brings these attitudes up as benchmarks that she hopes - and strongly wishes - that others would apply as well. In one example, The Host emphasised the resilience, endurance, and hard-working attitude of a community leaver. Despite hardships and losses in the family, rejection from kin, and very reduced means, the person in question managed to set aside money to buy a house and even provided care for relatives although they did not show her the same grace.

The Host is also keen to make sure the hamlets, and local women especially, are represented correctly in my research. In one of our discussions, when I said I wanted to write on the women's experience in the village, she told me:

> Write that they have too much work, they don't have a minute to themselves —even when they cut the wood. They spin wool, clean wool, knit socks, mittens and sweaters, cook, […] and they tend to the animals. They use the loom, that is what you should tell them, no need to speak with everyone—this is what we do.
>
> Interviewee, identity withheld, 6 February 2026

This description, however, comes from an aggregated, idealised image of how a woman in the village should conduct herself, alongside what expectations are imposed on her and how these feel, based on The Host's own experience. While some (older) women still spin and knit, and some embroider, I believe none still weave (though quite a few did so in their youth), which shows how the ideal outlives the practice, in a similar way to how the feeling and identity of remoteness endures despite some improved access. Her dismissal of the need to ask others is also telling: she considers herself a knowledgeable source, experienced enough and legitimate enough to speak for the whole of the local women's collective in a way that ensures adequate representation. This translates into declarative gatekeeping that was never enforced in practice.

Contrastingly The Granny had negative examples to highlight, on occasion calling out what she believed was a norm transgression. Furthermore, it was not only that a norm was broken, but the resulting situation was not in any way advantageous to the nonconformist, hence making it to some extent a fool's errand. For reasons of confidentiality the accounts are not reproduced in this paper.

In somewhat more neutral terms, The Anchor once reminisced about solving a childcare issue in the absence of the mother. Under the circumstances, she took the necessary steps, resulting in the correction of what she thought was a situation that needed putting right. She now recounts it as a funny story illustrating the unavoidability of certain developmental milestones in childrearing.

There is, though, one aspect where the women were willing to bend the rules to some extent, and that is related to their children. For the most part, the children received the usual guidance in relation to morality, faith, keeping the community going, and not disposing of the land if at all possible. However, in some instances, it was geared towards ensuring a better future for them: having a choice, getting more education, seeing the world, or marrying well. These aspects are not always spelled out, but sometimes hidden beneath remembrances and half-regrets told as jokes. Despite the risk of having no support in later years, some of the women went against the grain by prioritising their children's wellbeing over local societal expectations, a pattern also present in other communities (Goina, 2024, pp. 94–95). The pattern indicates tension between wishing to ensure the continuity of the community and ensuring the next generation has more agency.

Discussion

Based on the above examples, I propose that the narratives and actions of my participants are forms of matricultural transmission, through which the women exercise their agency and navigate remoteness in their everyday life within the wider constraints of what remains a patriarchal, traditionalist society. Following from these remembered, retold stories and participant observation, the hamlets are communities where women, despite acting within a patriarchal society, function as household and moral anchors, as well as agents of change when warranted. Their experience of remoteness, which changes throughout their lives, shapes these roles sometimes subtly, sometimes more prominently (as in their efforts for their children), indicating how frictions between socio-geographical circumstances and applied agency shape their world. It is also far from neutral in its effects, clearly laying a heavier burden on women, whose role, power and influence in the community it shapes. This leans the balance both ways: it keeps them dependent and

contained, but also gives them more power and influence in the domestic sphere and women-related community issues.

The women's act of staying on the mountain is what enables the community to endure. If one removes their quasi-permanent presence, what remains is seasonal living, maybe labour-related temporary housing, not unlike how construction workers sometimes sleep on site. The families would come seasonally to plant, harvest, and forage, but they would most likely not keep animals, other than potentially sheep (considering the origins of the settlements). This is reinforced by the return to seasonal living for some younger generations in the hamlets: they mainly stay in the village spring to early winter, sometimes even spending days away regularly in season. They do not keep livestock anymore. Furthermore, I encountered one situation where a family almost sold their house on the mountain, as they expected the wife to move to the valley when their youngest started school, showing how her long-term physical absence from the property renders it potentially useless. To my knowledge, the only example where the wife was away and the husband was on the mountain was in the case of the teacher. However, the schoolteacher was accommodated in the school and there was no actual household to tend to, since their main residence was in the valley.

The women's fundamental role in ensuring continuity is similar to what Goina (2024, pp. 77, 80–85) and Agárdi (2022, pp. 188–191, 245–249) document in Arad county and the wider East European region, respectively. Agardi routinely illustrates how women subvert authority to ensure their families wellbeing, work hard, take on the breadwinner role with diligence if needed, and ensure their children are raised as confident, self-reliant individuals. Similarly Goina's participants start from a place of domestic responsibility, being housewives and mothers, but as times change, they become heads of households and carers to younger siblings. Even if some stories include temporary displacements or travel for school, the women tend to return to their family home, and almost always focus their efforts on its continuity, as much as possible, marking it as central to their *raison d'etre*. This aspect is also visible in how they emphasise prioritising their own household (and its continuity) above all else, to the extent that they will say that "*fiecare cu grădina lui… numa la câmp facem cu rându*,"('each is concerned with their own garden;' Interviewee, identity withheld, 5 April 2026) and mutual aid only comes into play in the season for fieldwork (tilling, planting, harvesting).

Nevertheless, continuity tends to break down when parents allow children to pursue further schooling and when matricultural transmission is disrupted: if the daughter moves away for schooling or marriage, and there is no daughter-in-law to take on the role, there is no-one to whom the mother of the family can directly pass her knowledge. Depending on the circumstances, if there is no kin to move permanently into the house, it will be

inhabited only seasonally or abandoned. As covered above, The Host recounted how she was kept from further education so that she would be local and help her parents, a common rural practice (Goina, 2024, p. 87). Her education and her wishes were sacrificed for the sake of the extended family, and subsequently, the community. Directly following from this adverse experience, she made every effort to ensure her children had a wider range of choices and supported them through schooling and moving away. In the process, she forfeited having permanent help with the household, which potentially makes her the last generation in her family that conducts a traditional, mostly self-sufficient lifestyle based on subsistence agro-pastoralism. Hence, in some cases, adverse experiences causes the women to go against the norms,[3] which can result in the dissolution of continuity owing to the women's role as anchors of the household.

Most of my participants were at an age when they identified more with their role as mothers and grandmothers and less with their role as daughters. Furthermore, since the established rapport was often based on my being perceived as a proxy-daughter, the data reflects this angle and looks at matricultural transmission between the generation of my interlocutors and their daughters(-in-law). Even so, some ascending mother-daughter interactions could be read through the lines, but there is considerable variability owing to the small number of accounts. The Host mentioned that her mother "taught her nothing" (Interviewee, identity withheld, 4 April 2026), for skills are meant to be stolen (self-taught by observing others), and, as mentioned, was not supportive of her educational aspirations. The Granny mentioned that her brother was left in charge of burying the parents, but no other notable mentions of them arose in our conversations. The Granny's daughter-in-law and her mother, though, had a closer relationship and I was told they spent many hours sewing for her dowry. They visit each other when the mother comes up the mountain, and alongside the sister-in-law to Granny's daughter-in-law, help each other whenever possible and especially around hosting larger tourist groups. The Anchor's relationship with her mother seemed more fraught, especially following her mother's remarriage. The Host's neighbour was also close with her mother, but due to mobility issues and her mother's illness, she had to devolve the care to a more able-bodied sister.

Following from the above, the data suggests that on average, despite leaving home upon marriage, the daughters maintain a close relationship with their mothers and remain responsible for at least some of the caregiving in the parents' old age. Even more, the gold standard, as derived from The Host's examples, is that a woman should be always hard-working and caring even towards those that might not deserve it. Nevertheless, the transmission between mother and daughter seems to slow after marriage, as, with

3 I also acknowledge the influence the larger socio-economic context and the changing attitudes towards education and salaried work have on this shift, but its exact mechanisms will be the object of future research.

patrilocality, the daughter-in-law takes over upon the son's marriage or the daughter moves to her husband's house and becomes part of the transmission chain from her mother-in-law. Of course, these are not rigid structures and with the availability of mobile phones there is considerable contact and continued transmission, but a significant shift happens when the women moves from the natal to the marital household.

As the community became of interest to outsiders, my participants became proxy mothers and grandmothers, feeding, hosting, and guiding visitors, resuming matricultural transmission in a new form. However, at this stage, further research is needed to ascertain whether the fragility of the matricultural transmission system leads to quicker integration or higher tolerance of newcomers. If newcomers are at odds with the community, the women have the authority, as longstanding residents of the hamlets and participants in its social life, to use their experience and worldview to highlight where the visitors are transgressing: perhaps being too nosy, seen as overly demonstrative in religious practices, or even not knowing how to properly tend to animals. The same happens when locals step out of the norm, with unwanted behaviours being brought up as negative examples. The situation is illustrative of how those tasked with transmission are also (self-)tasked with regulation. Moreover, this authority extends to all community members, regardless of their length of residence.

It must be recognized that the women's authority only operates within the larger patriarchal tradition. Men in the community are not only more visible, owing to their wider mobility, often in pursuit of paid employment, but are deferred to as decision makers and even storytellers in relation to visitors and tourists. Gendered authority is subtly embedded in everyday life: it is still the women who prepare and serve most of the meals, and while they help with more demanding physical work, it is usually the men who decide when it starts and how it is undertaken. Overall, gendered hierarchies are part of the social atmosphere of the hamlets, with unpartnered women often thought of as unable to thrive in the community, especially without male or kin support. The local matriculture framework is subordinated to this wider context, but also to the restrictions of remoteness.

The difficulty of access has long impacted life in the community. As noted, it started as a chosen attribute; my research, though, revealed instances where locals wished they could relocate, but were prevented by the low value of their (relatively inaccessible) properties. Furthermore, as families were larger in the past, many successions are not settled, making selling difficult even in the higher demand environment of today. With an increase in opportunities in the valley beginning in the last decades of the past century, as well as the dissolution of communist era employment structures, the hamlets depopulated, first because people had the means to relocate and then due to the need to search for

employment further and further afield. The remaining scarcer local population, still faced with the downsides of geographical remoteness, rely, in part, on the women's role in the household, resulting in a friction between increased authority and constraint. It is the women who usually make sure tourists benefit from attentive hospitality (meals, accommodation, storytelling). As one local once told me when approached for help with some tea on a wintery hike, "Please go to the next house over, there are two women at home and they will surely be of more help than me" (Interviewee, identity withheld, 30 December 2016). The reliance on women's labour does strengthen their importance, on one hand, allowing them authority within this sphere and increasing the likelihood of matricultural transmission, but further restricts their mobility, on the other: they have to be home not only to tend to the household and animals, but to be able to act as hosts for tourists and visitors.

Women also perceive themselves as remote, as demonstrated by Granny's daughter-in-law, who is painfully aware that her place of living prevents her from benefitting from the help of her own daughter-in-law. The Host and her neighbours also cite the length and difficulty of travel, besides the risks of leaving the household and animals unattended, as the main reason for their lack of mobility. Participants who moved away felt this more acutely and cite the difficult life as a reason to never go back to living on the mountain. However, the opposite is also true: all my research participants, including the women, pride themselves in their identity as *isolați*, which they merge into a sense of belonging and a shorthand for resilience and exceptionality.

All of my participants routinely emphasise the amount of work they need to do, which they state directly results from where they live, as, for the most part, unless the men bring supplies from the shops in the valley, they only have what they grow and preserve locally. They are keenly aware that the hollowing-out of the communities means there is less support, fewer women, fewer kin connections to rely on, and increased responsibility. While incomers can fill some gaps, including - as I have shown above - in acting as new links in transmission, it does not remove the added pressure on local women or reduce the fragility of the system. Thus, remoteness, while it does not radically alter the content or mechanisms of matricultural transmission, recontextualises how it operates. It restricts women's mobility and makes them central to the localities' existence in their current form. They are quite literally the glue that holds the community together. At the same time, remoteness-derived processes such as depopulation and touristification introduce a growing fragility to the matricultural system, exposing it to an increasing risk of dissipation due to the reducing numbers of permanent (female) residents.

Conclusion

In the above, I have explored matricultural practices in the mountain hamlets that form my field site, with particular view to lived experience, narratives, and resulting responsibilities of the local women. Following on from the situations encountered, matricultural transmission covers common elements, such as values and skills, but is also concerned with community wide social norms. The women act as the main authority within the household, but also concerning socially acceptable behaviour in the community, making them a less visible, but still notable counterpart to the traditional patriarchal authority of the men.

Matricultural transmission is not fundamentally transformed even when operating within Romanian remotenesses, with considerable similarities to other rural areas as discussed in the previous section. Even so, the remoteness adds additional pressure to a system already transforming as a result of larger socio-economical circumstances (globalisation, commodification, increased international mobility). With decreasing population, remote Romanian women have fewer avenues for unloading their responsibilities and insufficient relief via the attraction of newcomers, creating an atmosphere of fragility. More notably, remoteness places at odds the mothers' efforts to expand their children's opportunities, especially through education, with their own needs, thereby reducing their own mobility and making them indispensable to household survival.

My findings attribute the endurance of the community to the direct efforts and sacrifices of local women, sustained through the meaning and significance they themselves attribute to *womanhood*. They offer a snapshot of the community where the women actively choose to stay on the mountain, despite the personal difficulties it entails, due to the responsibilities they have accepted as wives, mothers, and daughters. While their immobility can be actively attributed to external pressures and expectations, the women have shown they are willing and able to exercise agency and go against the grain when they decide to do so, which is why I propose that acting as anchors to their households and community is a conscious, willing act, not just an inertial taking on of handed-down responsibilities. These Romanian women living in remote hamlets have an active matriculture for which they have made personal sacrifices and in which they take substantial pride.

Biography

Oana is a social anthropologist, focusing on remoteness and isolation in rural Romania, post-socialism, nostalgia, and memory. A Goldsmiths, UoL alumna, she is currently a third

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Jewish and Muslim Women in Habsburg Lands: Historiographical Essay and Research Directions

ALISON ROSE, PhD

Abstract

Women-centered approaches to Habsburg history are traversing new landscapes and developing fresh approaches and understandings of how women have contributed to the development and diversity of the monarchy. As part of this trend, many recent works have explored the lives of Jewish women in Habsburg lands, while fewer studies have focused on the lives of Muslim women. In light of this proliferation of research and new approaches, it is important to synthesize current trends and findings. This paper aims to summarize and assess the current historiography on Jewish women and Muslim women in Habsburg lands and suggest areas and directions for future research, specifically what we might learn through a comparative study of Jewish and Muslim women in Habsburg lands. As women of marginalized groups, how are their lives similar and/or different? How are their experiences shaped by the multi-ethnic contexts in which they lived? What interactions might they have had with one another? Works considered in this paper include

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Rachel Manekin's Jewish Runaways in Habsburg Galicia *(2020) and Constanze Volksmann's* Muslim Women in Austria and Germany Doing and Undoing Gender: Making Gender Differences and Hierarchies Relevant or Irrelevant *(2019)*.

Keywords: Jewish women, Muslim women, Habsburg, religion and gender, matriculture

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Résumé

Les approches de l'histoire des Habsbourg centrées sur les femmes ouvrent de nouvelles perspectives et permettent de développer des méthodes et des compréhensions inédites quant à la contribution des femmes au développement et à la diversité de la monarchie. S'inscrivant dans cette tendance, de nombreux ouvrages récents ont exploré la vie des femmes juives dans les territoires des Habsbourg, tandis que peu d'études se sont penchées sur celle des femmes musulmanes. Face à cette multiplication des recherches et des approches, il convient de dresser un bilan des tendances et des résultats actuels. Cet article propose une synthèse et une évaluation de l'historiographie existante sur les femmes juives et musulmanes dans les territoires des Habsbourg, tout en suggérant des pistes pour de futures recherches — en particulier ce que nous pourrions apprendre grâce à une étude comparative des femmes juives et musulmanes dans ces territoires. En tant que femmes appartenant à des minorités, en quoi leurs vies se rejoignent-elles ou, au contraire, se distinguent-elles ? Comment leurs expériences ont-elles été façonnées par les contextes multiethniques dans lesquels elles ont vécu ? Quelles interactions ont pu exister entre elles ? Les ouvrages examinés dans cet article incluent Jewish Runaways in Habsburg Galicia *(« Jeunes juifs en fugue dans la Galicie des Habsbourg », 2020) de Rachel Manekin et* Muslim Women in Austria and Germany Doing and Undoing Gender: Making Gender Differences and Hierarchies Relevant or Irrelevant *(« Les femmes musulmanes en Autriche et en Allemagne : construire et déconstruire le genre — rendre les différences et les hiérarchies de genre pertinentes ou non pertinentes », 2019) de Constanze Volksmann.*

Mots-clés : femmes juives, femmes musulmanes, Habsbourg, religion et genre, matriculture

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Introduction

Women-centered approaches to Habsburg history are traversing new landscapes and developing fresh approaches and understandings of how women have contributed to and navigated through the development and diversity of the monarchy. As part of this trend, several recent works have explored the lives of Jewish women in Habsburg lands; while fewer studies have focused on the lives of Muslim women as a smaller number of Muslims lived in Habsburg lands, some works have begun to look at their lives as well. However, the parallels in the lives of Jewish and Muslim women under Habsburg rule have not yet been explored. As women of marginalized groups, how were their lives similar and/or different? How were their experiences shaped by the multiethnic and religiously diverse contexts in which they lived? How were they impacted by the gender roles and expectations within their respective religions and cultures? To what extent did those contexts, cultures, and religious communities sustain, express, and welcome women's participation? How did Jewish and Muslim women create, shape, and pass down their cultures and traditions within their communities?

This article uses the concept of matriculture as a framework for addressing these questions, aiming to compare Jewish and Muslim experiences in Habsburg lands through the lens of cultural aspects that inform women's lives and as lived by women. It will begin by defining the concept of matriculture and follow with an overview of the history and historiography of Jews and Muslims in Habsburg lands. It will then review the literature on Jewish and Muslim women in Habsburg lands looking for similarities and differences in their lived experiences, roles, and relationships. While the article focuses on the period from the formation of the Dual Monarchy in 1867 to its fall in 1918, it will also consider the historical background of the Habsburg Jewish and Muslim communities and how they were impacted by later events such as the collapse of the monarchy, the Anschluss, and the Holocaust.

What is matriculture?

Marie-Françoise Guédon introduced the term 'matriculture' based on Clifford Geertz's cultural systems theory in response to assumptions that women are part of an "essentially masculine whole on which they depend for their existence, or from which they derive their identity and definition." Matriculture is defined as "that part of those components of culture that sustain, express, and welcome women's participation in the socio-cultural fabric." It refers to the system of symbols in a society which pertains to women, the maternal, and the feminine. It places the lived experience of women and their roles at the center of analysis. Any society can be studied through the lens of matriculture. It may be minimal or essential. Matriculture leads to questioning received ideas such as notions of

domesticity, public/private realms, men as default leaders, power being everywhere defined in the same way, menstruation always marked as impure, and that nuclear families are more moral than extended families. Matriculture embraces and celebrates diversity.[1]

The concept of matriculture relates to the cultural construction of gender. Both men and women shape, create, and maintain a society's matriculture. "Men in human societies play crucial roles in the creation, performance, and maintenance of matricultures" and "women have played – and continue to play – essential roles in the preservation, revitalization, and decolonization of colonized Indigenous societies."[2] As a research tool for examining and comparing the body of symbols, meanings, and social relationships pertaining to women from a range of societies, matriculture can provide a useful framework for comparing Jewish and Muslim women's lives and experiences in Habsburg lands. It invites us to ask questions such as: What did each community's matriculture look like? What roles did Jewish and Muslim men play in creating matricultures? How did matricultures affect Jewish and Muslim women's roles and perceptions of them? Can the concept account for similarities and differences in their experiences? What roles did Jewish and Muslim women play in preserving their cultures? What religious roles did they play, and how has their status changed over time? What were their lived experiences? And how did women pass down traditions, cultural knowledge, identity, and heritage?

The framework of matriculture focuses attention on certain shared characteristics of Jewish and Muslim women's lives in Habsburg lands. Both lived in multiethnic contexts within cultures and religions that defined, limited, and regulated their roles and opportunities. They were stereotyped by the dominant culture and affected by modernization and reform. They navigated between two worlds, asserted their agency, passed down and sometimes resisted cultural knowledge, preserved their heritage, maintained their identities, and enriched Habsburg culture and society by contributing to its diversity.

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[1] Marie-Françoise Guédon, 'Introduction,' *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies* 1(1), May 2020, 3-7. URL: https://www.networkonculture.ca/assets/matrix/Volume%201,%20Issue%20I%20(May%202020)/2%20Introduction%20Guedon/2%20%20Introduction%20(en)%20%20Guedon.pdf; accessed 30 October 2026.

[2] Patrick J. Jung, 'Men and Masculinities from Matricultural Perspectives: An Introduction,' *Matrix*: *A Journal for Matricultural Studies* 4(2) Autumn 2025, 4. URL: https://journal.networkonculture.ca/index.php/matrix/index; accessed 30 October 2026.

History and Historiography of Jews in Habsburg Lands: A Common Experience?

Jews had a long history in Habsburg lands, were distributed throughout the monarchy, and were highly diversified in their histories, cultural backgrounds, and experiences. Due to the disunity of the empire, the geographic dispersion of the Jews, and the multiple legal jurisdictions under which they lived, it is debated whether one can speak of a common, coherent Jewish experience in Habsburg lands. Hillel Kieval has argued convincingly for a common Habsburg Jewish experience based on the Habsburg quest for imperial expansion, administrative and legal reform, and social control as well as on the consolidation of Ashkenazi rabbinic leadership and the intricate network of cross-regional family and communal ties.[3]

Jewish presence in Habsburg lands grew as a result of the monarchy's expansion from Lower Austria and the Bohemian Crown Lands to incorporation of the Kingdom of Hungary in 1526, Galicia from Poland-Lithuania in 1772 and 1795, Bukovina from the Ottoman Empire in 1774-75, Tuscany in 1737-1859, and the occupation and annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878 and 1908. Familiants Laws in the 1720s capping the number of Jewish households in Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia led to internal migration as Jewish younger sons moved into the countryside and Hungarian and Polish territories.[4] Jews in these regions were divided by language, religious leadership, social aspirations, and historical experiences as well as by geography. They lived under local and regional jurisdictions until Joseph II's Edicts of Toleration in the 1780s. With the *Ausgleich* (compromise) of 1867, the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary was created with two legislatively and bureaucratically distinct halves and separate political and legal spheres for Habsburg Jewry.[5]

Despite these divisions, "a shared sense of dynastic loyalty; then patriotic sentiments about the land and its inhabitants; and eventually, even adumbrations of modern nationalism" drew the diverse parts together.[6] Habsburg Jewish identity was built on the

[3] Hillel J. Kieval, 'Was There a Habsburg Jewish Experience?' *Austrian History Yearbook* 56 (2025): 1-10. Annual Robert A. Kann Memorial Lecture.
[4] For more on the impact of the Familiants Laws, see Martina Niedhammer, 'Gender and Family in Jewish Historiography on the Bohemian Lands: A Critical Survey,' *Studia Judaica* 19 (2016), nr 1 (37), 115-116; and Michael L. Miller, 'Absolutism and Control: Jews in the Bohemian Lands in the Eighteenth Century,' in Kateřina Čapková and Hillel J. Kieval, eds., *Prague and Beyond: Jews in the Bohemian Lands* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 72.
[5] Kieval, 'Was There a Habsburg Jewish Experience?' 2-3.
[6] Michael K. Silber, 'The Making of Habsburg Jewry in the Long Eighteenth Century,' in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, Volume 7, The Early Modern World, 1500-1815, eds. Jonathan Karp and Adam Sutcliffe, 763-797 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 763.

consolidation of rabbinic culture and expanded family networks. “Finally, in addition to elite rabbinic culture and long stretches of internal migration, it was the Josephinian enlightened absolutist reforms of the late eighteenth century and the democratic movements of 1848-49 that contributed most to the creation of a Habsburg Jewish experience.”[7] These reforms imposed a more or less uniform set of regulations on Jewish education, courts, communal structure, occupational choices, naming practices, and military service. Jewish schools throughout the monarchy taught an approved curriculum in the German language integrating the monarchy’s various Jewries. The decision to have German as the language of instruction in Jewish schools and communal records throughout most of the empire meant that Jews in the monarchy “would speak, read, and write the same language.”[8]

The last barriers to occupational and economic activity, movement, and property ownership were removed in 1860. The Jews of Cisleithania were emancipated in 1867 and in Hungary in 1868. Internal migration continued, particularly from Galicia to Hungary and from both regions to Vienna.

> [*Habsburg Jews*] reassemble, move about, and regroup in ever new ways, often because they had little alternative. They confronted and traversed political and cultural borders, acculturated to new linguistic and social settings, and through all this movement, dislocation, and relocation, Jews maintained connection and cultural coherence… Jews of the Habsburg Empire did share a common, overarching, boundary crossing, historical experience that emerged from centuries of familial, cultural, and ethnic ties across the empire.[9]

The state’s desire to foster the Jews’ loyalty affected their policies. Jews indeed were loyal to Austria and have been referred to as the only true Austrians.[10] By the turn of the twentieth century, there were over two million Jews in Austria-Hungary making up over four percent of the population, a fifth of the world’s Jewish population.

Despite these commonalities, there were significant regional differences in the compositions, histories, and religious orientations of Jewish populations that came under Habsburg rule. Vienna, the capital of the Habsburg monarchy, was home to almost two hundred thousand Jews by World War I, making it the largest Jewish community of Western or Central Europe. The community was composed of immigrants from the

[7] Kieval, ‘Was There a Habsburg Jewish Experience?’ 5.
[8] Kieval, ‘Was There a Habsburg Jewish Experience?’ 5-6.
[9] Kieval, ‘Was There a Habsburg Jewish Experience?’ 10.
[10] Tim Corbett, ‘Once ‘the Only True Austrians’: Mobilizing Jewish Memory of the First World War for Belonging in the New Austrian Nation, 1929-1938,’ *The Jewish Experience of the First World War*, eds. E. Madigan and G. Reuveni, (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 255-276.

Austrian provinces of Bohemia, Moravia, Galicia, and Hungary. Unlike non-Jewish immigrants, Jews came with their entire families and therefore women came from the same parts of the monarchy as men.[11] "The Jewish population of Hungary reached its peak with over 900,000 Jews in 1910 and was deeply divided by schisms due to the geographic origin of waves of immigration from different parts of the monarchy."[12] According to the census of 1910, the number of Jews in Bohemian lands stood at about 140,426, constituting 1.4 percent of the population with 42.7 percent living in cities, compared to only 26.2 percent who lived in cities in 1880.[13]

Acquired by the Habsburgs from the Ottoman Empire in 1775, Bukovina consisted of Ruthenians (Ukrainians), Romanians, Germans, Poles, and Jews, although German was its official language.[14] Bukovinan Jews embraced German language and culture; they continued to practice Judaism while becoming politically, economically, and culturally integrated. By 1900, Jews comprised thirty percent of the residents in Czernowitz (30,000 out of 80,000) and 40,000 by the start of the First World War, constituting the highest proportion of Jewish population of any large Austrian city, while Bukovina had the highest Jewish proportion of Jewish population of any Austrian crown land – almost thirteen percent, numbering a little over 100,000 just prior to the First World War.[15]

Galicia was incorporated into Austria from Poland in 1772. Until 1867, its official language was German.[16] After 1867, Galicia was granted limited regional autonomy. The capital city

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[11] Erika Weinzierl, *The Jewish Middle Class in Vienna in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, Working Paper 01-1. October 2003. Center for Austrian Studies. 3, citing Marsha Rozenblit, *The Jews of Vienna, 1867-1914: Assimilation and Identity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983).

[12] Katalin Fenyves, 'Jewish Women in Poland and Hungary.' *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*. Liverpool University Press, Volume 31, 2019, 143-144.

[13] Michal Frankl, Martina Niedhammer, and Ines Koeltzsch, 'Contested Equality: Jews in the Bohemian Lands, 1861-1917,' in Kateřina Čapková and Hillel J. Kieval, eds., *Prague and Beyond: Jews in the Bohemian Lands* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 124.

[14] Albert Lichtblau and Michael John, 'Jewries in Galicia and Bukovina, in Lemberg and Czernowitz: Two Divergent Examples of Jewish Communities in the Far East of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy,' in Sander L. Gilman and Milton Shain, eds., *Jewries at the Frontier: Accommodation, Identity, Conflict.* 29-66 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 41, citing Hermann Sternberg, 'Zur Geschichte der Juden in Czernowitz,' in Hugo Gold, *Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina*, 2 vols. (Tel Aviv: Olamenu, 1962), 2:27-47; and Joseph Karniel, *Die Toleranzpolitik Kaiser Josephs II* (Gerlingen: Bleicher, 1985), 437-8.

[15] David Rechter, 'A Jewish El Dorado? Myth and Politics in Habsburg Czernowitz,' in Richard I. Cohen, Jonathan Frankel, and Stefani Hoffman, eds., *Insiders and Outsiders: Dilemmas of East European Jewry*, 207-220 (Oxford and Portland, OR: Littman Library, 2010), 212; Lichtblau and John, 'Jewries in Galicia and Bukovina, in Lemberg and Czernowitz,' 45.

[16] Markian Prokopovych, *Habsburg Lemberg: Architecture, Public Space, and Politics in the Galician Capital, 1772-1914* (Purdue University Press, 2009), 3, 7.

of Lemberg (Lviv) grew from 29,500 to 212,000 on the eve of World War I.[17] Eleven percent of the population of Galicia was Jewish, and the Jewish community of Lemberg became the largest one in Galicia and the second largest in the Austrian Empire apart from Vienna. The Jews of Lemberg divided into four main political orientations: pro-German integrationists, Orthodox, pro-Polish integrationists, and Zionists.[18] Over time, the pro-German integrationists lost ground to the pro-Polish integrationists.[19] With the rise of nationalism and antisemitism, Lemberg Jewry shifted its orientation towards Orthodoxy and Zionism. Lemberg's Jews straddled all religious orientations; traditional Orthodox, Hasidic, Reform, and Enlightened Jews (Maskilim) could be found there.[20]

The Jews in Bosnia and Herzegovina date back to the first century. Romaniote Jews were joined by Sephardic Jews after the expulsions from Spain and Portugal. Many settled in Sarajevo alongside Muslims, Orthodox Serbs, and Catholic Croats, where they built a synagogue and established an organized community. Bosnia and Herzegovina was one of the few places where Jews were not subjected to pogroms or forced conversions. Until the Holocaust, they were an integral part of the socioeconomic, cultural, and political milieu. At the end of the nineteenth century, Ashkenazim who descended from refugees expelled from England, France, Hungary, and German states entered Bosnia in large numbers and created an Ashkenazic religious community in Sarajevo. Eventually, Bosnian Sephardim and Ashkenazim would be joined together under the Habsburgs.[21]

The Bosnian Jews partially succeeded in attaining a nationality status, but they were not totally recognized in Austria and not recognized at all in Hungary.[22] In 1906, they were granted religious autonomy and included in the government. In 1910, the Habsburgs

[17] Michael Stalislawski, *A Murder in Lemberg: Politics, Religion, and Violence in Modern Jewish History* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 19.
[18] Rachel Manekin, 'The Debate over Assimilation in Late Nineteenth Century Lwów,' in Richard I. Cohen, Jonathan Frankel, and Stefani Hoffman, eds., *Insiders and Outsiders: Dilemmas of East European Jewry*, 120-130 (Oxford and Portland OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010), 120, citing Ezra Mendelsohn, 'From Assimilation to Zionism in Lvov: The Case of Alfred Nossig,' *Slavonic and East European Review*, 49 (1971), 521-34; and 'Jewish Assimilation in Lvov: The Case of Wilhelm Feldman,' in Andrei S. Markovits and Frank E. Sysen, eds., *Nationbuilding and the Politics of Nationalism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 94-110, and *Painting a People: Maurycy Gottlieb and Jewish Art* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2002), 577-590
[19] Manekin, 'The Debate,' 121. According to Lichtblau and John, 'Jewries in Galicia and Bukovina, in Lemberg and Czernowitz,' 1867 was a turning point in the orientation of Lemberg's Jews away from German towards Polish integration. Polish socialists advocated equal rights for Jews, and Zionists tended to assimilate to Polish culture. 34-5.
[20] Michael Stanislawski, *A Murder in Lemberg: Politics, Religion, and Violence in Modern Jewish History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 28-30.
[21] Francine Friedman, *Like Salt for Bread: The Jews of Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 194-195.
[22] Friedman, *Like Salt for Bread*, 195.

granted Bosnia and Herzegovina its own constitution and gave the major religious communities self-rule over religious and cultural matters. The three major religions, Islam, Orthodox Christianity, and Catholicism, received large state subsidies, but the Jews were under-subsidized. After the Jewish representative complained, some adjustment was made.[23] The Bosnian Jewish population grew by 246 percent between 1879 and 1910, from 3426 to 11,868 people. By 1911, Bosnian Jews supported thirty-one religious communities in twenty-seven locations.[24] Over half of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Jews lived in Sarajevo (more than six thousand by 1910), and there were also substantial numbers in smaller towns.[25] They were scattered throughout the land and economically successful. The meeting with Ashkenazim caused the Sephardim to redefine their cultural identity. The Ashkenazim brought Austro-Hungarian culture into Bosnia and Herzegovina.[26]

History and Historiography of Muslims in Habsburg Lands: A Bosnian Islamic Tradition

In contrast to the widespread presence of Jews in Habsburg lands, Muslims lived primarily in Bosnia and Herzegovina; they were present when the Habsburgs occupied the region in 1878 and then attempted to annex it from the Ottoman Empire in 1908. The Habsburgs' colonial policies and efforts to integrate them shaped the lives of the nearly half a million Muslims that came under Austro-Hungarian control and led to a new and distinct religious and cultural identity, a Bosnian Islamic tradition.[27] Farid Hafez writes, "as the only 'real' colony of the Dual Monarchy, Bosnia and Hercegovina, with its large Muslim population, represents an ideal case study to investigate the power relations between a colonizing empire that was embedded in Christian normativity and an 'othered' Muslim population."[28]

Muslims and some Christian Orthodox Serbs put up fierce opposition and resistance to the Habsburg occupation, while the then-small Jewish community remained neutral.[29] It took 170,000 Habsburg troops three months to establish control; a large number of Muslims,

[23] Friedman, *Like Salt for Bread*, 204-207.
[24] Friedman, *Like Salt for Bread*, 209.
[25] Friedman, *Like Salt for Bread*, 212.
[26] Friedman, *Like Salt for Bread*, 232, 235.
[27] Farid Hafez, *Governing Islam in Austria and Germany: From Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2026), 70-71.
[28] Hafez, *Governing Islam*, 20.
[29] Martin Gabriel, 'Ambivalent Perceptions: Austria-Hungary, Bosnian Muslims and the Occupation Campaign in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1878),' in *Imagining Bosnian Muslims in Central Europe: Representations, Transfers and Exchanges*, ed. František Šísteck, 63-75, (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2021), 66.

including women and children, were killed.[30] The battle for Sarajevo was brutal and many Muslims fled.[31] "This exodus was particularly alarming for the Habsburg authorities; should the Muslim population be whittled away, the Orthodox population could be lent an absolute majority, thus reinforcing Belgrade's claims over Bosnia."[32] In order to prevent this from happening, the Habsburg authorities provided full citizenship rights and religious freedom for the entire Bosnian population.[33] Bosnian Muslims had identified by their religion when living under Muslim rule, but during the period of Habsburg control (1878-1918), they underwent a political awakening.

> Bosnian Muslims castigated the Roman Catholic Church for proselytizing, with governmental concurrence…. The Austro-Hungarian presence eventually won grudging acquiescence from Muslim leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina by ensuring that those leaders maintained their existing socioeconomic position and way of life.[34]

The Habsburgs prioritized Bosnian identities as religious in an attempt to curb nationalism, and public imperial celebrations showcased the integration of religious structures. The emperor, a Catholic, engaged in Catholic rituals and attended celebrations of the Eastern Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim religious societies where he was blessed by priests, ministers, and rabbis.[35] Aspiring to separate Bosnian Muslims from the influence of the Ottoman Empire and its highest Islamic office, the *sheikh ul-Islam*, the Austro-Hungarian authorities appointed the first *Reis-ul-Ulema* – chief spiritual leader of the Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They also formed a council of four members, which became the first Bosnian Muslim Islamic institution independent of Istanbul. Sharia provisions were limited to matters of family and inheritance and the administration of the *waqf*s (endowments). Bosnian Muslims welcomed many of the reforms, but conflicts emerged over the management of *waqf*s and certain aspects of education.[36]

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[30] Hafez, *Governing Islam*, 40-41.
[31] Gabriel, 'Ambivalent Perceptions,' 69.
[32] Fabio Giomi, *Making Muslim Women European: Voluntary Associations, Gender, and Islam in Post-Ottoman Bosnia and Yugoslavia (1878-1941)* (Central European University Press, 2021), 31.
[33] Fabio Giomi, *Making Muslim Women European,* 31-32; Robin Okey, *Taming Balkan Nationalism: The Habsburg 'Civilizing Mission' in Bosnia, 1878-1914.* (Oxford U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8.
[34] Francine Friedman, *The Bosnian Muslims: Denial of a Nation* (Boulder Co: Westview Press, 1996), 57-88, 63-64.
[35] Hafez, *Governing Islam,* 51.
[36] Dino Abazović, 'Religion and State in Bosnia Herzegovina,' in Sevgi Adak, Thomas Schmidinger, eds. *The Enduring Legacy of the Habsburg Islam Policy: Muslim Communities in Central and Southeast Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025), 124-125; URL: http://www.jstor.org.proxy177.nclive.org/stable/10.3366/jj.25700644, accessed 25 March 2026.

Benjámin von Kállay, the administrator of the occupied territories appointed in 1882, said that Austria was "charged with the mission of carrying civilization to Oriental peoples."[37] In pursuing their "civilizing mission," the Habsburgs established multi-confessional schools open to boys and girls.[38] The government founded 535 Muslim schools, 54 Catholic, and 56 Christian Orthodox primary schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It also opened 239 state primary schools by 1904-1905. Certificates from secondary schools, which emerged more slowly, were recognized across the monarchy.[39] The initial Croatian textbooks were replaced by a new set of textbooks between 1883 and 1893 which added characters with Muslim names and encouraged religious tolerance and coexistence.[40]

The absence of a university in Bosnia and Herzegovina meant that high school students who wanted to continue their education had to do so in different parts of the monarchy – in Zagreb, Vienna, and Graz, where they depended on scholarships. Muslim students were funded by the Provincial Government in Sarajevo to attend the University of Vienna. The first generation of Muslim students had a hybrid identity between their Islamic faith and their Western belief in the enlightenment. Many of the students developed a resistance to Austro-Hungarian rule. The initiatives to foster loyalty through education "largely failed because domestic Muslim politicians and intellectuals saw Austro-Hungarian rule as foreign, believing that the adoption of European ways of life would jeopardize Muslim identity."[41]

Subjects of Bosnia and Herzegovina were never given Austrian or Hungarian citizenship due to the perception of their 'backwardness.' In 1909, Muslims petitioned to establish a mosque in Vienna. Even though more than 600,000 Muslims were living in the monarchy, and hundreds were in military service in Vienna, their application was rejected. After 1911, they sought protection from the Dual Empire rather than opposing the government's intervention into their religious affairs. They felt that the Dual Monarchy was preferable to a Yugoslavian state.[42] The Islam Act of 1912 provided "a certain legal security and formal

[37] Clemens Ruthner, 'Sleeping Beauty's Awakening: Habsburg Colonialism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1878-1918,' in *Imagining Bosnian Muslims in Central Europe: Representations, Transfers and Exchanges*, ed. František Šísteck, 76-91 (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2021), 82.
[38] Fabio Giomi, 'Daughters of Two Empires: Muslim Women and Public Writing in Habsburg Bosnia and Herzegovina (1878-1918),' *Aspasia*, Volume 9, Issue 1, 2015, 1-18.
[39] Amila Kasumović and Tomasz Jacek Lis, 'Fostering Loyalty to the Habsburg Cause: Muslim Students from Bosnia and Herzegovina at the University of Vienna, 1899-1911,' *Social History* 50:3, 2025, 311-333. DOI: 10.1080/03071022.2025.2506884 312-314
[40] Oliver Pejić, 'The Portrayal of Muslims in Austro-Hungarian State Primary School Textbooks for Bosnia and Herzegovina,' in *Imagining Bosnian Muslims in Central Europe: Representations, Transfers and Exchanges*, edited by František Šísteck. 92-103 (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2021), 93-95.
[41] Kasumović and Lis, 'Fostering Loyalty to the Habsburg Cause,' 313, 324, 330.
[42] Hafez, *Governing Islam*, 67.

structures to Muslim communities in Austria, recognition of the Hanafi rite [a school of Sunni Islam with which most Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina were affiliated] as a religious community, and guarantees religious freedom."[43] Although it was meant to integrate the Muslim population into Austria-Hungary, only a few Bosnian Muslims migrated to Cisleithania, and just 889 Muslims were living in Vienna in 1909.[44]

After World War I, the few Muslims who remained in Austria assembled in private associations, such as the Oriental Association and the Islamic Cultural Association. After the *Anschluss* to Germany in 1938, the Islamic Cultural Association was dissolved. From the 1960s on, the labour migration of workers led to a growth in the Muslim population in Austria and in Europe in general, though it was not until the late 1990s that their religious affiliation became "relevant in the public discourse."[45]

Jewish and Muslim Women in Habsburg Lands: Historiography and Themes

Jewish and Muslim women's lives in Habsburg lands varied and were shaped by several factors including government restrictions, gender conventions and limitations, multiethnic contexts, and new opportunities that became available to them. While women's lives differed depending on where they lived, social class, and religious observance, they shared the experience of being discriminated against and navigating their lives and identities in multiethnic and complex historical and social contexts. In these situations, Jewish and Muslim women shaped their communities' matricultures by accumulating and passing down knowledge, caring for others, sharing responsibilities, and creating female networks.

Studies of Muslim women in Habsburg lands have focused almost entirely on Bosnia and Herzegovina, the only Habsburg territory with a large Muslim population, while most studies of Habsburg Jewish women have concentrated on Vienna, even though three quarters of Jewish women lived in Galicia, Bukovina, and Hungary.[46] Several recent works

[43] Constanze Volkmann, *Muslim Women in Austria and Germany Doing and Undoing Gender: Making Gender Differences and Hierarchies Relevant or Irrelevant* (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2019), 15.
[44] Jan Kreisky, 'Austro-Hungarian Confessional Politics in Bosnia Herzegovina: International Law, Muslim Autonomy Movements and the Islam Act of 1912.' 21-37, in Sevgi Adak, Thomas Schmidinger, eds. *The Enduring Legacy of the Habsburg Islam Policy: Muslim Communities in Central and Southeast Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025), 34; URL: http://www.jstor.org.proxy177.nclive.org/stable/10.3366/jj.25700644. Accessed 25 March 2026.
[45] Volkmann, 14-15.
[46] On Jewish women in Vienna, see Alison Rose, *Jewish Women in Fin de Siècle Vienna* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008); Elisabeth Malleier, *Jüdische Frauen in Wien, 1816-1938: Wohlfahrt –*

have focused on Jewish women in Galicia, such as Rachel Manekin's work on Jewish runaways and Keely Stauter-Halsted's studies of Jewish prostitution.[47] There has been less research on Jewish women in Bohemia, Moravia, Bukovina, Hungary, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and rural areas of Austria.[48] With regard to Bohemia, Martina Niedhammer points out shortcomings in the historiography in areas such as Jewish women's contributions to liturgical reform, points of intersection in men's and women's duties, and the specific experiences of Jewish men in the Bohemian Lands. It is also "hard to find serious works that look more closely at regions of the Bohemian lands other than the capital, Prague."[49]

Mädchenbildung – Frauenarbeit (Vienna: Mandelbaum Verlag, 2003); Michaela Raggam-Blesch, *Zwischen Ost und West: Identitätskonstruktionen jüdischer Frauen in Wien* (Studien Verlag, 2008); Harriet Pass Freidenreich, *Female, Jewish, and Educated: The Lives of Central European University Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002)*;* Elisabeth Malleier, 'Making the World a Better Place. Welfare and Politics, Welfare as Politics? Activities of Jewish Women in Vienna before 1938.' *Aschkenas* 16.1 (2007): 261–268*;* Susanne Korbel, 'Spaces of Gendered Jewish and Non-Jewish Encounters: Bed Lodgers, Domestic Workers, and Sex Workers in Vienna, 1900–1930,' *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 65 (2020); Tim Corbett, 'A 'Capable Wife' or a 'Woman of Valor'? Reading Gendered Discourses and the Commemoration of Women in Vienna's Jewish Cemeteries,' in *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, 32: (2008): 77-101; Waltraud Heindl, 'Zur Entwickelung des Frauenstudiums in Österreich' in *Durch Erkenntis zu Freihiet und Glück… Frauen an der Universität Wien ab 1897*, eds. Waltraud Heindl and Martina Tichy (Vienna: Westdeutscher Univerisitätsverlag, 1993), 17-26.

[47] Rachel Manekin, 'The Lost Generation: Education and Female Conversion in Fin-de-Siècle Kraków,' *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, 18 (2005): 189-219, *The Rebellion of the Daughters: Jewish Runaways in Habsburg Galicia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), and 'From Anna Kluger to Sarah Schenirer: Women's Education in Kraków and Its Discontents,' in Elissa Bemporad and Glenn Dynner, eds., *Jewish Women in Modern Eastern and East Central Europe.* 29-59 (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2022); Nancy Wingfield, *The World of Prostitution in Late Imperial Austria* (Oxford University Press, 2017) and 'Gendered Moral Panics in the Late Habsburg Monarchy: Prostitution, Sex Trafficking, and Venereal Disease,' in *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, 2022, Vol. 1, 292-300; Keely Stauter-Halsted, ''A Generation of Monsters': Jews, Prostitution, and Racial Purity in the 1892 L'viv White Slavery Trial,' *Austrian History Yearbook* 39 (2007): 25-35, *The Devil's Chain: Prostitution and Social Control in Partitioned Poland* (New York, 2015), and 'Moral Panic and the Prostitute in Partitioned Poland: Middle-Class Respectability in Defense of the Modern Nation.' *Slavic Review* 68, no 3 (Fall 2009), 572-3.

[48] For Hungary, see Fenyves, 'Jewish Women in Poland and Hungary.' For Bukovina, see Amy Colin, 'Writings from the Margins: German-Jewish Women Poets from the Bukovina,' *Studies in 20th Century Literature*: Vol. 21: (1997) Iss. 1, Article 3. https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1407, accessed 30 October 2026; on Bohemia and Moravia, see Martina Niedhammer, 'Gender and Family in Jewish Historiography on the Bohemian Lands: A Critical Survey,' *Studia Judaica* 19 (2016), nr 1 (37), s. 111-128. doi: 10.4467/24500100STJ.16.005.5351; Anna Hájková, *The Last Ghetto: An Everyday History of Theresienstadt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); and Kateřina Čapkova and Hillel J. Kieval, eds., *Prague and Beyond: Jews in the Bohemian Lands* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021). For the Austrian provinces, see Alison Rose, *Antisemitism, Gender Bias, and the "Hervay Affair" of 1904: Bigotry in the Austrian Alps* (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2016).

[49] Niedheimer, 'Gender and Family in Jewish Historiography on the Bohemian Lands,' 123.

Works about the lives of Muslim women in Habsburg lands are few and far between, though they touch on some similar themes. Fabio Giomi's work looks at Muslim women's education and participation in voluntary associations in Habsburg Bosnia and Herzegovina, while Ninja Bumann focuses on Islamic divorce and mixed marriages in Habsburg Bosnia and Herzegovina. M. Šerić has written about the Muslim 'woman question' in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Constanze Volkmann's looks at Muslim women in Austria and Germany. These works shed light on the lives of Muslim women and how they were viewed, and challenge assertions of their passivity.[50] Several parallels and convergences with Jewish women's experiences come to light when comparing studies of Muslim and Jewish women, particularly in areas such as integration and identity, religious life, education, authorship and writing, conversions, marriage and divorce, sexuality, prostitution, and the 'woman question.' The following historiographical review will explore these common themes through the lens of matriculture, that is, by placing women at the centre of analysis when comparing the experiences of Jewish and Muslim women in Habsburg lands and the ways that historians have treated them.

Integration and identity

In Vienna and other large urban centers, Jewish women found themselves integrating into the middle class by embracing educational opportunities, liberal values, philanthropy, focusing on the family, and upholding religion and culture in the home.[51] Viennese Jewish women participated in charity, women's organizations, culture, and politics despite facing gender bias, limitations, stereotypes, and the rise of political and confessional antisemitism. They took advantage of new opportunities for education, professional careers, cultural pursuits, and political activities, using their involvement to negotiate their identities as Jews and as women in a changing world. Jewish women's salons served as gathering places for Viennese writers, artists, and intellectuals. Still, many Jewish women remained in the workforce and lived in cramped apartments in the Leopoldstadt district.[52]

Muslim women in Bosnia and Herzegovina also began to integrate into middle class culture by participating in organizations and pursuing educational opportunities, though somewhat later. For example, Muslim women's involvement in theatre began during the interwar period; this was delayed comparing to Jewish and Orthodox women, who were

[50] Giomi, *Making Muslim Women European* and 'Daughters of Two Empires'; M. Šerić, *The Muslim Woman Question in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Between Islamic Tradition and Global Modernity* (September 24, 2025), Universiteit Leiden, The Netherlands; URL: https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4261977, accessed 24 October 2026.
[51] Weinzierl, 'The Jewish Middle Class in Vienna in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries.' 14.
[52] Korbel, 'Spaces of Gendered Jewish and Non-Jewish Encounters.'

involved by 1900. Though traditionally considered to lie on the threshold between art and prostitution, being an amateur actress became increasingly accepted in Muslim society.[53]

Religious life

Both Jewish and Muslim women participated in religious organizations and were expected to uphold and pass down religious traditions. Women's religious lives and how they were impacted by modernity were of central concern in both communities. The Viennese Jewish community adopted moderate changes to public worship, such as confirmation ceremonies for girls, and rabbis and other Jewish thinkers dedicated much discussion to women's duty to uphold Judaism in the home.[54] Viennese Jewish women participated in prayer and philanthropy. A Jewish prayerbook for women, *Beruria: Gebet- und Andachtsbuch für jüdische Frauen und Mädchen* (Beruria: Prayer and Devotional book for Jewish Women and Girls) compiled by Max Grunwald in Vienna in 1907 included works by women and went through multiple editions.[55] Viennese Jewish women's organizations proliferated around the turn of the century, providing Jewish women with opportunities to enter into public life while fulfilling the religious obligation of *Tzedakah* (charity).[56]

Jewish women in Hungary also engaged in religious life, women's organizations, and educational opportunities despite facing gender restrictions and limitations. The first Hungarian translation of the *Tse'enah ure'enah* (Yiddish language bible for women) was published in 1905 and of *Die fromme Zionstochter* (a prayerbook for women and girls) in 1848. *Mirjam*, an original Hungarian prayerbook aimed at women published in 1898, became hugely popular. "The changing quality of female worship is also reflected in sermons given in the vernacular rather than in Hebrew as well as the growing number of seats in the women's sections of the newly built synagogues."[57] Hungarian Jewish women participated in women's religious organizations, such as the Pest Israelite Women's Association which created the first Jewish girls' orphanage in 1867, a kosher soup kitchen which served as a model for municipal soup kitchens established in the 1870s, and modern educational programs for Jewish girls. A short-lived magazine for Hungarian Jewish women written primarily by men, the *Magyar Zsidó Nö*, like its Polish counterpart, *Di yidishe froyenvelt*, "agreed that the Jewish identity of the future generations was entirely dependent on the Jewish mother." But they were not given any assistance in this. "They still could not obtain more Jewish learning than that provided by the religious classes of their schools" and "they had no say in the running of Jewish communal affairs, while they

[53] Giomi, *Making Muslim Women European*, 293-294.
[54] Rose, *Jewish Women in Fin de Siècle Vienna*, 27-36, 57-84.
[55] Rose, *Jewish Women in Fin de Siècle Vienna*, 44-45.
[56] Rose, *Jewish Women in Fin de Siècle Vienna*, 46-57.
[57] Fenyves, 'Jewish Women in Poland and Hungary,' 145.

had more and more to take care of themselves: many of them had to become breadwinners."[58]

In Bohemia, Jewish women navigated through residence restrictions, changing gender roles, and educational opportunities in an effort to "combine the increasingly secular way of life of the Jewish middle-class with religious traditions."[59] After the rise of the middle class and the promotion of separate female and male spheres, attitudes towards Jewish women's education shifted to focus on women as guardians or keepers of Jewish traditions.[60] *Tsedakah* (charity) played an important role for Bohemian Jewish women navigating through a male-dominated religious sphere and non-Jewish discrimination.[61] Fanny Neuda's women's prayer book, *Stunden der Andacht* (Hours of devotion, 1855), and her collection of stories, *Jugend-Erzählungen aus dem jüdischen Familienleben* (Tales of Jewish family life for youngsters, 1876) illustrate the expectations on Jewish women to both foster acculturation and uphold Jewish identity by attending to the Jewish education of their daughters.[62] Jewish cookbooks in Bohemia also demonstrate how women found ways to uphold a Jewish identity and way of life amidst growing secularization and modernization.[63]

The religious lives of Jewish women in Bosnia and Herzegovina differed due their Sephardic background and the presence of a large Muslim population. Sephardic women remained centred on home and religion, and spoke Ladino (Judeo-Spanish). They wore traditional dress – the *anterija* (long embroidered dress) and *Tokado* (small hat adorned with ducats) and were active in their own communities. [64] Muslim women in Bosnia and Herzegovina also interacted with state and religious institutions, though not as directly. Fabio Giomi's work focusing on the impact of Vienna's educational policies on Muslim women and the role of Muslim women in voluntary associations challenges the assumption that Bosnian Muslim women under Habsburg rule remained removed from social transformation.[65]

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[58] Fenyves, 'Jewish Women in Poland and Hungary,' 146-147.
[59] Niedhammer, 'Gender and Family in Jewish Historiography on the Bohemian Lands,' 113.
[60] Louise Hecht, 'Teaching Haskalah – Haskalah and Teaching: Jewish Education in the Czech Lands (a Power Play),' *Jewish Culture and History* 13 (2012), 2–3: 93–107; Niedhammer, 'Gender and Family in Jewish Historiography on the Bohemian Lands,' 118.
[61] Niedhammer, 'Gender and Family in Jewish Historiography on the Bohemian Lands,' 119.
[62] Frankl *et al*, 'Contested Equality,' 134-135.
[63] Frankl *et al*, 'Contested Equality,' 136. On Neuda's prayerbook, see Hillel J. Kieval, 'Unequal Mobility: Jews, State, and Society in an Era of Contradictions, 1790-1860,' in Kateřina Čapková and Hillel J. Kieval, eds., *Prague and Beyond: Jews in the Bohemian Lands* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 102-105.
[64] Friedman, *Like Salt for Bread: The Jews of Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 194-195.
[65] Giomi, *Making Muslim Women European*, 62.

Bosnian women played important roles in Bosnian associational culture at the turn of the century. They established their own associations, including the Dobrotvorna Zadruga Srpkinja (Serbian women's charitable society) in Banja Luka. Catholic and Jewish women volunteered in community-based associations. Jewish women participated in Jewish associations without establishing specific female chapters. Catholic women started their own chapters after 1909. While Muslim women were not as directly involved in these activities, they supported cultural and philanthropic initiatives financially.[66] Muslim women in Bosnia and Herzegovina also interacted with state and religious institutions, though not as directly. Fabio Giomi's work focusing on the impact of Vienna's educational policies on Muslim women and the role of Muslim women in voluntary associations challenges the assumption that Bosnian Muslim women under Habsburg rule remained removed from social transformation.[67]

Religion played a central role in debates about Muslim girls' education. Muslim reformers who argued for education embraced the ideology of separate spheres and saw girls' schooling as preparation for a return to the domestic realm. Opponents argued that the education provided in schools was modern and anti-religious.[68] Some Muslim progressives saw women as a hindrance to Muslim nationalization and argued that allowing them to study and socialize with non-Muslim peers would help them to develop a national collective identity. Others argued that Muslim women played a key role in preserving Bosnian ethnic integrity during Ottoman rule, and that they remained loyal to their nation despite their conversion to Islam. The credit for keeping a sense of national identity alive among the Muslims of Bosnia "could be attributed to none other than their mothers, Serbian women of Muslim faith; in the privacy of their own homes, these women had kept Serbian customs alive through songs and poetry."[69] In response to the belief that sending Muslim girls to school would destroy their faith and morality, associations stressed that it was ignorance and economic inactivity that were responsible for women's immorality. "If Muslim girls were to complete at least four years of elementary school, there would be fewer prostitutes, fewer alcoholic women and fewer venereal diseases."[70]

The Muslim 'woman question' emerged as a topic of discussion and debate in Habsburg Bosnia. Milan Nedeljković, a Serbian scholar, argued that Muslim women were isolated by veiling, segregation, and lack of education, and that Muslim men were violent, oppressive religious fanatics who enslaved submissive Muslim women. Bosnian Muslim intellectuals who were influenced by the Enlightenment view that a society's level of civilization was

[66] Giomi, *Making Muslim Women European*, 61-62.
[67] Giomi, *Making Muslim Women European*, 62.
[68] Giomi, *Making Muslim Women European*, 73.
[69] Giomi, *Making Muslim Women European*, 178.
[70] Giomi, *Making Muslim Women European*, 234.

related to the status of women published articles advocating for the reform of Islamic customs related to women.

> Muslim women were an important component of the Austro-Hungarian modernization projects. The Austro-Hungarian civilizational discourse considered the Muslim woman of key importance for the socio-cultural modernization of Bosnia and Herzegovina.[71]

Education

The Habsburg policy requiring attendance at mandatory state schools impacted both Jewish and Muslim women. Jewish families in Western Galicia were willing to send their girls to public state sponsored schools because unlike boys, there was no religious obligation for them to study Jewish texts.[72]

> In Galicia, where elementary education was compulsory, Jewish parents, regardless of their political, ideological, or religious views, did not have much choice and had to send their daughters to public schools, where they were taught Polish language and culture and where they met non-Jewish classmates… The specific character of Jewish girls' education in the Polish lands influences analyses of discourses on the body, because it complicates the linguistic choice, and more importantly, it shows the entanglement of Jewish and non-Jewish ideas about the female body that Jewish women encountered.[73]

> While Orthodox Jews in Eastern Europe often frowned upon or forbade teaching secular subjects to their sons, they had no such strictures with respect to their daughters. On the contrary, girls with knowledge of European languages, or who could help their fathers with their business accounts, were highly esteemed, even in the most Hasidic households."[74]

After the occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Habsburgs set up eleven new schools providing education for boys and girls. Muslims there put up a lot of resistance to sending their children, especially girls, to these schools, fearing that they were a cover for converting them, although laws prohibited this. Special schools for Muslim girls were

[71] Šerić, *The Muslim Woman Question in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 21-22.
[72] Manekin, *The Rebellion of the Daughters*, 23.
[73] Zuzanna Kołodziejska-Smagała, 'The Female Body in Polish Jewish Women's Writing, 1880-1918,' *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, Volume 38, (2026, Liverpool University Press): 116-117; URL: https://muse.jhu.edu/article/979787, accessed 24 October 2026.
[74] Manekin, *The Rebellion of the Daughters*, 236.

opened to accommodate them, but some wealthy girls attended the new mixed confessional schools; in many cases, the mothers or female relatives sent them. The schools led to "a first small cadre of Muslim girls … studying and learning to write in the Serbo-Croatian language."[75] Religion was central in the curriculum. Despite the shortage of space in Sarajevo's Muslim Girls' school, a classroom was reserved for religious studies and prayer.[76] In 1897, an elementary state school for Muslim girls was established in Sarajevo. In 1901, a three-year advanced course was added for them, and in 1913 a separate three-year course was added to train Muslim female teachers.[77]

In Western Galicia, Jewish girls' education in mandatory state schools led some daughters to rebel against their parents. The Polish schooling system immersed Jewish girls in Polish language and culture, creating a gap between Jewish parents and daughters and a divide between Jewish girls and boys.

> Regardless of the economic status of their families, Galician Jewish girls experienced a growing gulf between their dreams and aspirations as educated young women and their parents' traditional norms and expectations. When parents arranged a match for their educated daughters with a Hasid who lacked a modern education, a family crisis often ensued. Strong-willed daughters rebelled, and some ran away to a place that would offer them shelter for a few months, such as the Felician Sisters' convent in Kraków, which acquired a reputation for harboring female Jewish runaways.[78]

There were over 300 known cases of Jewish runaway girls who left home to escape from arranged marriages or to pursue higher education, and Manekin tells three of their stories. Michalina Araten, the daughter of a wealthy Hasidic family who was sent to a private primary school in Kraków, ran away in 1899 to the Felician Sisters' convent in Kraków because of a pending arranged marriage. She disappeared from the convent after some months and was eventually smuggled out of the country and given a new name. The case was used variously to accuse the church of kidnapping, the state of failing to protect Jews, or the Jews of using the state to attack the church. Debora Lewkowicz, daughter of a village tavern keeper who went to a school in the city of Wieliczka, on the eve of her wedding ran away to the Felician Sisters' Convent where she was baptized and prepared for a job as a governess. Anna Kluger lived in a suburb of Kraków where her parents sent her to one of the best private schools in the city. When she was 15, her parents arranged a marriage; she acquiesced but continued her studies in secret after the marriage which

[75] Giomi, *Making Muslim Women European,* 35.
[76] Giomi, *Making Muslim Women European*, 50.
[77] Giomi, 'Daughters of Two Empires,' 5.
[78] Manekin, *The Rebellion of the Daughters,* 3.

remained unconsummated. Despite her mother's efforts to prevent her education, she received her matriculation certificate in 1908 and registered at the Jagiellonian University, In 1909, she ran away with her younger sister and hid in a convent abroad and fought to be released from her father's custody. She lost in a local court and took her case to the supreme court in Vienna, where she won. She continued her studies at the University of Vienna, earned a PhD in history, returned to Kraków, and became a teacher in a Hebrew high school.[79]

Habsburg Jewish women pursued higher education when it became available. The first girls' high school was opened in Budapest in 1896, and a disproportionate number of Jewish women entered the University of Vienna when it opened to women in 1897. Many of the first women graduating in Hungary were Jewish, and the ratio of Jewish girls graduating from high school was higher than the ratio of boys in 1910-11 (38 percent compared to 21.2 percent). "During the first ten years when women were admitted to Budapest University, nearly half of the total number was Jewish, while Jewish male students made up only a third of the male student body."[80]

Daughters of wealthier Bosnian Jewish families began to attend the middle school in Sarajevo, and in 1912, the first Bosnian woman to graduate from Mostar's high school, Berta Bergman (1892-1945), was Jewish. In 1904, 67 of the 187 girls enrolled in the State High School for girls were Jewish. The wealthy also sent their daughters abroad to boarding schools to increase their marriageability.[81]

> Christian and Jewish Women of the Yugoslav region—whether they lived in the Ottoman or Habsburg Empire, or in the Serbian and Montenegrin states—experienced new forms of education, learned to write and speak in public, joined the paid work-force, transformed their consumption practices and everyday life, and took part in the political struggle amidst the ranks of nationalist, socialist and feminist movements.[82]

Jews founded the Jewish Cultural-Educational and Humanitarian Society Benevolence (*La Benevolencija*) in Sarajevo in 1892 to support apprentices and the poor. The organization later expanded into a major hub of Jewish life.[83]

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[79] Manekin, *The Rebellion of the Daughters*, and 'From Anna Kluger to Sarah Schenirer.' 5.
[80] Fenyves, 'Jewish Women in Poland and Hungary,' 148.
[81] Friedman, *Like Salt for Bread*, 242.
[82] Giomi, *Making Muslim Women European*, 4.
[83] Friedman, *Like Salt for Bread*, 244.

Jewish and Muslim women writers

Increased educational opportunities resulted the emergence of Jewish and Muslim women writers who expressed their identities and asserted their agency through their texts. Zuzanna Kołodziejska-Smagała shows how Polish Jewish women voiced their views on the 'woman question' and pursued integration through their writing. There were about fifteen female Jewish writers between 1880 and 1914 and about ten who wrote ego-documents; this was a higher number than male Jewish numbers for the same period. They wrote about political participation, the national question, and how girls' education might secure women more equality. They did not necessarily advocate a change in gender roles or the abandonment of the patriarchal discourse. They wrote critically of traditional, arranged marriages which they saw as exploitative of young people and introduced the theme of sex education into their works. They presented a simplified picture of Jewish culture, did not mention issues that might provoke antisemitism, and highlighted similarities between Polish and Jewish cultures. They avoided topics that might give credence to Christian stereotypes about Jewish attitudes to the body. Jewish women writers discussed sexuality and hygiene but made almost no mention of the *mikveh* (ritual bath).[84]

In literature, the focus was on the 'woman question,' the path to education, involvement in community affairs, and becoming a useful citizen.[85] Sexual pleasure was described with restraint, but there are references to sexual abuse. Heroines who pursued independent sex lives had tragic ends, showing that society was not ready for independent, modern women. Jewish women writers stressed the common features of women's problems and did not specify the ethnic, religious, and national backgrounds of their characters. They did not include descriptions of their bodies in ego documents. Their literary texts are more explicit about premarital and extramarital sex by male characters.[86]

In Bukovina, Jewish girls from acculturated families sought education and expressed themselves through writing. Beginning in the 1880s, when nationalism and racist antisemitism began to rise, Jews turned away from the German language and promoted Hebrew or Yiddish. Both the Hebraist movement, associated with Zionism, and the Yiddishist movement had established themselves in Czernowitz.[87] For Yiddishists, Czernowitz served as an important centre; indeed, the first international Yiddish language

[84] Kołodziejska-Smagała, 'The Female Body in Polish Jewish Women's Writing, 1880-1918,' 117-188, 121.
[85] Kołodziejska-Smagała, 'The Female Body in Polish Jewish Women's Writing, 1880-1918,' 122.
[86] Kołodziejska-Smagała, 'The Female Body in Polish Jewish Women's Writing, 1880-1918,' 129.
[87] German nationalist and/or exclusively Christian fraternities were founded at the University of Czernowitz in the 1880s. Jews founded the Jewish Nationalist fraternity Hasmonäa in 1891. Lichtblau and John, 'Jewries in Galicia and Bukovina, in Lemberg and Czernowitz,' 46-7, 53.

conference took place there in 1908.[88] In this context, Jewish women writers struggled for recognition. Their poems are inscribed with marginalization and deterritorialization and stand up for the marginalized Other. “Like the three dimensions of these authors’ identity as women, Jews, and poets, the three main strands of their work – the multicultural, the Jewish, and gender theme – are so intertwined that they cannot be separated.”[89]

Attendance at Bosnian schools led to the emergence Muslim women writers who wrote in Serbo-Croatian and published in male-controlled Bosnian journals. They wrote poetry, prose, novels, short stories, and social commentary, and supported women’s education in state schools without contesting domesticity, segregation, or veiling. Public writing provided them with a way to express themselves, to reflect on their living conditions, and to argue for more education and sociability outside the home. Their writing careers ended with marriage and motherhood.[90]

Giomi’s portraits of 108 of the first generation of Muslim women writers show that most supported the new gender regime proposed by Muslim Western-trained notables and did not challenge the ideology of separate spheres. He finds that the few women who imagined a different future and different forms of sisterhood through their writings became the first to establish and participate in voluntary associations after 1918.[91]

> According to the available sources, Muslim women seemed to be largely convinced of the non-adequateness of the gender regime inherited from the late Ottoman period. (…) Nevertheless, a few women used public writing to imagine something at least partially different with respect to the aforementioned gender regimes (…) several and different forms of sisterhood – among Muslim women, sometimes among women beyond confessional differences.[92]

Marriage and divorce, conversions, and intermarriage

Marriage, divorce, and conversion were major issues that concerned and affected both the Jewish and Muslim communities in Habsburg lands. While works on Jewish women examine these topics from a variety of angles including marriage as a migration strategy,

[88] Lichtblau and John, ‘Jewries in Galicia and Bukovina, in Lemberg and Czernowitz,’ 56-7. Nathan Birnbaum, a former Zionist turned diaspora nationalist, ultra-orthodox, and Yiddish culture advocate, selected it because of its multi-national character mirroring the Habsburg monarchy, its pro-Jewish stance, its location near Russia and Romania, and because he viewed it as an oasis in the ‘East.’
[89] Colin, ‘Writings from the Margins,’ 37.
[90] Giomi, *Making Muslim Women European*, 95-98.
[91] Giomi, *Making Muslim Women European*, 108-109.
[92] Giomi, ‘Daughters of Two Empires,’ 13-14.

works on Muslim women focus on the impact of Sharia law and its interaction with the Habsburg state. Fears of girls and women's vulnerability to religious conversion plagued both communities, as cases of women being kidnapped into convents and forced to convert attracted a great deal of attention.

Eva Grisová's study of the migration and marriage strategies of Jewish women from southwest Moravia who got married in Vienna in the second half of the nineteenth century shows migration as a response to economic stagnation and opportunities in Vienna. Her reconstruction of the life trajectories of 172 Jewish women and their families demonstrates that women were active participants in the migration process, and that marriage strategies were a key tool for individual and family mobility.[93]

> Beyond individual preferences, marriages were embedded in complex strategies that were influenced by socio-economic status, and also by the expectations of the wider family. Financial considerations were thus pivotal, not just in migration decisions but also in selecting the right partner.[94]

Aleksandra Jakubczak shows that Jewish women used prostitution and Jewish marital practices to navigate and improve their economic and legal situations. Later marriage exerted financial pressure on working-class women who sometimes earned a living as prostitutes: some Jewish girls migrated to engage in prostitution to raise money for their dowries and this was implicitly condoned by the Jewish community. In the interwar period, migration restrictions pushed more women into marriages of convenience. Jewish observers understood this as a migratory strategy – using marriage to leave Poland. Marriage provided women with a way to get around the quotas which discriminated against single Jewish women immigrants. Some of them ended up in prostitution, but they may not have been mere victims who were tricked into it.[95] "Contrary to contemporary accounts, Jewish women were not always victims of harmful marital practices but actually had some agency and could use various means to improve their situation by, for instance, raising funds for a dowry or consciously contracting marriages that would give them geographical mobility at a time of increasing restrictions."[96]

In her overview of the historiography on Jews in Bohemian lands pertaining to gender and family, Martina Niedhammer points out the impact of the infamous Familiants Laws (1726-27), which set limits on Jewish residence, settlement patterns, and migration. The state

[93] Eva Grisová, 'Viennese Brides: An Example of Female Migration from Jewish Communities in Southwest Moravia in the Second Half of the 19th Century,' *Judaica Bohemiae* 60 (2025): 45-75.
[94] Grisová, 'Viennese Brides,' 68.
[95] Aleksandra Jakubczak, 'Marriage as *Froyen-handl*: Jewish Marital Practices in the Early Twentieth Century,' *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry,* Volume 38, 2026, pp. 192-212.
[96] Jakubczak, 'Marriage as *Froyen-handl*,' 207.

authorities' interpretation of these Laws changed over time to become a tool for the 'moral improvement' of Jews by introducing a mandatory examination for young couples wishing to marry. The examination posed another obstacle to marriage.[97] Nevertheless, transnational networks of Jewish families were established by business, matchmaking, and marriage. Mirjam Zadoff has shown that matchmaking and becoming acquainted often took place at Bohemian summer resorts.[98] The legal emancipation of Jews in 1867 further affected the lives of Jewish women and gender roles in Bohemian lands by introducing civil marriage leading to a growing number of intermarriages and conversions.[99] In Bosnia, Jewish women interacted with Muslim men and women on some occasions, and conversion to Islam was a convenient way for a Jewish woman to divorce, since Muslim women could not be married to non-Muslim men.[100]

Studies by Ninja Bumann demonstrate the economic and legal hardships in matters of marriage and divorce for Muslim women in Bosnia. Under the Habsburgs, Muslim personal status matters continued to be held at Sharia courts which followed the Hanafi school and had disadvantages for women when collecting *nafaka* (arrears of maintenance) or attempting to escape a marriage in the wake of abandonment or abuse.[101] Only repudiated wives were entitled to the *mehr* (dowry). In mutual divorces or those initiated by the wife, women forfeited claims to *mehr* and *nafaka* (maintenance). Unilateral divorces by a wife were possible only in cases such as apostasy from Islam, alcoholism, or male infertility.[102] Wider marital issues such as absent husbands and 'disobedient' wives resulted creating problems which led to calls for legal reform.[103]

Aware of their rights under Islamic law, some Muslim women advocated for themselves in the courts. For example, Mućelefa Zaimović, a remarried widow, asked the local kadi to separate her from her new husband when he forced her to sell the house she had inherited from her deceased husband. The kadi did not respond so she filed an appeal with the Supreme Sharia court, an appeals body installed by the Habsburg administration

[97] Niedhammer, 'Gender and Family in Jewish Historiography on the Bohemian Lands,' 115-116. For more on the impact of the Familiants Laws, see Miller, 'Absolutism and Control,' 72.
[98] Mirjam Zadoff, *Next Year in Marienbad: The Lost Worlds of Jewish Spa Culture*, trans. William Templer (Philadelphia, 2012).
[99] Frankl *et al*, 'Contested Equality,' 136-137.
[100] Friedman, *Like Salt for Bread*, 138-139.
[101] Ninja Bumann, 'The Economy of Islamic Divorce in Habsburg Bosnia and Herzegovina,' in *Gender and Divorce in Europe: 1600-1900*, volume 2 (2023), 195-212, 198.
[102] Bumann, 'The Economy of Islamic Divorce in Habsburg Bosnia and Herzegovina,' 198.
[103] Bumann, 'The Economy of Islamic Divorce in Habsburg Bosnia and Herzegovina,' 195; Ninja Bumann, 'Contesting Juridical Authority: Sharia, Marriage, and Morality in Habsburg Bosnia and Herzegovina,' 17 March 2022, *Austrian History Yearbook*, Volume 53, May 2022, 150-168. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0067237822000054

in 1879, which ordered the local kadi to hold a hearing. She was able to get a divorce but had to renounce any financial claims and did not get her house back.[104]

Abandoned women, who could not remarry and could be declared widows only after their husbands were declared dead or after the passing of 90-120 years, frequently appeared before Sharia courts to claim what they were owed, but most of the time, the authorities failed to compel husbands to appear before the courts.[105] Hatuna Mandra was abandoned by her husband and turned to the court. Stressing that she was poor and had been abandoned without maintenance, the local kadi inquired if she could be divorced according to the more lenient Maliqi *mezheb*, which allowed a marriage to be dissolved after four years of the husband's abandonment when his whereabouts were unknown. Financial restitution after divorce and entitlements during marriage were critically important for women. As a result of the case, the Supreme Sharia court issued a legal reform in 1895 which allowed for divorces after four years of desertion, and Hatuna Madra was granted a divorce. In 1917, a new reform allowed abandoned wives to file for divorce even if they knew the whereabouts of their husbands. [106]

Still, Muslim women in Habsburg Bosnia had few options for initiating a divorce. Although they could live separate from their husbands, a woman who left her husband without his approval was considered a 'disobedient wife' and as a result, she forfeited her *nafaka* and was forbidden to remarry.[107] Calls for using coercion, such as fines and prison sentences, against 'disobedient' women issued in the context of demands for greater autonomy were rejected by Austro-Hungarian authorities. Reforms had provided abandoned women with more options which led to calls to enlarge Sharia courts enforcement powers to return disobedient wives to their husbands.[108] Overall, Muslim women were caught in the middle of a power struggle between Austro-Hungarian authorities and Sharia courts. Despite these limitations and complications, they asserted themselves to attain the financial support they deserved and needed to survive.

The regulation and negotiation of mixed marriages at Sharia courts also affected Muslim women.[109] The 1883 *Regulation on the Order and the Scope of the Sharia Courts* restricted the competence of Sharia courts to regulating personal status matters solely among the Muslim population. This hindered mixed couples from getting legally married because marriages between a Muslim and a non-Muslim did not fall under the jurisdiction of Sharia

[104] Bumann, 'The Economy of Islamic Divorce in Habsburg Bosnia and Herzegovina,' 199-203.
[105] Bumann, 'The Economy of Islamic Divorce in Habsburg Bosnia and Herzegovina,' 203-204.
[106] Bumann, 'The Economy of Islamic Divorce in Habsburg Bosnia and Herzegovina,' 205-207.
[107] Bumann, 'The Economy of Islamic Divorce in Habsburg Bosnia and Herzegovina,' 207.
[108] Bumann, 'The Economy of Islamic Divorce in Habsburg Bosnia and Herzegovina,' 208.
[109] Ninja Bumann, 'Marriage Across Boundaries: Mixed Marriages at the Supreme Sharia Court in Habsburg Bosnia and Herzegovina,' *Historical Searches* 19/2020, 151-182.

courts.[110] As a result, mixed couples resorted to strategic conversions or concubinage. Mixed couples living in concubinage often faced legal problems around the religious affiliation and legal custody of their children born out of wedlock. In 1912, a regulation by the provincial government allowed for the solemnization of mixed marriages by a kadi. This did not lead to greater acceptance of mixed marriages by society.[111]

The Supreme Sharia court archives provide insight into the Habsburg officials, kadis, and the local population's dealings with mixed marriages. In total there were forty-three cases about mixed couples between 1879 and 1918 which dealt with four issues: the unclear definition of competences brought on by the new Sharia court regulation of 1883 on mixed marriages, the role of conversions as a strategy for legalizing a mixed marriage, the question of the status of children from a mixed relationship, and the process of legalizing mixed marriages based on a new regulation of 1912. The cases demonstrate that mixed marriages not only crossed religious boundaries but faced institutional, legal, and social obstacles.[112]

Conversions were a possible remedy but conversions of Muslim girls to Catholicism caused public protest. The total number of conversions was low, but the case of 16-year old Uzeifa Delahmetović in 1890, who left home to convert to Catholicism and was hidden from her family at the residence of the Archbishop in Sarajevo, led the Habsburg administration to enact a Conversion Ordinance that put conversions under the strict control of the authorities. After this event, a new law mandated a two-month-long waiting period and an inspection by a government commission.[113] Restrictions on conversions made it more difficult for mixed couples to marry.

> This was the case when Muharem Biberić from Banja Luka sent, in early spring of 1895, a telegram to the Provisional Government in Sarajevo complaining that the local kadi from Banja Luka refused to marry him and his Jewish fiancée, although there would be no interdictions. The Provisional Government and the Supreme Sharia court started to investigate the case, whereby the local district Sharia court revealed that the Jewish fiancée had already earlier requested a conversion at the responsible authority.[114]

With no orders issued, Biberić got married privately and lived together with his fiancée. "Apparently, the hurdles for a strategic conversion in order to obtain a marriage license

[110] Bumann, 'Marriage Across Boundaries,' 157.
[111] Bumann, 'Marriage Across Boundaries,' 154-155.
[112] Bumann, 'Marriage Across Boundaries,' 155-156.
[113] Bumann, 'Marriage Across Boundaries,' 161, notes 30 and 31.
[114] Bumann, 'Marriage Across Boundaries,' 162.

seemed too big and the couple preferred to live in concubinage."[115] Decisions about their legal status and religious affiliation were highly inconsistent and decided on a case-by-case basis.

In August 1912, a new regulation allowed kadis to register mixed marriages in some instances.[116] "Although with this new regulation, Sharia courts could marry a mixed couple or issue a marriage license for them, such marriages were still not entirely accepted by society and kadis."[117] These cases show that Muslim women's lives were caught between the Sharia courts and state regulations. Additionally, they demonstrate a certain amount of social mixing among religious groups in Habsburg Bosnia. More research is needed on the circumstances that led to these relationships and how they were experienced and viewed.

Like Jewish women, Muslim women were vulnerable to exploitation and oppression from their cultures and larger society but nevertheless found ways to assert their agency. Conversions of young Muslim women to Catholicism, like those of the Galician Jewish runaways described above, were seen as abductions even though they might have provided an escape from family control and social isolation. For example, the alleged abduction of Saja Džukić led to protests in Mostar. Saja was 17 years old when she fled her father's home in February 1881 to convert to Catholicism and then marry her Catholic boyfriend Andrija Kordić. The local Sharia court in Mostar sentenced her to imprisonment, and she was briefly arrested but soon released. The Provisional Government informed the Sharia court in Mostar that conversions were not in their competence.[118] The Fata Omaniović affair of 1899, in which a Bosnian Muslim woman from the village of Bijelo Polje near Mostar was allegedly abducted to Dalmatia and converted to Catholicism at age 16, enraged the Bosnian Muslim elite although she likely went on her own accord to escape an arranged marriage. Local protests spread to other parts of the province and led Muslims to agitate for religious and educational autonomy. The fight divided Bosniaks into two camps, those who fought against the occupation and those who sided with the authorities.[119]

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[115] Bumann, 'Marriage Across Boundaries,' 162.
[116] Bumann, 'Marriage Across Boundaries,' 174.
[117] Bumann, 'Marriage Across Boundaries,' 178.
[118] Fedja Buric, 'Becoming Mixed. Mixed marriages of Bosnia-Herzegovina during the life and death of Yugoslavia,' Dissertation, University of Illinois 2012, 153, notes; URL: http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.957.6472&rep=rep1&type=pdf. Accessed October 24, 2026.
[119] Hivzija Hasandedić, 'Four Conversions,' URL https://akos.ba/zasto-su-bosnjaci-zaboravili-fatu-omanovic-115-godina-od-njenog-pokrstavanja/. Accessed October 24, 2026.

Prostitution

While they have been often portrayed as passive victims, recent work on Jewish prostitution has taken centre stage in research on Galician Jewish women's lives and discussions of them.[120] Contemporaries debated the causes of prostitution and how women became victims. Some procurers presented religious families with a Jewish marriage contract.[121] Other girls left home of their own volition, and some poor families encouraged their daughters to go out of financial desperation. Myths of female passivity and helplessness informed the narratives of women as victims tricked into prostitution, overlooking that some women knowingly entered prostitution. "In this and other cases, the preoccupation with the traffickers' trickery and coercion averted attention from the dire poverty of the countryside, from which most of the 'captives' escaped…family pressures and poverty were the leading contributors to the decision to take up public sex, not trickery or coercion by male agents."[122]

Women resorted to prostitution because of "a long-standing convention in Polish society or out of a calculated effort to earn money in times of need, or both."[123] Many women engaged in paid sex because they couldn't earn enough in their day jobs. Domestic servants, who were poorly paid, comprised the largest group of registered prostitutes (two-thirds in Lemberg in 1903). "The turn to part-time commercial sex provided these recent arrivals to the city with much needed cash and a steady flow of male companions."[124] They found in prostitution an alternative to financial desperation, a way to flee from abusive families or unhappy marriages, or incarceration in convents.[125] Blaming Jewish procurers for sex trafficking diverted attention away from other contributing factors and from women's own agency.[126] The fight against prostitution ultimately became reshaped into an urgent matter of Polish national regeneration.[127] According to Nancy Wingfield,

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[120] Stauter-Halsted, 'Moral Panic and the Prostitute in Partitioned Poland,' 566.
[121] Edward J. Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice: The Jewish Fight Against White Slavery* (New York: Schocken, 1983), 105.
[122] Stauter-Halsted, ''A Generation of Monsters,' 30.
[123] Stauter-Halsted, ''A Generation of Monsters,' 31.
[124] Stauter-Halsted, 'Moral Panic and the Prostitute in Partitioned Poland,' 575.
[125] Stauter-Halsted, 'Moral Panic and the Prostitute in Partitioned Poland,' 577.
[126] Stauter-Halsted, ''A Generation of Monsters,' 32. In fact, Stauter-Halsted reports that while the proportion of Jewish prostitutes in eastern Europe reflected the rough percentage of Jewish urban residents, the number of Jewish traffickers appears to have been disproportionate to their fraction in the wider population – yet contemporaries focused almost entirely on the Jewish role in sex trafficking. 'Moral Panic and the Prostitute in Partitioned Poland,' 568.
[127] Stauter-Halsted, ''A Generation of Monsters,' 34.

> [F]ew forms of socially deviant behavior received so much attention in the sexually saturated Austrian fin de siècle as *Mädchenhandel*, or trafficking in girls… Certainly, *Mädchenhandel* was in many ways a modern crime, a crime associated particularly with Jews, who were popularly believed to supply white, unwilling girls to serve as prostitutes world-wide.[128]

The issue was widely covered and debated in the Austrian press. The discourse focused on Bukovina and Galicia and portrayed it as the corruption and kidnapping of innocent girls by eastern European Jewish procurers, although a closer look reveals a more complicated picture of young women voluntarily marrying men and going abroad hoping for a better life often with the support of their families.[129] As well, not all traffickers were men. "Examination of white slaving in late imperial Austria reveals that women were involved in exploiting other women. They participated not only in feminist, philanthropic, and abolitionist organizations but also in trading and selling women." Industrialization, modernization, urbanization, mobility, and anonymity were factors leading to the movement of women with or without their consent.[130]

Prostitution also became a concern for Muslims. After World War I, reformer Dževad Sulejmanpašić wrote that Muslim women had turned to sex work to support themselves during the war. Non-Muslim prostitutes began to wear veils and pretend to be Muslims "insofar as for foreigners and non-Muslims, the Muslim woman is quite an exotic delicacy." As well, the veil was commonly used by prostitutes regardless of their religion to maintain their freedom of movement and prevent tracking by the police. Sulejmanpašić argued that free access to education and work was necessary to improve women's position in Muslim society.[131] He acknowledged that these changes conflicted with Islamic law, but "we must unwaveringly choose to conform to the pressing needs of our times." He justified Muslim women's participation in voluntary associations as a way to prevent them from falling into decadence.[132]

Parallel Experiences and Divergences

There are not many comparative studies of Jews and Muslims in Habsburg lands and none that focus specifically on women and/or gender. Omar T. Nasr and Tim Corbett have

[128] Nancy M. Wingfield, Nancy M. 'Destination Alexandria, Bueno Aires, Constantinople: "White Slavers" in Late Imperial Austria.' *Journal of the History of Sexuality*. Vol. 20. No. 2 (May 2011): 291.
[129] Wingfield, 'Destination Alexandria, Bueno Aires, Constantinople,' 292.
[130] Wingfield, 'Destination Alexandria, Bueno Aires, Constantinople,' 311.
[131] Giomi, *Making Muslim Women European*, 118-120.
[132] Giomi, *Making Muslim Women European*, 121-128.

addressed divergent and convergent historical experiences amongst Jews and Muslims living in modern Austria, pointing out that both groups are diverse and have been perceived or viewed themselves in national or ethnic terms. With respect to population and migration, the Jewish population of the Habsburg monarchy was larger than the Muslim population around the turn of the century, though that has reversed since the Holocaust. While Jews came to Austria from the Holy Roman Empire, Hungary, and Poland, Muslims arrived from the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire. The Muslim population rose to over half a million following the occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878.

> Consequently, by the interwar period, when a vibrant Jewish culture was flourishing in Austria, a small yet energetic Muslim community had also emerged, like the Jewish population predominantly located in Vienna but also in university cities like Graz and Innsbruck. Muslims in interwar Vienna formed various intellectual, political, and religious organizations and endeavored to partake in Viennese cultural life. Despite its ultimate failure due to the rise of Nazism and the outbreak of World War II, a mosque construction project in Vienna serves as an emblematic reminder of the determination to make Vienna a spiritual abode for the interwar Muslim community.[133]

Another parallel exists in Jews' and Muslims' exclusion from the construction of a white and Christian identity, although the 'Jewish Oriental' was imagined to be the 'enemy within,' while the 'Muslim Oriental' was located outside the borders of Europe.[134] Jews within Austria suffered a long history of persecution going back to the Middle Ages; from the fifteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was seen as an external menace and the terms 'Turks' and 'Turkish danger' have been applied to several perceived enemy ethnicities, including Greeks, Armenians, Sephardic Jews, democrats, liberal politicians, and socialists.

> The intertwining of anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim ideologies in modern Austrian culture is succinctly demonstrated in the 1933 edition of Franz Karl Ginzkey's (1871-1963) children's book *Hatschi Bratschis Luftballon*, a story originally published in 1904 about an evil "Turk" called Hatschi Bratschi who kidnaps Christian children from Central Europe. The 1933 edition included new illustrations by Ernst Dobrowski (1896-1985) that incorporated explicitly antisemitic motifs, blending them with barbaric stereotypes of the "Oriental Muslim."[135]

[133] Omar T. Nasr, and Tim Corbett, 'Diversifying Modern Austrian History: Exploring Parallels and Intersections between Jewish and Muslim Histories in Austria,' In *PaRDeS: Journal for the Association for Jewish Studies in Germany* 29 (2024): 137-147, 141.
[134] Nasr and Corbett, 142. Citing Farid Hafez, 'From 'Jewification' to 'Islamization': Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in Austrian Politics Then and Now,' *ReOrient* 4, no. 2 (2019): 199-202.
[135] Nasr and Corbett, 'Diversifying Modern Austrian History,' 143.

Nasr and Corbett conclude that Jews and Muslims in Austria share a long history as the quintessential Other. "While Austria's Jewish history, from the cultural heyday of the fin-de-siècle to the annihilation of the Holocaust, has been thoroughly explored in historiography, the historic Muslim populations of the country, their entanglements in Austrian culture and society, and their experiences of war and persecution, evidently remain a research desideratum, as does the entanglement of Jewish and Muslim histories in modern Austria and Europe."[136]

Expanding on this, Farid Hafez compares the role played by antisemitism and Islamophobia in Austrian party politics in the past and present by focusing on conspiracy theories that draw on the idea of a Jewish or Muslim takeover which threatens European or national identity. Jews have been equated with Muslims and both groups have been portrayed as opposing European values. From 1894 to 1938, The *Reichspost*, a Viennese Christian Social newspaper, claimed to be fighting against the Jewish press and Jewish influence in politics which "sought to overthrow the empire, as well as traditional family values and the Christian religion."[137] The Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), established in 1956, continues to agitate against Jews. Since 1992, the party has campaigned for a constitutional clause stating that Austria is 'not a country of immigration.' In 2010, it framed the Social Democratic Party as Islamist, arguing that they would 'Islamize' the country and contribute to the oppression of women. Karl Lueger was Vienna's antisemitic mayor at the turn of the twentieth century; his slogan 'Vienna should not become Jerusalem,' was transformed by the FPÖ in their 2004 election campaign into 'Vienna should not become Istanbul.' Further, the FPÖ brands Muslims as antisemites and unironically portrays itself as a 'pure' party despite its frequent antisemitic statements.[138] Hafez concludes that the discourse of Jewification/Islamization was and is used against the Social Democrats for the purpose of political competition and that "both Jewry and Islam are represented as conspiratorial forces that endanger the life of the (Christian) nation by altering its culture and society at large with the help of its other enemies."[139]

Jewish and Muslim women, *as women*, also experience further levels of discrimination and prejudice. Volkmann points out Muslim women are viewed as oppressed victims of their culture and that gender inequality is used to demonize Muslims and prove their backwardness. Her work challenges this perspective by looking at how Muslim women living in predominantly non-Muslim countries do and undo gender. She concludes that

[136] Nasr and Corbett, 'Diversifying Modern Austrian History,' 146.
[137] *Reichspost*, 1897: 1, cited in Hafez, 'From 'Jewification' to 'Islamization.' 207.
[138] Hafez, 'From 'Jewification' to 'Islamization.' 213.
[139] Hafez, 'From 'Jewification' to 'Islamization.' 215.

"religiosity is not in contrast to, but compatible with feminist concerns" for Muslim women as well as for Jewish women.[140]

Entangled Experiences and Encounters

Encounters between Jews and Muslims in Habsburg lands took place primarily in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where there was a significant Muslim population. Muslim-Jewish relations in Bosnia date back to the Ottoman period, as illustrated by the story of the Sarajevo Megillah. In 1820, a corrupt Ottoman pasha kidnapped eleven prominent Jews, including the chief rabbi (a kabbalist named Moshe Danon), and accused them of murdering a dervish who had converted from Judaism to Islam. The pasha's demand of 50,000 groschen of silver from the Jewish community offended the local multiethnic population of Sarajevo who considered the Jews (one-fifth of population) part of their own community. Local Jews, Muslims, and Christians joined forces to storm the pasha's palace and free the Jews, and the Muslim community raised ransom money. Ever since, Bosnian Jews have celebrated this event by visiting the grave of the Jewish historian who documented it, Zeki-efendi Attias, and taking part in a pilgrimage to the grave of Rabbi Danon in the south of Bosnia who died on his way to Palestine.[141]

There are few known cases of entanglements of Jewish and Muslim women during the Habsburg period, though it seems likely that they occurred given that there were cordial relations between Sarajevo's Jews and Muslims during the Ottoman period and that just a few decades later, Bosnian Muslims, including women, protected their Jewish neighbors during the Nazi occupation. Eli Tauber is a Jewish historian, publicist, advisor for culture and religion at the Union of Jewish communities, the director of the Archives of the Jewish Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the founder and president of Association Haggadah, an organization dedicated to preserving and promoting Jewish culture and tradition in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Sarajevo Haggadah originated in Catalonia Spain around 1350, making it one of the oldest surviving Sephardic Haggadahs in the world. It came into possession of the Cohen family in Bosnia, who sold it to the Bosnian National Museum. It was protected during World War II by Derviš Korkut, the Muslim museum librarian who hid it from the Nazis. Korkut also hid a Jewish girl (Mira Papo) in his home; she survived the war and emigrated to Israel, where she petitioned for the Korkuts to be recognized as Righteous Gentiles. During the Bosnian war, the Korkuts' daughter Lamija Jaha and her husband Vllaznim fled across the border into Macedonia with some of their family mementos. One was a photocopy of her parents' Righteous Among the Nations certificate from Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust museum and memorial. They made their

[140] Volkmann, 245.
[141] Friedman, *Like Salt for Bread*, 122-127.

way to Skopje and presented it to the president of the Jewish community who contacted Jerusalem. Lamija and her family were flown to Israel where they were extended asylum.

Another story of inter-religious and inter-generational friendship from Bosnia, also included in Tauber's book *When Neighbors Were Real Human Beings*, is that of Zeyneba Hardaga, the first Muslim woman in the world to be recognized by Yad Vashem for rescuing Jews.[142] The story of the Hardaga family and how they saved Jews and then were saved by them is featured in a short film by Sabina Vajrača, *Sevap Mitzvah* ('A Good Deed'). Hardaga and her family hid the Jewish Kabiljo family in their home and helped them escape from Nazi-occupied Sarajevo. Fifty years later, during the 1992-1995 siege of Sarajevo, the Jewish community helped the Hardagas leave Sarajevo using fake Jewish identity cards and the Kabiljo family secured them a refuge in Israel.[143] The impression is that, in Bosnia at least, the human connection has been more important than religious differences between Muslims and Jews.

Conclusion

This article has shown that Jewish and Muslim women in Habsburg lands were shaped by the distinctly local matricultures in which they lived, even while they shared common experiences of living within the gender norms and restrictions of their religious communities. These norms and restrictions were used in arguments for and against religious reform and for navigating through Habsburg policies towards religious and ethnic minorities. Strong parallels between the religious communities can be found in areas such as education, conversion, marriage, and divorce, and the impact of the Habsburg state's efforts to foster loyalty and prevent the rise of nationalism and rebellion. Notable differences can be seen in the positions taken by the Jewish and Muslim communities on the secular education and social segregation of girls, intermarriage, and divorce, which would have a significant impact on women's lives.

Jewish and Muslim women also took active parts in shaping and preserving matricultures. They advocated for and took advantage of new opportunities for education, used conversion a way to escape from arranged marriages and free themselves from the control of their families, and entered into marriages and engaged in sex work to attain economic

[142] 'Jews And Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina: 'an Example for Europe',' *Sarajevo Times*, 18 February 2026; URL: https://sarajevotimes.com/jews-and-muslims-in-bih-an-example-for-europe-2/. Accessed 24 October 2026.
[143] *Sevap Mitzvah (a good deed)* – short film by Sabina Vajrača; URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAPaGjprKpg&t=16s. Accessed 24 October 2026.

stability and prospects for migration. Jewish and Muslim women both advocated for themselves by demanding education and greater freedom, expressed their views and identities through their writings, and navigated economic and legal situations through marriage, divorce, and the courts. The review of works on Habsburg Jews and Muslims that centre women's lives provides a greater understanding of women's contributions to upholding and shaping traditions, building community, and expressing their identities, effectively shaping their matricultures.

While Jews had a longer and deeper history in and were dispersed more widely throughout Habsburg lands, Muslims mainly lived under Habsburg occupation from 1878-1918 in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Women of both communities were affected by state educational initiatives aimed at integrating them, which affected their matricultures, and in both cases, their experiences became focal points for debates on modernization and reform as progressive and regressive views of Jewish and Muslim matriculture contested over women's lives.

Jewish and Muslim women lived separate daily lives for the most part but had parallel and shared experiences: they shared a marginalized status as the Other, underwent the transition to Habsburg rule, played important roles in preserving their autonomy and upholding traditions, cooperated with and adapted to the Austro-Hungarian legal frameworks, and contributed to building voluntary associations.

The application of the framework of matricultures also raises several questions and suggests directions for future research. Both Muslims and Jews, including Jewish women, attended universities. Did Jewish and Muslim students interact with each other? Were there any Muslim women students? How might their experiences and interactions in Bosnia, Vienna, and other university towns have been affected by their matriculture? Regarding intermarriages, more research might be done on how these mixed relationships came about in the first place as well as the impact this had on their matricultures. The experiences of women from other marginalized groups in Habsburg lands might be brought into the conversation. Finally, looking at how religion and cultural norms shaped different women's lives by excluding and restricting them, but also provided them with identity, comfort, and connection, can offer a way to learn from shared experiences, rather than focusing on competing memories, and ultimately bring people together across faiths.

Biography

Alison Rose specializes in Austrian Jewish women's history and is the author of three books, *Jewish Women in Turn of the Century Vienna* (2008) and *Antisemitism, Gender Bias*,

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Authorized Loudness:

Tzaghrīta as a Matricultural System among Jebala Women

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Abstract

Tzaghrīta *(ululation) is frequently described in the literature as an affective, ritualized vocal practice expressing joy in life-cycle and communal contexts. Such framings, however, tend to leave unexamined the culturally specific conventions that shape the forms, contexts, and meanings of women's vocal presence in the public sphere.*

This article argues that among Jebala women in northern Morocco, tzaghrīta *functions matriculturally, organizing how women collectively express affect and negotiate propriety, authority, and public presence. Its expressive force depends on culturally specific forms of authorization that enable women's vocal loudness while also defining its limits.*

This argument is developed through an analysis of tzaghrīta *as it appears in Jebala life-cycle rituals, communal gatherings, and everyday social*

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interactions, drawing on ethnographic observation and historical accounts from the region. Particular attention is given to participation conventions, modes of circulation, and local moral vocabularies surrounding modesty, decorum, and vocal restraint. Situating tzaghrīta *within a localized matricultural framework reveals how women's voices acquire cultural force through established symbolic orders and how that force forms part of the broader organization of gendered social life in Jebala.*

Keywords: ululation, Jebala culture, women's voices, *tzaghrīta*, northern Morocco

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Résumé

La tzaghrīta *(ululation) est souvent décrite dans la littérature comme une pratique vocale ritualisée et empreinte d'affectivité, exprimant la joie lors d'événements liés au cycle de la vie ou à la vie communautaire. De tels cadres d'analyse ont toutefois tendance à laisser dans l'ombre les conventions culturelles spécifiques qui façonnent les formes, les contextes et les significations de la présence vocale des femmes dans l'espace public.*

Cet article soutient que, chez les femmes Jebala du nord du Maroc, la tzaghrīta *fonctionne selon une logique matriculturelle : elle organise la manière dont les femmes expriment collectivement leurs affects et négocient les normes de convenance, les rapports d'autorité et leur présence dans l'espace public. La force expressive de la* tzaghrīta *repose sur des formes d'autorisation propres à cette culture, qui rendent possible l'intensité vocale des femmes tout en en définissant les limites.*

Cette thèse est développée à travers une analyse de la tzaghrīta *telle qu'elle se manifeste dans les rituels liés au cycle de la vie, les rassemblements communautaires et les interactions sociales quotidiennes chez les Jebala, en s'appuyant sur des observations ethnographiques et des récits historiques propres à cette région. Une attention particulière est portée aux conventions de participation, aux modes de circulation de cette pratique, ainsi qu'aux vocabulaires moraux locaux liés à la modestie, au décorum et à la retenue vocale. Inscrire la* tzaghrīta *dans un cadre matriculturel localisé permet de comprendre comment les voix des femmes acquièrent une force culturelle au sein d'ordres symboliques établis, et comment cette force s'inscrit dans*

l'organisation plus large des rapports sociaux de genre dans la région des Jebala.

Mots-clés : ululation, culture Jebala, voix des femmes, *tzaghrīta*, nord du Maroc

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Introduction: *Tzaghrīta*, Loudness, and Matriculture

Ululation in the literature

Ululation—variously described across the Maghreb and Mashriq[1] as *tzaghrīta*, *zaghrūda*, *zaghlūṭa*, or *zaghārīd*[2]—refers to a high-pitched, trilling vocalization most commonly performed by women in ritual and public settings. The term derives from the Arabic verb *zaghrada* (زغرد), meaning 'to ululate,' with regional phonological variations reflecting dialectal morphology. Throughout Arabic-speaking societies, ululation is widely recognized as a gendered sonic practice, marked by rapid oscillation of pitch and sustained vocal vibration. It is typically embedded in moments of heightened collective significance, with its sound carrying strong cultural legibility: it announces transition, marks intensity, and signals communal acknowledgment. Though acoustically simple, the practice is socially dense, appearing in the course of life-cycle rituals, devotional gatherings, and public events.

[1] The terms *Maghreb* and *Mashriq* are used here as broad regional designations for the western and eastern parts, respectively, of the Arabic-speaking world. Both derive from Arabic geographical terms: *al-maghrib* (المغرب, 'the west' or 'place of sunset') and *al-mashriq* (المشرق, 'the east' or 'place of sunrise'). The variant English spellings—*Maghreb* for *Maghrib* and *Mashriq* for *Mashreq*—reflect established conventions in English-language scholarship, not differences in the corresponding Arabic forms. *Al-Maghrib* may also designate Morocco specifically, while 'the Maghreb' conventionally refers to the broader northwestern African region. I use these terms here in their regional sense and in preference to the broader designation 'Middle East,' while recognizing that neither constitutes a fixed or exhaustive geographical category.

[2] Jacobs cites Charles Pellat's 1952 article 'À propos des 'youyou' de la femme musulmane' in *Semitica*, which theorizes that "it seems more likely that the term '*zaghareet*' was first borrowed from *Tamazight* (Berber languages) during the Abbasid reign," with "its entry into the Arabic language deriving from the Maghreb region" (2008, 48). This interpretation, however, is not universally accepted. Traditional Arabic lexicography links *zaghrada* (زغرد) to the triliteral root gh–r–d (غ–ر–د), meaning 'to warble' or 'to trill,' suggesting an internal derivation *within* Arabic. During the French Protectorate (1912–1956), colonial officials and chroniclers referred to the sound as 'youyou'; it was reportedly banned during the Moroccan independence struggle (Baker 1998, 307).

Ethnographic and historical accounts have most often framed ululation as a sonic marker of celebration. In the Moroccan context, early European observers such as Edward Westermarck documented its prominence in life-cycle rituals, particularly weddings, where women's trills punctuate thresholds of transition and collective recognition. Subsequent scholarship published across the Maghreb and Mashriq has similarly situated ululation within festive contexts, emphasizing its role in expressing joy, marking auspicious occasions, and intensifying communal solidarity (see Nasrallah 1990; Ramadan 2009; Qissis-Nafl 2010; Adilah and Daraouiche 2012). In these studies, ululation appears primarily as an audible index of happiness, triumph, blessing, or ritual climax—a culturally patterned signal of collective affirmation.

Beyond celebratory ritual contexts, scholars have also examined ululation as a sonic register of resistance and collective struggle. In Palestinian and Algerian settings in particular, researchers have documented how women's ululations accompany demonstrations, funerals of martyrs, and moments of anti-colonial mobilization, transforming what might otherwise be coded as celebratory sound into an audible expression of defiance, endurance, and national solidarity (see Sambron 2008; Drif 2013; Abderrazaq 2015; Al Attari 2017; Saoudi 2018). In these contexts, ululation links private emotion to a public articulation of political belonging. Yet even here, the interpretive emphasis remains largely on what the sound conveys: grief, pride, steadfastness, national solidarity, and communal resolve.

Ululation has also been examined within broader discussions of gendered expressive culture, performance, and embodiment. Rather than treating it solely as an index of emotion or political allegiance, these analyses attend to the ways women's vocal practices are socially patterned, learned through participation, and embedded in regimes of decorum, modesty, and public presence (see Al Bakr 2014; Ramadan 2015). Ululation is thus approached as a form of embodied knowledge—one that circulates through imitation, repetition, and shared ritual experience outside formal instruction, in the traditional modality of oral transmission. Within this framework, the practice becomes legible as a gendered mode of participation in communal life, shaped by expectations surrounding women's comportment, audibility, and relational standing. Yet even here, the emphasis often remains on expression and identity—on what ululation reveals about gendered subjectivity—while the structural principles governing when and how it sounds remain less fully explored.

Within these varied contexts—ritual celebration, political struggle, and gendered expressive culture—ululation has most often been interpreted through an affective and semiotic framework. Whether sounding at weddings, martyrs' funerals, nationalist

demonstrations, or saintly pilgrimages, it is approached primarily as an expression of collective feeling or political meaning. Even when attention is paid to embodiment and performance, the analytic emphasis tends to fall on what ululation signifies: joy, grief, pride, defiance, blessing, or solidarity. What remains comparatively underexamined is not what ululation communicates, but how its sounding is organized—how timing, the layering of voices, initiation, and regulation render women's loudness culturally legible within specific moral and ritual orders. To address this lacuna, I approach ululation through the lens of matriculture, examining how patterned timing, aggregation—the layering of individual voices into a collective sound—and regulation structure women's audibility without collapsing it into individual display.

This analysis draws on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in the Jebala region of northern Morocco in 2022 and 2023, followed by repeated visits to the region. As an ethnomusicologist and a native of the Jebala region, this research forms part of my broader engagement with Jebala music culture and was supported by Columbia University and the American Institute for Maghrib Studies (AIMS). My research included participant observation at weddings, pilgrimage and devotional sites, and other communal settings in which *tzaghrīta* is performed, as well as engagement in conversations with Jebala women who participate in these practices. These ethnographic encounters provide the basis for examining *tzaghrīta* not only as a vocal form but as a socially organized practice understood and enacted by its practitioners.

The social organization of loudness

While existing scholarship richly documents the ritual centrality and affective force of *tzaghrīta*, it tends to foreground what ululation expresses, with less attention to how it becomes socially organized. Even when authors acknowledge that the practice has 'a time and place' (see Ensel 1999; Jones 2001; Jacobs 2007), this observation often remains at the level of description. The conditions under which women's loud vocality is socially embedded—who may perform it, at what moments, with what bodily comportment, and within what moral parameters—are noted in passing but have received comparatively limited theoretical attention.

'Loudness,' as used here, is an analytical rather than a vernacular category. My interlocutors did not consistently describe *tzaghrīta* through a specific Jebli Arabic term for loudness, nor did they discuss the practice primarily in terms of vocal volume. Instead, they described it through its social and ritual organization: when *tzaghrīta* is performed, who initiates it, how others join, and what its presence contributes to an occasion. My use of 'loudness' derives from the heightened audibility of the practice itself—its high-pitched

vocal production and the acoustic intensity generated when multiple voices sound together—and from the particular significance of such audibility within moral frameworks concerned with women's raised voices. I therefore use the term not as a translation of a singular local concept, but as an analytical description of this relationship between acoustic intensity and socially regulated audibility.

Previous research demonstrates that *tzaghrīta* operates within a dense field of ethical and cultural regulation. Discussions of propriety, modesty, and restraint recur in ethnographic accounts. Gestures such as covering the mouth while ululating are linked to decorum (see Jones 2001; Jacobs 2008; Meintjes 2019); interlocutors invoke notions of beauty and shame when describing the visible aspects of vocal production, particularly the exposure of the tongue during ululation (see Jacobs 2008); and juristic traditions at times classify women's raised voices as potentially problematic under certain interpretations of piety (see Jacobs 2008). Concepts such as *al-ḥayā'* (modesty), *ʿawra* (vulnerability or that which must be concealed), and the Moroccan vernacular *ḥshūma* (shame, impropriety) structure expectations regarding women's comportment in public space. Even where ululation is valued and expected, it remains bounded by moral vocabularies that govern when loudness is legitimate and when it risks crossing into impropriety.

Yet these regulatory dimensions are often treated as contextual background rather than as constitutive elements of the practice itself. Ululation appears as an expressive act occasionally constrained by norms, obscuring the extent to which its force depends on those very norms. The literature thus describes *tzaghrīta*'s affective meaning in detail, while the cultural system that renders certain forms of women's loudness intelligible, appropriate, and socially efficacious remains less fully explored.

Tzaghrīta *as a matricultural system*

To account for the patterned permissibility of women's loud vocality, this article approaches *tzaghrīta* through the lens of matriculture. Developed by Marie-Françoise Guédon and grounded in a Geertzian understanding of cultural systems, matriculture refers to the body of symbols and meanings pertaining to women and the feminine that operates in any given society as both a model of and a model for reality. As an analytic framework, matriculture provides a way of examining how symbolic systems position women, authorize their actions, and delimit their domains of influence across different social arrangements. It foregrounds women's symbolic formations as internally structured cultural systems in their own right, distinct from derivative models of male-defined authority.

Seen through this lens, *tzaghrīta* emerges as a matricultural form: a culturally sanctioned modality through which women's vocal presence becomes meaningful, legitimate, and effective. Its force derives from its operation within a symbolic order that designates specific contexts for women's loudness and establishes that loudness as expected. *Tzaghrīta* authorizes women's vocal intensity in circumscribed moments and delineates the boundaries of that authorization.

By reframing *tzaghrīta* as a matricultural system of authorized loudness, the focus shifts from what women express to how a cultural order structures their audibility. The question is not whether women 'find a voice' through ululation, but how a shared symbolic system renders certain forms of loudness socially legible, collectively affirmed, and morally intelligible within bounded social space.

Matriculture and Vocal Authority

Matriculture as analytic framework

Matriculture provides an analytic vocabulary for examining how symbolic systems position women within cultural life. It directs attention to the patterned meanings, expectations, and authorizations that attach to women and the feminine in any given society. The emphasis shifts from structural description to symbolic organization: how cultural forms render women's roles intelligible, legitimate, and consequential.

American anthropologist Clifford Geertz's formulation of culture provides the theoretical grounding for this approach. In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, he defines culture as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (1973, 89). Symbols, in this account, both reflect and organize social reality. They operate simultaneously as 'models of' the world—rendering it intelligible—and as 'models for' conduct—shaping and prescribing social behaviour. A matricultural analysis therefore examines how gendered symbols function within this dual capacity: how they represent women's place in social life and how they prescribe the terms under which that place is enacted. This analysis draws on Guédon's articulation:

> We use the expression 'matricultural system' to designate that part or those components of culture that sustain, express, and welcome women's participation in the socio-cultural fabric, whether it sustains a matrilineal

> kinship system or not. A matricultural system may be minimal and derivative, or it may be considered the essential source of its cultural context… (2020, 6).

Ululation offers a useful illustration of how such symbolic systems operate across cultural contexts. In her study of Zulu vocal practice, Louise Meintjes explains the gendered and relational nature of ululation: "In the process of ululating, women are exhorting, competing, affirming, agreeing, celebrating, proclaiming, encouraging, anticipating, or praising, sharing in a mature women's world while marking their relationships to one another and to men" (2019, 64). Joel Kuipers' study of *pakallaka* (ululation) among the Weyewa in Indonesia reveals that this practice, grounded in local traditions of ancestor worship (1999, 494), incorporates dance and gesturing and may be observed in settings ranging from soccer matches to tombstone-dragging and not "in unplanned, informal, non-ritualized circumstances" (Ibid., 495). Ululation, then, is not spontaneous noise but culturally patterned action, activated at recognizable moments and embedded within shared expectations about women's participation in society.

Gendered vocal practices are sustained by symbolic systems that render them intelligible, expected, and, at times, obligatory. A matricultural approach therefore asks what such practices express and how they are authorized, structured, and delimited within broader cultural orders. The object of analysis is thus the symbolic organization of these practices, irrespective of the presence or absence of formal political power.

Why vocal practices matter

Vocal practices occupy a distinctive position within symbolic systems because they sit at the intersection of embodiment, audibility, and public presence. Unlike visual markers of gender, which may be constant or spatially contained, voice is ephemeral and expansive: it unfolds in time and carries beyond the body that produces it. It demands attention. As such, its regulation becomes particularly charged in contexts in which women's comportment and public visibility are culturally structured.

Tzaghrīta is deeply entrenched in everyday life in Morocco and throughout much of the Global South. Its performance is overwhelmingly gendered and communal, emerging within shared milieux of celebration and collective recognition. Jennifer Jacobs observes that

> the… contexts in which *zaġārīt*[3] is performed across the greater Middle East—weddings, births, baptisms, winning in sports, good news, payday, etc.—

[3] Direct quotations from the literature adhere to the authors' preferred spellings.

> speaks to its general reported function: expressing joy. And, indeed, the word my interlocutors most commonly used to explain *zaġārīt* is *faraḥ* "joy, exhilaration" (2007, 495).

This consistent association with joy reinforces ululation's place within culturally sanctioned domains of affirmation and ritual intensity.

This understanding was echoed by Rachida, a member of the groom's immediate family whom I met and spoke with during the 2022 wedding in Dshīra discussed below (see next section). She framed ululation explicitly within the domain of celebration:

> We just do it when we are happy… it's a way to express happiness. We do it in *mounassabāt* [special moments], we do it *afrāḥ* [joyous occasions] like weddings, when someone has a baby, we do it for *ḥinna*,[4] or someone comes back from the East.[5] This is what we do. In our tradition, the women either sing *ʿayyūʿ*[6] or do *tzaghrīta*. Singing *ʿayyūʿ* is difficult, it's not for everybody. *Tzaghrīta*—everybody can do that. To each her mouth and tongue…[7]

Rachida's account situates *tzaghrīta* firmly within the sphere of collective joy, but it also identifies an important distinction between ululation and other forms of women's vocal practice. Unlike the musical genre *ʿayyūʿ*, which she describes as requiring a specialized ability, *tzaghrīta* is available to everybody. Her phrase 'to each her mouth and tongue' locates this capacity in the body itself, emphasizing its availability without specialized musical expertise. In her account, then, *tzaghrīta* provides a broadly accessible means through which women can participate in and sonically mark collective occasions.

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[4] The *ḥinna* ceremony is a pre-wedding ritual held in the days preceding the marriage contract, typically as a women-centered gathering. The term refers to the reddish plant dye used for the hand-painting ritual during weddings; locally pronounced *ḥinna* in Jebala country—a marked phonetic distinction from *ḥənna* in much of the rest of Morocco. During the ceremony, henna is applied to the bride's hands and feet—often by an elder woman—symbolizing protection, fertility, and transition into married status. The event is accompanied by singing, rhythmic clapping, and sustained ululation, which collectively affirm the bride's incorporation into a new phase of social life.

[5] 'The East' refers colloquially to the *ḥajj* pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the five pillars of Islam and an obligation for Muslims who are physically and financially able to undertake it. The return of a pilgrim is marked by communal celebration, during which ululation signals honour, blessing, and the pilgrim's reintegration into local social life.

[6] The improvisational poetic form known as *ʿayyūʿ*, originating in rural settings—particularly within the domain of female singers—was "sung very loudly and was traditionally associated with the outdoors as a way to help pass the monotony of daily gendered tasks such as agricultural work and herding animals" (Curtis 2015, 325).

[7] Rachida [last name not known], informal conversation with author, July 16, 2022.

Yet scholars have also noted that ululation carries social force beyond mere affective signaling. In underscoring the potency of *tzaghrīta*, L. JaFran Jones writes: "It may simply be an expression of joy, but it is also an act of power. It would be most unfortunate for any significant event to pass without *zaghrīṭ*. Clearly women's monopoly of this device enhances their status" (2001, 430). Jones's formulation is important for recognizing the institutional weight ululation possesses within communal life. Significant events demand its sounding; its absence would be conspicuous. Women's exclusive association with the form thus situates them as indispensable participants in the marking of collective transitions.

What emerges, then, is not a contradiction between joy and power, but their co-presence within a culturally structured domain. Ululation is simultaneously affective and authoritative. Its force derives not from defying norms of modesty or overturning gender hierarchies, but from operating within a symbolic system that assigns women specific auditory functions in moments of heightened social significance. Vocal authority, in this sense, is not an individual assertion but a distributed condition: a socially recognized capacity activated at recognizable times and governed by shared expectations. Approaching *tzaghrīta* through this lens allows us to ask not whether women gain power through voice, but how voice itself becomes a culturally organized site of legitimacy. Vocal practices matter because they render audible the boundaries of authorization—who may sound, when, and with what effect—and thereby illuminate the symbolic organization through which gendered presence is structured in public life.

Methodological positioning

My position as a male researcher from the Jebala region also shaped the conditions of my fieldwork. While linguistic and cultural familiarity afforded certain forms of access, my gender shaped that access differently among ethnographic settings. At weddings and other communal events, I was able to observe and hear *tzaghrīta* directly as part of the broader ritual setting. Other contexts, however, imposed gendered limits on observation. At the Cave of the Petrified Bride discussed below, for example, I remained outside while women entered the women-only interior. My account of that portion of the ritual—being unable to directly observe what occurred inside—is therefore necessarily grounded in what I could hear from beyond the threshold. Such differences in access form part of the conditions under which the ethnographic knowledge presented here was produced. My familiarity with Jebala culture therefore exists alongside the limits of my ethnographic position; these accounts are shaped by both cultural proximity and the gendered conditions of each setting.

Approaching *tzaghrīta* as matricultural does not *de facto* entail describing Jebala society as matriarchal, matrifocal, or unusually egalitarian. Nor does it position ululation as a hidden transcript of resistance or as a vehicle of empowerment in a progressivist sense. Matriculture, as employed here, is not a claim about social inversion or gender parity. It is an analytic orientation toward the symbolic systems through which women's roles are activated, delimited, and made meaningful.

Much of the scholarship on women's expressive practices in Muslim societies has productively explored resistance, subversion, and agency within constraint. These frameworks have illuminated important dynamics of power. Yet they can also incline analysis toward a binary in which women's vocal presence is interpreted either as repression or as defiance. Such binaries also risk reproducing what Lila Abu-Lughod critiques as the tendency to overexplain Muslim women's lives through culture, particularly when culture is imagined primarily as a source of constraint from which women must escape (2002, 783-88). This framing can obscure the historically and socially specific ways in which women inhabit, negotiate, and participate in the cultural worlds to which they belong.

A matricultural approach redirects attention from these interpretive frames to the cultural organization within which vocal acts are rendered legitimate in the first place. The central question concerns how norms themselves authorize specific forms of women's presence, including forms that do not depend on transgression for their efficacy.

This is a methodological shift, not an ideological one. It allows for the recognition that women's cultural centrality can coexist with bounded domains of action, and that symbolic authority need not entail structural dominance. By treating *tzaghrīta* as part of a system that concurrently enables and regulates women's audibility, its analysis avoids reducing loudness to either expressive excess or political insurgency. Instead, it examines how vocal authority is distributed, activated, and constrained within a shared moral order. Such positioning does not deny that ululation may take on political meanings in particular contexts. Here, however, the analysis brackets that question in order to examine the prior condition that makes such mobilizations intelligible: a culturally sustained understanding that women's voices matter in specific ways at specific times. Matriculture provides the vocabulary for analyzing that condition.

Contexts, Conventions, and Moral Regulation

Social contexts of *tzaghrīta*

Life-events and other rites of passage provide the primary contexts for the exercise of *tzaghrīta* in Jebala society. These ritual moments span the life cycle: birth, circumcision, naming of infants, the elaborate sequence of ceremonies marking marriage (from betrothal to the post-nuptial confirmation of the bride's virginity), and death. Within these settings, ululation does not appear as ambient sound but as a culturally expected acoustic marker of transition.

Its sounding punctuates specific thresholds—junctures at which relationships are reconfigured, statuses altered, or collective attention intensified. In wedding contexts especially, *tzaghrīta* marks departures and arrivals, public presentations and acknowledgments, functioning less as spontaneous expression than as structured affirmation. Women's voices rise collectively at recognizable points: when a bride leaves her natal household, when the dowry is displayed, when guests arrive, or when ritual sequences reach climactic points. These eruptions of sound are brief yet decisive, signalling that the event is unfolding as it should.

Several historical and contemporary ethnographic accounts—spanning nearly a century—illustrate the role of *tzaghrīta* in Moroccan marriage and naming rituals. In an early twentieth-century field report from Fès, Westermarck explains the sound of *tzaghrīta* as a "quivering noise" which occurs when a prospective bride's father returns to his home to share the news with his wife after conferring with the groom's father on the betrothal arrangements:

> The women of the house make a quivering noise, but the girl bashfully hides herself, not seeing her father for several days. Similarly, the young man's father tells his wife what has passed, and in his house also the women make the same kind of noise. But the lad himself keeps away from his father (1914, 22).

The customs followed by the Ulåd Bu-'Aziz of Dukkâla are linked to the rural milieu and indicate the nature of the entourage visiting the prospective bride's family:

> When the betrothal has been made, the parents of the young man, in company with the married women of the village, as well as male friends, take to the girl's family a present consisting of a sheep or bullock, wheat, and salt

> butter. When taking it there the women make their usual quivering noise, called *zġârīt*, which is also the name given to the present. After their arrival they grind the wheat, and while this is going on they again make their quivering noise, in which the other women who are present join (Ibid., 33).

Three ululations precede the suite of ritual wedding songs of the High Atlas and Anti-Atlas Mountains, composed of the Indigenous genres *izwirrign* and *amarg*. The texts of these songs—a mixture of Arabic and Tashlhit, an Amazigh[8] dialect—begin with the opening phrase of the Qur'an, *bismi llāh ar-raḥmān ar-raḥīm*[9] (In the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful). The opening ululations are thus immediately linked to Islamic practice, reinforced by a song text which reads "I dress you as she was dressed/Aicha the Prophet's wife" (Rovsing Olsen 2013, 175-76).

Tzaghrīta is also a central element in Alessandra Ciucci's ethnographic account of a post-midnight rooftop wedding celebration in Safi at which both male and female guests are present and the *shikhāt*[10] (professional female singer-dancers performing the *'aita*[11] repertoire) are accompanied by male instrumentalists. In this excerpt, the guests react kinesthetically to the singers:

> As Hafida and 'Aicha [the lead vocalists] sang the lines of the poem, they took the audience into a journey where history, geography, lore, memory, imagination, and eroticism were recalled line after line….The guests listened attentively to the words as they gently rocked their heads and upper torso to and fro, waved their arms, clapped their hands, or ululated to incite the performers (Ciucci 2010, 74).[12]

In this vignette, *tzaghrīta* becomes woven into the performer/audience dynamic, in which audience response generates feedback to/from the singers; as Jacobs has observed in her

[8] Miriam Rovsing Olsen's discussion of Berber linguistic groups (2013, 166) hearkens to a term currently supplanted by 'Amazigh,' meaning 'free people' in the local language. The term 'Berber,' historically associated with the Greek and Latin terms for 'barbarian,' was in customary use during the colonial era (see note 2 above).

[9] باسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

[10] شيخات

[11] عيطة

[12] Yet the very qualities which are appreciated in the performance setting carry repercussions in terms of reputation. Kapchan explains this delicate balance vis-à-vis the attribute of *ḥashumi*, 'to be respectful and reserved' (from *ḥashama*, 'to defer'): "In order to dance, you must be *matluqa* [free, unrestricted], but in order to function in the hierarchy built upon respect for elders…you must be *ḥashumi*, careful not to shame yourself or your family" (1994, 94).

fieldwork, "*zaghareet* is characterized as both response to and motivation for feelings and affective behaviors by other social actors" (2008, 176).

In a ritual occurring later in the wedding cycle, following the consummation of the marriage, a bride's 'virtue'—evidenced by bleeding from the broken hymen—provides an occasion for *tzaghrīta*. The groom presents the bride's undergarments to women stationed outside the door, who would then "ululate with joy upon seeing the blood and either parade the bride's trousers through the crowd or hand them over to the men" (Combs-Schilling 1989, 207). The motif of blood also figures in the infant naming ceremony in Marrakech attended by Deborah Kapchan in 1999, at which a ram was "ritually slaughtered, its blood running down the blue and white hand-lain mosaic tiles to the drain," to the accompaniment of "sounds of joyous ululation" (2003, 265).

Beyond marriage and newborn rituals, ululation also appears in communal celebrations and returns—such as the homecoming of a pilgrim from Mecca or the public recognition of a family milestone—where audible affirmation is socially anticipated. Comparable patterned activation is documented in other Moroccan ritual contexts, including Jewish pilgrimage processions in Ouezzane, where ululation inaugurates the movement of pilgrims and dignitaries (Trevisan Semi 2009, 214). Even in funerary contexts, where affect may be more complex, ululation may mark passage rather than lament, distinguishing it from forms of wailing considered excessive or improper. On these varied occasions, *tzaghrīta* is tied less to generalized emotion than to socially recognized transitions that call for collective acknowledgment.

These contexts, however, are also bounded. *Tzaghrīta* does not circulate freely in the course of everyday interaction; it emerges within gatherings already designated as ceremonially charged. Its activation depends on shared recognition of the occasion's significance. Women's loudness is therefore situational, tied to specific times and settings in which their vocal presence is both permissible and expected. The recurrence of *tzaghrīta* at life-cycle events points to a central feature of matricultural ordering: women's loudness becomes culturally appropriate at occasions that call for collective affirmation.

Participation conventions

Within these ritual settings, *tzaghrīta* is not performed indiscriminately. Although multiple women may join in, initiation and participation follow recognizable conventions. The first ululation often emerges from a woman whose age, relational proximity, or social standing situates her as appropriate to the moment—an elder relative, a close kin member, or someone occupying a position of ceremonial responsibility. Others follow almost

immediately, overlapping in sound; the act is rarely solitary. Its authority derives in part from collective uptake.

Participation is structured by relational positioning. Younger women may join in, but they do not typically initiate in contexts where seniority carries symbolic weight. In some gatherings, unmarried girls, married women, and elder women participate with varying intensity, reflecting distinctions of age and status. The distribution of sound mirrors existing social hierarchies rather than dissolving them. Loudness, while communal, remains socially patterned.

Timing is equally regulated. Ululation does not erupt arbitrarily; it responds to specific cues—a bride stepping over a threshold, the visible presentation of a dowry, a musical cadence reaching its peak, or the completion of a ritual exchange. The first trill often functions as a signal that a socially charged moment has arrived. Others modulate their participation in response, producing a brief, layered swell of sound that rises sharply and subsides just as quickly. The resulting overlap is coordinated, with intensity and duration calibrated to the event's rhythm.

This patterned calibration was evident during a wedding I attended in July 2022 in the village of Dshīra. The occasion formed part of my fieldwork in the Jebala region, during which I was accompanying Lahcen Laaroussi Tanjaoui's ensemble in the course of a broader study of Jebli music traditions. After leaving Tangier, we followed National Road N2 until the Crochet Blanco intersection, where we turned toward Dar Chaoui and eventually left the paved road entirely. The final stretch consisted of roughly five kilometers of unpaved, winding ascent. The vehicle moved slowly over loose gravel and narrow bends, the climb taking close to twenty minutes. Only gradually did the settlement come into view: a small *dəwwār*[13] of five or six dwellings dispersed along the hillside and, above them, a large *caidal*[14] tent erected on a slight rise. Its carved wooden supports and scale distinguished it immediately from the surrounding homes, marking it as the ceremonial center.

[13] Term used in Morocco (interchangeably with *dshar*) to refer to a rural settlement or village. It usually consists of a cluster of houses, and is often surrounded by agricultural land or pastures. It represents a basic form of rural community, usually lacking formal administrative status.
[14] The term *caid* refers to a local administrator or tribal chief. Found throughout Morocco, *caidal* tents are used to honor distinguished guests and invited dignitaries, especially at national, religious, or family celebrations such as weddings and circumcisions.

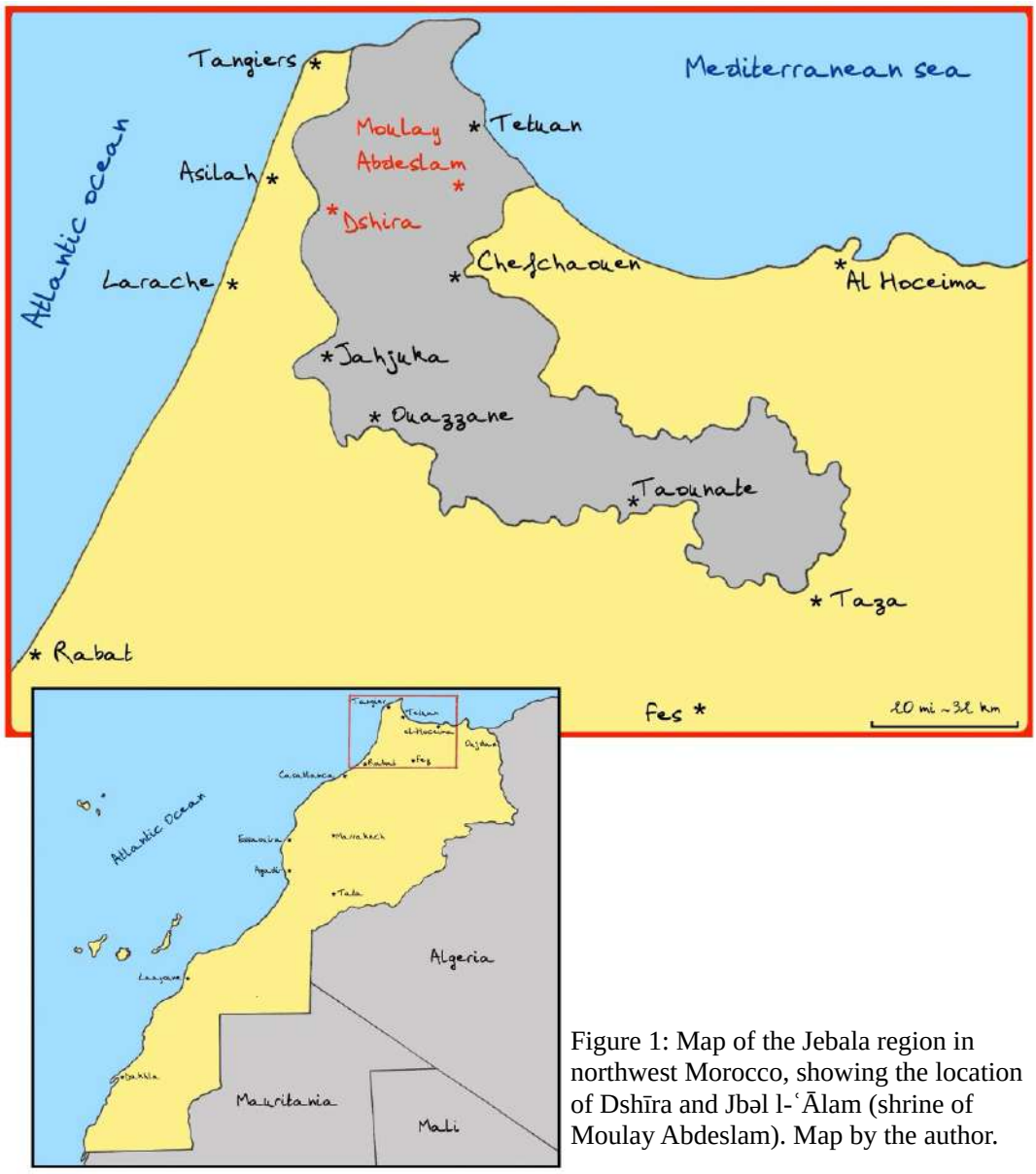

Figure 1: Map of the Jebala region in northwest Morocco, showing the location of Dshīra and Jbəl l-ʿĀlam (shrine of Moulay Abdeslam). Map by the author.

The afternoon temperature approached 99°F [approx. 37°C], though a steady wind cut across the slope. As chairs were unloaded and positioned beneath the tent, the distant sound of *ghayṭa* and *ṭbel* drifted upward from below the hill. The music grew steadily louder, signalling the approach of the bridal procession. At first glance, the group appeared fluid in its movement—men accompanying the musicians, women positioned toward the front, and children weaving between clusters. The bride progressed on

horseback within the procession, closely framed by women who surrounded her and structured her movement as the group ascended toward the village.

As the procession climbed, the incline grew steeper and the path narrowed into a corridor bordered by cacti, marking the entrance to the village. Here, at a point where mounted passage was no longer feasible, the group slowed and came to a coordinated halt. Several women stepped forward to assist the bride down from the horse. The musicians did not stop. The *ghayṭa* continued in short, insistent phrases, answered by vocal responses from the male players, producing a compact call-and-response exchange that structured the procession's ascent. It was during these brief musical intervals, when the reed instruments momentarily fell silent, that the *tzaghrītā*s would sound.

The first trill generally came from the elder women at the head of the procession, not from those directly beside the bride. It invariably came at the end of the very short chant of *əṣ-ṣlāt w-əs-slām*[15] initiated by several women, the ululation rising almost simultaneously with the chant's final syllable. The sound was sharp and sustained. Almost immediately, others followed—not in exact synchrony but in rapid succession—producing a cascading effect. Younger women joined fractionally after the elders, reinforcing the swell without extending it. No single voice remained distinct. The sound crested and then receded before the *ghayṭa* resumed its phrase. The ululation did not interrupt the music; it occupied the spaces within it. What was audible was not an individual voice asserting itself, but a coordinated layering of women's voices, activated at specific junctures and withdrawn just as deliberately.

From a distance, the scene might have appeared disorderly—wind, heat, music, movement, children weaving between groups. Up close, however, the vocal entries revealed an underlying structure. The ululations aligned with musical cadence and bodily transition. They marked the various thresholds—dismounting, entering the village, approaching the tent—without filling the air continuously.

This sequence illustrates how restraint operates as an integral component of the form. Extended or misplaced ululation risks disrupting the ceremonial flow and may be met with subtle correction—an elder's glance, a shift in musical direction, or the swift transition to the next ritual act. The efficacy of *tzaghrīta* lies in its brevity and placement. It punctuates

[15] This chant is widely recited by both women and men in Morocco during various celebrations, symbolizing deep respect and admiration for the Prophet and acknowledging his venerable status. The lyrics "*əṣ-ṣlāt w-əs-slām ʿlīk ā rasūl Allah. Lā jāh ilā jāh sīdnā Mohammed. Allah mʿa əj-jāh əl-ʿālī*" translate to "Blessings and peace be upon the Messenger of Allah, there is no more noble standing than the one our Prophet Muḥammad, Allah is all supportive of his elevated status." In this context, *jāh* signifies honour, dignity, and the elevated position of the Prophet Muḥammad.

without saturating. Through this patterned alternation of sounding and silence, women's loudness becomes measured and intelligible, its intensity contained within the ceremonial flow.

These conventions reveal that *tzaghrīta* operates within a system of tacit knowledge. Over generations, women learn how to produce the sound, when to deploy it, and how to align it with collective expectation. Participation follows socially legible conventions of timing and context. Through such cues, coordination, and restraint, women's loudness takes shape as a culturally organized practice whose authority rests on recognition of proper form—and its predictable execution.

Moral vocabularies

While *tzaghrīta* is indispensable in designated ritual contexts, its legitimacy is not unconditional. Women's vocality in Muslim societies has long been subject to moral evaluation, framed within concepts that regulate bodily comportment, audibility, and public presence. Terms such as *al-ḥayā'* (modesty) and *ḥshūma* (impropriety or shame in Moroccan usage) articulate everyday norms of comportment, while the more charged concept of *ʿawra* (that which must be concealed or protected) anchors juridical and doctrinal debates regarding women's audibility. Together, these terms form part of a broader ethical vocabulary through which women's verbal expression, appearance, and behaviour are assessed.

These forms of regulation, however, cannot be attributed solely to Islamic ethical discourse or local cultural norms. Colonial rule introduced its own regimes for regulating women's public presence and expressive practices, often through colonialist constructions of morality and public order. In Morocco, this extended to the practice of *tzaghrīta* itself: during the French Protectorate, the *youyou*, as colonial authorities termed it, was reportedly prohibited during the independence struggle due to its potency (Baker 1998, 307). Women's audibility was thus shaped by overlapping moral, political, and historical regimes of regulation.

Within the ethical register, as Saba Mahmood notes, *al-ḥayā'*[16] (حياء) denotes a cultivated disposition of modesty valued among pious Muslims (2005, 156; see also Esposito 2004). Such ethical concepts structure comportment through normative ideals as well as

[16] *Al-ḥayā'* (Arabic: حياء) is commonly translated as modesty, shyness, or moral reserve. In Islamic ethical discourse, it refers to a cultivated disposition of restraint grounded in awareness of divine and social accountability. Unlike purely prohibitive notions of shame, *al-ḥayā'* is often framed as a positive virtue—an interiorized moral sensibility shaping comportment, speech, and interaction. Interpretations of its scope and gendered implications vary across legal, theological, and cultural contexts.

prohibitions. In Moroccan vernacular usage, the admonition *ḥshūma!*[17] (حشومة) marks a transgression of propriety—signaling that a boundary of acceptable conduct has been crossed (see Ossman 1994, 155-56). Debates surrounding veiling likewise underscore that modesty may be interpreted as ethical discipline rather than mere constraint (see Afsaruddin 1999, 7-9).

Legal discourse provides one expression of this regulatory field. The thirteenth-century jurist Ibn al-Hajj denounced female Sufi leaders who performed *dhikr*[18] publicly, regarding such practices as illegitimate on the grounds that women's voices constitute *ʿawra*[19] and therefore should not be heard in mixed company (Ahmed 1992, 116). Frances Hasso and Zakia Salime similarly cite the widely circulated formulation *ṣawt al-mar'a ʿawra* (a woman's voice is ʿawra), a phrase that expresses an equivalence between women's voices and sexualized body parts (2016, 16). Within this interpretation, women's audibility in the presence of unrelated men becomes morally suspect rather than socially neutral.
These formulations, however, represent one strand within a broader ethical discourse. Modesty can function as both cultivated virtue and prohibition, structuring comportment without mandating silence.

Leila Ahmed explains that the semantic range of *ʿawra* has been historically entangled with anatomical references:

> ʿAwra is one of those words… richly suggestive of the androcentrism of dominant Arabic culture and of the connections it made between women, sexuality, and shameful and defective things. Its meaning includes blind in one eye; blemished, defective; the genitals; generally parts of the body that are shameful and must be concealed; women's bodies; women's voices; and women (Ahmed 1992, 116).

[17] *Ḥshūma* (Moroccan Arabic: حشومة) derives from the root ḥ-sh-m, associated with shyness and modest restraint. In Moroccan vernacular usage, the term functions as both noun and exclamation, denoting impropriety, embarrassment, or behavior deemed socially inappropriate. Beyond individual feeling, *ḥshūma* operates as a moral boundary marker within everyday interactions, signalling that a norm of decorum, respect, or social propriety has been breached. Its force is situational and relational rather than juridical, reflecting community-based expectations of appropriate conduct.

[18] *Dhikr* (Arabic: ذكر), meaning 'remembrance,' refers to devotional practices centered on the repetition of divine names, Qur'anic phrases, or invocations of God. In Sufi contexts, *dhikr* may be performed individually or collectively and can include rhythmic chanting, breath control, bodily movement, or musical accompaniment.

[19] *ʿAwra* (Arabic: عورة) denotes that which must be concealed or protected. In Islamic legal and ethical discourse, the term refers to parts of the body that should remain covered, though its semantic range extends beyond anatomical reference to include notions of vulnerability, modesty, and moral exposure. Interpretations of what constitutes *ʿawra* vary across legal schools and cultural contexts.

Margot Badran similarly describes the ideological framing in which:

> Women's voices were considered awra, something shameful, to be covered. Awra, which means pudendum, carries specifically sexual connotations. Moreover, not only women's voices but their entire beings were construed in sexual terms and therefore as awra. The prevailing ideology held that women, as essentially sexual beings, posed dangers to men, family, and society. Men secluded women in order to control them—that is, women of the middle and upper classes… whose labor outside the home was not needed. Their lives were to be private and unseen (2009, 96–97).

These formulations underscore the degree to which women's audibility has been morally charged in certain historical and doctrinal articulations. Female vocal presence is not culturally neutral; it is situated within discourses of propriety, sexuality, and social order. Yet such discourses do not translate into uniform silence. The same cultural milieu that produces arguments for restricting women's public voices simultaneously sustains ritual practices in which female ululation is expected and, as Remo Ensel notes, "cannot be left out" (1999, 231).[20] Ritual context alone, however, does not necessarily authorize ululation. At the conclusion of the *hajj*[21], for example, it may be regarded as inappropriate or unwelcome; Jacobs notes that "women who perform *zaghareet* upon their husbands' completion of the *hajj* thereby invalidat[e] the act" (2008, 163). The distinction, therefore, is not between ritual and nonritual settings, nor between prohibition and permission in absolute terms, but between contexts in which loudness is fitting and those in which it breaches commonly held expectations of restraint.

Moral vocabulary and ritual conventions thus operate in tandem. Covering the mouth while ululating, limiting duration, and aligning the sound with ceremonial rhythm become not incidental gestures but embodied signs of calibration, documented across ethnographic accounts. Jones, for instance, notes that, in Maghrebi culture, "the right hand is extended horizontally over the upper lip" during *tzaghrīta* (2001, 429); Meintjes draws a connection between the practice of ululation and proper behaviour in noting that women "partially cover their mouths decorously when they ululate" (2019, 63). Jacobs observed Jordanian females adopting the practice of placing one's hand over the mouth during *tzaghrīta*, citing a dual concern—with about half of the women surveyed stating

[20] British orientalist Edward Lane similarly documented women's ululation at the funeral of "a devout sheykh" in mid-nineteenth-century Egypt, noting that the women "rend[ed] the air with the shrill and quavering cries of joy called 'zagháreet'" that accompanied the procession (1871, 259).

[21] *Ḥajj* is the major pilgrimage to Mecca required once in a lifetime for able-bodied Muslims. The conclusion of the pilgrimage is marked by ritual acts emphasizing humility, supplication, and restraint—contexts in which exuberant vocal display may be considered inappropriate in some interpretations.

that this gesture helps "to focus the sound outward" (2008, 140), and the other half cognizant of the visual impact of the tongue "lolling about in plain view." This image, Jacobs comments, "seemed crude to many" (Ibid., 141); one woman used the phrase *mish hilw*[22] (not pretty). Jacobs concludes that "masking such an unpleasant view is consistent with concerns about polite, modest social behavior in the region" (Ibid.).



Figure 2: A woman performing tzaghrīta *(ululation) among a gathering of women in Dəwwār Būnṭāyər, in the territory of the Lakhmās tribe, southeast of Chefchaouen, northern Morocco, June 2019. © Abdou El Ouahabi, used with permission.*

Loudness, on the other hand, is activated without necessarily dissolving modesty; intensity coexists with decorum—despite Jacobs' caution that some of her Muslim interlocutors stated that *zaghareet* is *ḥarām*, i.e. forbidden, according to an unspecified *ḥadīth* from the body of traditional sayings of the Prophet specifying that "women should not raise their voices above men's" (2008, 163). In this configuration, *tzaghrīta* operates within the ethical ideals of *al-ḥayā'* and the sensitivities surrounding *ʿawra*, its audibility enhancing communal order in some contexts and unsettling it in others.

[22] مش حلو

Authorization, however, is never absolute. The same symbolic order that activates women's loudness at particular thresholds simultaneously defines its limits. Authorization is temporal, situational, and relational: it attaches to moments, not to persons. A woman who may sound forcefully within a wedding procession does not thereby acquire unrestricted vocal license in other domains. The legitimacy of *tzaghrīta* depends on the circumstances under which it sounds. When those conditions shift, the act risks reclassification—from affirmation to impropriety. The power of the practice thus lies not in escaping regulation but in operating precisely at its edge. *Tzaghrīta* exemplifies a form of vocal authority that is both enabled and delimited by the matricultural order.

Collective Voicing and Authorized Loudness

Tzaghrīta *as collective utterance*

Tzaghrīta is rarely a solitary act. Although an individual woman may initiate the first trill, the sound almost immediately becomes collective. Others join, overlap, and sustain the layered resonance, producing simultaneity rather than sequence as the initial trill disperses among participants. The result is a shared acoustic event. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea recounts her experience in Marrakech in the early 1970s while watching a neighbourhood prenuptial procession, noting the infectious character of these utterances:

> "Ah…ooooooh!" The woman closest to us started the tzaghreet, that high, ululating women's wail that can be joyful or sad, depending on the occasion, but that now came forth like a cry of triumph from Rue Trésor. It was taken up by other women, in the house, at the windows above the street, and from the sibha [covered passageway], where a crowd of relatives stood to get a last glimpse of the dowry, Rabia's household goods, making its formal way from her natal house to her nuptial house, to establish a new family unit. Ululations sounded from the rooftops along the street…. (1975, 130).

Fernea's account captures the contagious and spatially expansive character of the form. This vocal simultaneity has important implications. Because multiple voices sound together, the act resists identifiable attribution. No single performer remains acoustically foregrounded for long; the sound blends, layers, and disperses. Even when initiated by a particular woman, her ululation becomes indistinguishable from the collective response that follows. The voice is heard, yet its individual source is absorbed within the collective sound.

Such dissolution is not incidental but structurally embedded in the form itself. The rapid oscillation of pitch, the high timbral intensity, and the overlapping entries produce a sonic field in which individual vocal signatures are difficult to isolate. Unlike speech or solo song, which may highlight a named performer, *tzaghrīta* privileges simultaneity over individuation. The sound marks presence without attributing authorship.

Through this collective voicing, vocal agency becomes distributed: multiple women co-produce a coordinated acoustic surge whose force lies in its density and coordination. This participation gives the act its authority, diminishing the significance of personal charisma or verbal content. At a ritual threshold, the resulting burst signals communal affirmation. The act is effective precisely because it is shared, as Rachida explained when I asked who may initiate the *tzaghrīta*:

> Everybody can start it… but we all know who is going to do it first. In every family, in every village, the ones who step in are well known—the *zʿāymiyya*[23] [bold initiators]—… But it depends on the occasion. For a *sbūʿ*,[24] it will probably be the grandmother, or the elder sister of the woman who gave birth… A youngster might start in some moments, but not in others.

Rachida's explanation underscores a productive tension: participation is widely accessible, yet initiation is socially legible. Her use of the term *zʿāymiyya* is particularly revealing: although anyone may technically initiate, certain women are recognized as those who characteristically step forward, and their capacity to do so varies with the occasion and their relational standing within it. Openness, then, does not imply randomness; accessibility does not eliminate hierarchy. Initiation emerges from a form of social knowledge shared among the women themselves.

This distribution of agency mitigates the risks typically associated with women's public loudness. In contexts where female vocal display may otherwise attract scrutiny, collective

[23] The term *zʿāymiyya* derives from *zaʿīm* (leader) and connotes someone who steps forward with confidence or recognized authority. In this context, it does not refer to formal leadership but to a socially acknowledged readiness to initiate collective action, especially in ritual settings.

[24] Held on the seventh day after a child's birth, the *sbūʿ* is a significant event in Moroccan culture, as it marks the newborn's presentation to the community. Family members and friends gather at the baby's family home for a party, and a sheep (or a goat) is typically slaughtered, symbolizing gratitude and seeking blessings for the newborn's health and prosperity. Traditionally, this ceremony involved the selection of a name for the child. However, nowadays the child usually already has a name, making the ceremony largely symbolic. Guests bring gifts, usually clothing or practical items for the family, and the gathering takes on a distinctly festive character. Music, rhythmic chanting, and women's ululations punctuate the celebration, marking the child's incorporation into communal life and affirming collective joy.

sounding diffuses exposure. Recognition is achieved without singling out an individual performer. Audibility is intensified while responsibility remains communal. The sound is unmistakably present, yet it does not belong to any one woman.

Seen in this light, *tzaghrīta* exemplifies a matricultural mechanism of collective voicing. Its force comes from the coordinated production of shared audibility, through which loudness becomes a property of the group. This structured simultaneity allows *tzaghrīta* to generate social presence within established moral boundaries.

Loudness without individuation

The collective structure of *tzaghrīta* produces a distinctive configuration of audibility: loudness without individuation. Although the sound is piercing and unmistakable, it does not attach itself to a singular subject. Recognition occurs at the level of the group. What is acknowledged is not *who* sounded, but *that* the women have sounded.

This distinction matters. In many social contexts, heightened vocal presence risks drawing attention to the speaker as a discrete actor. Public loudness may expose an individual to scrutiny, moral evaluation, or reputational consequence. *Tzaghrīta*, however, diffuses that exposure through aggregation. Because the sound is layered and simultaneous, it resists attribution. No one woman stands alone as the source; the acoustic event belongs to the collectivity.

A different configuration of this diffusion was evident at a cave site in the Jebala region known locally as *Kahf ləʿrūsa l-məmsūkha* [Cave of the Petrified Bride], associated with a legend of a bride who fled an unwanted marriage and was transformed into stone. The cave lies in the immediate vicinity of Moulay Abdeslam's shrine at Jbəl l-ʿĀlam, a site of enduring importance in Jebala religious and social life. The saint—widely regarded as a spiritual patron of the region—anchors an annual pilgrimage (*mūssem*) that draws visitors from throughout northern Morocco. His presence structures local sacred geography, linking dispersed villages through shared devotional itineraries. The legend of the petrified bride and the ritual practices surrounding the cave thus unfold within a landscape already marked by saintly authority and pilgrimage movement. Women's collective ululation at the cave resonates within this broader devotional terrain—where supplication, blessing, and embodied presence are woven into the rhythms of Jebala ritual life.

Women from surrounding villages—and increasingly from nearby towns—visit the site seeking blessing in matters of marriage. Young unmarried women in particular come in

groups, hoping for a husband in the near future, with married women accompanying them; sometimes out of curiosity, just for fun, or as ritual facilitators.

The entrance to the cave is narrow. Despite its constriction, clusters of young women gather there, waiting their turn to enter. Around the mouth of the cave and along its interior walls hang fragments of women's undergarments—left behind, according to local practice, after supplication. Some garments remain draped across the rocks; others lie scattered near the entrance. The gesture is linked to the legend: a young bride, forced toward a marriage she refused, fled on her wedding day and wept inside the cave until she was petrified. The droplets of water that continue to fall from the inner rock are said to be her tears. Young women touch the stone, wash their faces with the water believed to flow from it, and leave behind a token of clothing in hopes that their own marriages will be secured.

As groups approach the entrance, the phrase *əṣ-ṣlāt w-əs-slām ʿlīk ā rasūl Allah* (Blessings and peace be upon the Messenger of Allah) is repeated aloud. The chant circulates among them before they enter, resembling a collective invocation. Once inside, the girls can be heard ululating and repeating blessings upon the Prophet. The sound thickens immediately within the enclosed space. From outside the cave entrance, I could hear the shift without seeing the participants; the interior is treated as a women-only space, and so my position remained just beyond the threshold. What registered was not individual movement but acoustic density.

At the close of each short chant, ululation erupted—not from a single discernible source, but from multiple voices entering almost simultaneously. The cave's stone walls compressed and magnified the sound, folding each trill into the next. What may have begun as an individual voice became almost instantly indistinguishable within the layered resonance. From outside, attribution became impossible. I could distinguish proximity—voices nearer the entrance sounded sharper, while those deeper within echoed with softened reverberation—but could not identify an initiator because the oscillations overlapped too quickly. Each entry masked the previous one.

Occasionally the chant would pause. Then another surge would break forth, again indistinguishable in origin. No voice lingered long enough to separate itself from the group. What was audible was not an individual plea for marriage but a shared sonic gesture enacted in simultaneity. The acoustic field belonged to the collectivity.

The result is a form of presence that is both amplified and shielded. The sound carries force—it punctuates ritual thresholds, commands attention, and affirms communal

transitions—yet it does so without isolating a performer. Women are publicly audible, yet not publicly singularized. The act affirms participation without converting participation into self-display.

Rhimou, a backup singer in Lahcen's ensemble whom I came to know while shadowing the group during fieldwork, articulated this distinction by contrasting village practice with urban weddings:

> In Tangiers, in Larache… in the city, in general… they bring a *nəggāfa*[25] and the women who accompany her; they are responsible for everything. One of these women is in charge of the *tzaghrīta*. The *nəggāfa* handles the clothing and jewelry, and the others help the bride with the *caftan* [traditional Moroccan gown] as she walks. But one of them is there just for the *tzaghrīta*—she's the one everything relies on. And it's you and your *ghrāma* [monetary tip]—the bigger the *ghrāma*, the more she'll stretch her throat. For us, no… we do everything ourselves… we do the *tzaghrīta* ourselves. Maybe a woman will help with clothing—but that's family. For the *tzaghrīta*? *Abadan* [never]. Our own women do it.[26]

Her contrast underscores more than a simple rural/urban difference. Rhimou distinguishes between two ways of organizing *tzaghrīta*. In the urban weddings she describes, responsibility for ululation is assigned to a designated performer and incorporated into the paid services surrounding the bride; as Rhimou puts it, "the bigger the *ghrāma*, the more she'll stretch her throat." By contrast, her repeated insistence that "we do everything ourselves" and that "our own women do it" locates *tzaghrīta* within the participating community itself. Her emphatic *abadan* makes this distinction especially clear: in the village setting she describes, ululation is not something to be delegated to an outside specialist. Rhimou's account thus sharpens what is at stake in collective voicing: not simply the presence of multiple voices, but a form of participation whose authority derives from the women who are invested in and enact the occasion.

Cultural force, in this sense, emerges through the density of overlapping voices. The trills generate an acoustic field that exceeds the capacity of any individual voice. As voices join,

[25] A *nəggāfa* is a female wedding attendant in Moroccan marriage ceremonies responsible for dressing and ceremonially presenting the bride. Beyond arranging multiple traditional outfits, she oversees the adornment of jewelry, manages the timing and sequencing of costume transitions, and directs the bride's staged entrances. As such, the *nəggāfa* functions not merely as a stylist but as a ritual specialist who mediates aesthetic display, social propriety, and the transmission of regional bridal traditions.
[26] Rhimou [last name not known], interview with author, July 16, 2022.

audibility intensifies without becoming attributable to a single performer. Their convergence gives the sound weight while maintaining distributed authorship.

This configuration allows loudness to function as recognition without exposure. Women are acknowledged as indispensable participants in ritual life, yet the form itself prevents their vocal presence from becoming a personal claim to authority. What is affirmed is collective alignment: that the moment is worthy, that the transition is legitimate, that the community consents. The sound thus marks communal coherence without singling out an individual voice.

In this way, *tzaghrīta* converts what might otherwise be perceived as risky audibility into culturally legible presence. Its loudness signals participation within social norms and amplifies a sense of collective belonging. The force of the practice emerges from this capacity to make women emphatically audible within the moral order that gives their sounding meaning.

Authorization versus transgression

The force of *tzaghrīta* comes from its ability to inhabit boundaries effectively. Because women's loudness is activated within recognized ritual frames and dispersed through collective voicing, it does not register as a breach of decorum. Its audibility is culturally granted, grounded in recognized conventions of when and how women may sound. Authorization here does not denote permission alone; it describes the culturally recognized conditions through which women's collective loudness becomes capable of marking, organizing, and intensifying particular ritual junctures.
This distinction between authorization and transgression is crucial. Transgression presupposes a boundary crossed—an act that challenges, disrupts, or overturns prevailing norms. *Tzaghrīta*, by contrast, derives its potency from normative alignment. It sounds when communal affirmation is expected; it intensifies transitions already designated as significant; it reinforces ritual order. The practice does not suspend moral vocabulary but operates through it.

Indeed, the very features that prevent individuation—simultaneity, aggregation, patterned brevity—also prevent the act from becoming oppositional. Because the sound is shared and temporally bounded, it does not convert into a platform for personal visibility. Women do not claim authority in abstraction; they exercise a socially established function. Loudness appears not as defiance but as fulfillment.

This does not mean that *tzaghrīta* lacks force. On the contrary, its authority is palpable. It commands attention, punctuates ceremony, and renders women's participation unmistakable. Yet that force is sustained precisely because it is granted. Authorization is embedded within symbolic order: the practice is intelligible as appropriate, fitting, and necessary. Its power stems from confirming moral norms at decisive points in ritual life. In this sense, *tzaghrīta* exemplifies a matricultural configuration of vocal authority. Women's loudness is culturally delimited and thereby effective. Boundaries remain intact even as women assume a powerful acoustic presence. The practice illustrates how social systems can generate powerful forms of presence without relying on inversion or rupture. Loudness acquires legitimacy by operating within the contours of constraint.

Through collective voicing, bounded activation, and normative alignment, *tzaghrīta* demonstrates that authorization itself can be generative. The sound carries weight because it is socially legible, temporally precise, and communally sustained. Its cultural force lies not beyond the boundary, but at it.

Matricultural Ordering in Jebala Social Life

Tzaghrīta *within gendered symbolic systems*

The patterned activation, collective structure, and bounded authorization of *tzaghrīta* are not isolated features of a single ritual practice. They reflect a broader matricultural ordering within Jebala social life in which women's symbolic presence is central yet delimited. What appears, at the level of performance, as calibrated loudness is, at a wider scale, an expression of how gendered symbolism is organized.
Across the life-cycle events examined above, women's voices mark moments in which the social fabric is reconfigured. Marriage, birth, departure, return, and death are not merely private experiences; they are communal transitions that require recognition. *Tzaghrīta* provides that recognition in a form that is unmistakably gendered. The practice positions women as indispensable participants in the reaffirmation of collective continuity. Their sound does not accompany ritual; it completes it.

This centrality, however, does not entail inversion of hierarchy. Women's loudness does not suspend the broader structures of authority that organize public life, nor does it displace male leadership within political or juridical domains. Instead, *tzaghrīta* illustrates a system in which symbolic indispensability coexists with differentiated roles. Women occupy a domain of ritual ratification and affective affirmation that is socially necessary yet contextually bounded.

Such an arrangement reveals that reinforcement and centrality are not mutually exclusive. The activation of women's voices at ceremonial thresholds strengthens the existing order by marking its legitimacy. When women ululate, they do not disrupt social continuity; they signal that continuity is being properly enacted. The practice therefore stabilizes rather than destabilizes hierarchy. It confirms that roles are being fulfilled, transitions properly observed, and communal ties reaffirmed.

Seen at this scale, *tzaghrīta* becomes legible as one articulation of a wider symbolic logic in which gendered differentiation structures participation without erasing significance. Women's social importance is real and consequential, but concentrated within specific culturally sustained domains. The boundaries surrounding their vocal presence give that importance its particular contours. Matricultural ordering, in this sense, distributes symbolic authority through differentiated social roles and domains.

Implications for matriculture

If *tzaghrīta* exemplifies a matricultural configuration of authorized loudness, the Jebala case also suggests a defining feature of matricultural systems more broadly: their uneven operation across social domains. Women's symbolic power is not uniformly distributed. It is activated in specific contexts, tied to certain occasions, and delimited by recognizable conventions. This unevenness is not a flaw in the system but one of its constitutive principles.

Within ritual thresholds, women's voices become indispensable. Their ululations ratify transitions, intensify communal recognition, and render collective alignment audible. Outside those thresholds, however, the same vocal intensity may be inappropriate or unwelcome. The legitimacy of women's loudness therefore varies across social domains, taking force within the settings that authorize it.

This patterned unevenness clarifies why symbolic centrality does not dissolve hierarchy. Women may occupy positions of acoustic prominence in ceremonial space while remaining constrained in juridical, political, or formal decision-making domains. These differentiations are not accidental inconsistencies; they are structural distinctions. Matriculture operates through distribution, not homogenization. It assigns weight without erasing boundaries.

Understanding this logic prevents two common misreadings. First, it avoids interpreting women's ritual centrality as covert domination or latent matriarchy. Second, it resists

framing bounded activation as mere repression. The system neither inverts nor silences; it differentiates. Meaning and legitimacy are generated precisely through calibrated limits. Because authorization is situational, its activation carries force. Because it is not diffuse, it retains intensity.

Tzaghrīta thus offers one instantiation of a broader symbolic ordering in which women's social significance is real, consequential, and culturally sustained—yet always contextually defined. The boundaries that circumscribe women's audibility do not negate their authority; they structure it. Matriculture, in this sense, names a configuration in which symbolic power operates through patterned activation, collective enactment, and productive constraint.

Conclusion

Restating the argument

This article has argued that *tzaghrīta* is best understood as a matricultural system of authorized loudness. Its force derives primarily from how it is structured, activated, and delimited within Jebala social life, giving form to expressions of joy, affirmation, and communal enthusiasm. Women's vocal intensity emerges within bounded ritual settings, operates through collective simultaneity, and acquires legitimacy through alignment with shared moral vocabularies.

By tracing the contexts, conventions, and moral calibrations that govern its sounding, this analysis has shown that *tzaghrīta* exemplifies a patterned distribution of symbolic authority. Its loudness is culturally granted, regulated through the contexts in which it becomes appropriate and effective. Within these conditions, women occupy positions of acoustic centrality without dissolving established hierarchies. Through simultaneity and collective voicing, individual exposure recedes as vocal agency becomes distributed among the group.

Seen through a matricultural lens, *tzaghrīta* reveals how boundaries function productively. The limits placed on women's audibility help generate the conditions under which loudness becomes meaningful and effective. Women's social significance is neither illusory nor unbounded. It is situational, culturally sustained, and symbolically indispensable within specific domains. *Tzaghrīta* thus stands as one instantiation of a broader logic in which authorization, regulation, and collective voicing converge to produce socially legible forms of presence.

Broader contributions

By reframing *tzaghrīta* as a matricultural configuration of authorized loudness, this study contributes to broader discussions of gendered sound, symbolic power, and the regulation of public presence. The analysis shows that women's audibility can be both bounded and consequential, a configuration that is difficult to capture through familiar accounts of silencing and resistance, repression and empowerment. Loudness need not signify rupture; it may function as an integral component of social continuity.

This perspective complicates prevailing assumptions in sound studies and gender theory that equate vocal prominence with individual assertion or political transgression. *Tzaghrīta* offers a different configuration, in which collective voicing creates a consequential form of public presence while remaining embedded in existing social relations. Its force comes from the patterned distribution of symbolic authority across particular moments, roles, and domains.

More broadly, the article underscores the analytic value of matriculture as a framework for examining uneven symbolic authority. By attending to how boundaries operate productively—activating women's significance in specific domains while constraining it in others—the concept offers a vocabulary for understanding gendered power beyond dichotomies of domination and liberation. Matriculture directs attention to the cultural logics through which legitimacy is conferred, roles are differentiated, and presence becomes socially intelligible.

In this light, *tzaghrīta* offers a regional instance of a wider anthropological pattern: the generation of meaning through calibrated limits. Women's voices achieve considerable loudness within specific contexts, their centrality bounded by the occasions that authorize it. It is precisely this patterned unevenness that gives the practice its force. Recognizing such configurations expands how we theorize gender, sound, and social order, inviting attention to forms of authority that emerge through the inhabiting of boundaries.

Biography

Hicham Chami is an ethnomusicologist and Lecturer at Brandeis University. He received his PhD from Columbia University (2024). His research examines music, gender, and cultural marginalization in northern Morocco, with a particular focus on the Jebala region, combining ethnographic fieldwork, historical analysis, and sound-based cultural theory.

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Echoes of Resilience:

Women's Voices and Agency in Nso Cultural Traditions of the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon

HAPPINESS YINYUY

Abstract

This paper explores the echoes of resilience embodied in Nso women's voices and agency within the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. The Nso People trace their history to Princess Ngonnso, the founding mother of the Nso ethnic group. Ngonnso represents the foundational female figure whose legacy underscores women's enduring spiritual and symbolic significance in Nso society. Although Nso has a centralised patriarchal social structure headed by the Fon *and assisted by a council of traditional rulers and regulatory societies, women have demonstrably matricultural functions when transmitting oral traditions, teaching cultural values, organising communal labour, and preserving Indigenous knowledges. Nso women's roles in reproduction and*

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community development further position them as major sources of continuity and power. This study draws on historical analysis, oral traditions, and contemporary accounts to reveal women's power in Nso socio-political landscape. Findings reveal that although women are largely excluded from formal male-controlled political councils and public decision-making - justified by male hegemonic ideologies - forms of influence persist through informal networks, religion, and resistance to exploitative customs. This article argues that women's agency in Nso culture is not merely reactive but a persistent, resilient force that sustains social cohesion, economic vitality, and cultural identity amid patriarchal constraints.

Keywords: women's voices, women's agency, Nso cultural traditions, Bamenda Grassfields, Nso matriculture

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Résumé

Cet article explore les échos de la résilience qui s'expriment à travers les voix et l'agentivité des femmes Nso, dans les Grassfields de Bamenda, au Cameroun. Le peuple Nso fait remonter son histoire à la princesse Ngonnso, figure fondatrice du groupe ethnique Nso. Ngonnso incarne ce pilier féminin originel dont l'héritage souligne l'importance spirituelle et symbolique, toujours vivace, des femmes au sein de la société Nso. Bien que la société Nso soit dotée d'une structure patriarcale centralisée dirigée par le « Fon *» et secondée par un conseil de chefs traditionnels et de sociétés régulatrices, les femmes exercent manifestement des fonctions relevant d'une matriculture lorsqu'il s'agit de transmettre les traditions orales, d'enseigner les valeurs culturelles, d'organiser le travail communautaire et de préserver les savoirs autochtones. Les rôles des femmes Nso dans la reproduction et le développement communautaire les positionnent en outre comme des sources majeures de continuité et de pouvoir. Cette étude s'appuie sur l'analyse historique, les traditions orales et les témoignages contemporains pour mettre en lumière le pouvoir des femmes dans le paysage sociopolitique Nso. Les résultats montrent que, bien que les femmes soient largement exclues des conseils politiques officiels contrôlés par les hommes et des processus décisionnels publics — une exclusion souvent justifiée par des idéologies hégémoniques masculines — des formes d'influence résilientes persistent grâce à des réseaux informels, à la religion et à la résistance face aux coutumes exploitantes. Cet article soutient que l'agentivité des femmes dans la culture Nso n'est pas simplement réactive, mais constitue une force persistante et résiliente qui*

soutient la cohésion sociale, la vitalité économique et l'identité culturelle au milieu des contraintes patriarcales.

Mots-clés : voix des femmes, agentivité des femmes, traditions culturelles Nso, les Bamenda Grassfields, matriculture Nso

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Introduction

The Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon constitute one of the most culturally vibrant and anthropologically significant highland regions in Central Africa. This area is made up of an elevated plateau characterized by volcanic soils, misty valleys, savannah grasslands, and a network of interconnected *fondoms (*chiefdoms). The region is also characterized by a dense concentration of communities, languages, and political institutions whose histories have been shaped by migration, settlement, warfare, trade, diplomacy, agriculture, and processes of state formation. Paul Nkwi and Jean-Pierre Warnier explain the long history of population movements and the complex processes through which the landscapes and societies of the western Grassfields were formed.[1] They argue that the region has experienced relatively continuous and dense settlement over several centuries, and that its contemporary social and physical landscapes are products of successive processes of migration, agricultural transformation, and interaction among communities.[2]

Within this wider Grassfields environment, the Nso constitute one of the major centralized polities of the region. The area also includes culturally rich communities such as Bamessing, Babungo, Wiya, Kom, Bafut, Bali, Mankon, Aghem, and Oku, among others. According to oral traditions, the dynastic ancestors of the Nso people originated from such places as Rifum and Bankim and made their way south to their present location.[3] These societies are characterized by strong traditional institutions, kingship systems, regulatory societies, and complex political structures headed by male traditional rulers and a council of elders. These polities developed traditional institutions of governance in their

[1] P.N. Nkwi, and Jean-Pierre Warnier, *Elements for History of Western Grassfields* (University of Yaounde: Department of Sociology, 1982), 5-6.
[2] Ibid., 6.
[3] V.G. Fanso, *Cameroon History for Secondary schools and Colleges, Vol.1: from prehistoric times to the nineteenth century* (London: Macmillan Publisher, 1989), 34. The *fondom*s of the Bamenda grassfields emerged from waves of migrations, conquests, and alliances dating back several centuries, involving movements from the Tikar plains and Adamawa Plateau. The Tikar *fondom*s in the Bamenda grassfields include Nso, Kom, War, Bafut, Wiya, Fongom, Tang, Bum, Mbem, Bambili, Mfumte, Oku, Bamunka, Babungo, Bambalang, Bamali, Bafanji and Babessi. Others in the district between Mbam and Ndjim rivers are Bankim, Bang-Heng, Ina, Ue, Yakong, Ngame, Ngume and Ditan among others.

administration generally headed by men. Nevertheless, women exercised matricultural functions through kinship networks, motherhood, ritual authority, and advisory roles.

Nso is one of the Tikar *fondoms* of the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon.[4] It is found in the Bui Division of the Northwest Region of Cameroon. It has an estimated population of over 400,000 inhabitants and a density of about 250 persons per square kilometre[5]. The Nso *fondom* is headed by a *Fon*, a male ruler who resides at the heart of a centralized yet flexible governance structure. The Nso *fondom* has a hierarchical system of government which comprises the *Fon*, male councillors, regulatory societies, and an intricate kinship network, all operating within an agricultural economy heavily dependent on women's labour.

The organizing concept in this article is matriculture. This woman-centric concept was developed by Marie Francoise Guédon from the work of Clifford Geertz; he writes that "Culture is a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life."[6] This is the theoretical foundation from which matriculture was subsequently developed. Building on Geertz's work, Linnéa Rowlatt writes that "Matricultures are a society's cultural system which relates to women, mothers, femininity, and other associated concepts such as births, sex, or grandmother."[7] In this same light, Marie Francoise Guédon writes that "We use the expression 'matricultural systems' to designate that part or those components of culture that sustain, express, and welcome women's participation in the socio-cultural fabric, whether it sustains a matrilineal kinship system or not."[8]

Guédon's establishment of the concept of matriculture, based as it is on Geertz' theory of cultural systems, provides a useful foundation for understanding Nso matriculture not as a fixed institutional structure, but as a web of culturally constructed meanings surrounding Nso motherhood and womanhood. From this perspective, maternal roles, female authority, kinship practices, rituals, oral traditions, symbols, and everyday practices become meaningful because members of the community collectively interpret and attach significance to them.

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[4] E. M. Chilver and P. M. Kaberry, *Traditional Bamenda: The Pre-Colonial History and Ethnography of Bamenda Grassfields*, Vol. I, (Buea: Government Printer, 1967), 11.
[5] M. R. Njilla, *Management of Property/ Resources for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods in Bui Division, Northwest Region of Cameroon* (University of Buea: M.Sc. Dissertation in Geography, 2009), 9.
[6] C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York : Basic Books, 1973), 5.
[7] L. Rowlatt, "Blind: The Western Gaze at Matricultures, Historically. Part I," *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*, 1:1 (2020), 17; based on Geertz' famous definition in 'Religion as a Cultural System' in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 123.
[8] M-F. Guédon, 'Introduction,' *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural StudiesI*, 1, no. 1 (May 2020): 6; URL: https://www.networkonculture.ca/activities/matrix; accessed 30 September 2026.

In this study, matriculture is conceptualized as an interpretive lens for understanding the cultural meanings attached to motherhood, womanhood, maternal ancestry, and women's contributions to society. Rather than treating matriculture as synonymous with matriarchy or women's formal political dominance, the study understands it as a system of shared symbols, values, narratives, and practices through which women and mothers are culturally represented, interpreted, and accorded social significance. This is in line with Geertz's interpretive approach to culture, which emphasizes the importance of examining the meanings that people attach to symbols and social practices within particular cultural contexts. From this perspective, matriculture concerns not only what women do, but also what their roles, identities, and contributions mean within the Nso society.

With regard to Nso cultural traditions, matriculture provides a framework for examining the symbolic and social significance of women as mothers, ancestors, culture bearers, agricultural actors, custodians of oral traditions, advisers, mediators, and participants in community life. It draws attention to the ways in which cultural narratives, rituals, kinship practices, symbols, and everyday interactions construct and reproduce ideas about the value and place of women in the Nso community. Such meanings can generate forms of informal authority and agency even where women have limited access to formal political institutions.

This work is relevant in Nso where Ngonnso symbolises the Founding Mother and has great spiritual and ancestral connections to the *fondom*. This does not imply that Nso society is matriarchal or that women exercise formal political authority over men. Rather, where the concept of matriculture provides an interpretive lens for examining how cultural symbols, kinship relations, ritual practices, oral traditions, titles, and everyday social interactions construct the significance of women and create culturally legitimate spaces for their agency, the historical figure of Princess Ngonnso symbolises the maternal origin of Nso identity and legitimises women's cultural significance and authority. Women's responsibilities in childbirth, naming ceremonies, initiation rites, marriage negotiations, and funeral rituals illustrate how maternal values shape the social organisation of the Nso *fondom*.

The concept of cultural authority is particularly important because it acknowledges forms of women's power that may not be visible in formal political institutions. Instead, women influence Nso society through family leadership, community associations, and educational activities. Mbu Dora Nyuykighan, for example, argues that Nso women's power often emerges through cooperation, complementarity, and cultural participation rather than confrontation with patriarchal institutions.[9] This perspective is particularly relevant to Nso society, where women exercise influence through women's institutions, market organisations, agricultural cooperatives, religious and ritual rites; their authority is

[9] M. D. Nyuykighan, 'Gender Representations in Selected Nso Folktales of the Northwest Region of Cameroon,' *International Journal of African Society, Cultures and Traditions*, 13:1 (2025), 25.

exercised through consensus-building and community service. She also explains how Nso women preserves cultural norms and values across generations through education and socialisation. In Nso society, women are the principal agents of cultural reproduction. The women teach their children Indigenous languages, clan histories, moral values, traditional dances, folktales and proverbs. Through these activities, women ensure the continuity of Nso identity and heritage.

Phyllis M. Kaberry's *Women of the Grassfields: A Study of the Economic Position of Women in Bamenda, British Cameroons* explains how Nso logic rationalised gendered labour divisions in ways that highlighted female indispensability. She explains that Nso men claimed that preparing land for the planting of crops was "a woman's job which is too strenuous for the men." Her observations, gathered through immersive participation[10] (including accompanying women to farms), demonstrate that women's control over planting, harvesting, processing, and surplus management granted them *de facto* economic autonomy. Kaberry also notes that Nso women consider themselves very important to the community because "All people come from her. Women are like God because they bear children."[11]

Miriam Goheen's *Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops: Gender and Power in the Cameroon Grassfields* offers a focused analysis of Nso society. This work presents Nso women as the 'backbone' of the economy of Nso.[12] Nso women were and are still involved in subsistence agriculture. They cultivate several varieties of food crops to feed their families and use the surplus items in trade. This recognition of women's foundational role in the Nso society coexists with institutional mechanisms that channel their influence towards the social sphere. The men assume leadership and decision-making supremacy while women engage in agricultural and domestic realms to ensure societal reproduction and stability.[13]

Y. C. Nkeneh, in her analyses of the Bamenda Grassfield *fondoms*, describes the women of this socio-cultural area as occupying a 'deep state' position. That is, they exercise informal advisory and stabilizing roles that sustain institutions during crises or successions. She explains that the women in the Bamenda Grassfields play a vital role in determining who

[10] Immersive participation refers to the active and direct involvement of individuals in an activity, experience, cultural practice, or research process in a way that allows them to become deeply engaged in it rather than simply observing it from a distance. In a nutshell, it involves learning, understanding, and experiencing something by participating in it personally.
[11] P.M. Kaberry, *Women of the Grassfields: A Study of the Economic Position of Women in Bamenda, British Cameroons* (London and New York: Routledge, 1952), 110-111 and 117.
[12] M. Goheen, *Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops: Gender and Power in the Cameroon Grassfields (*Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 207-209.
[13] D.B. Ngoran *et al*, 'Incidental Benefits of Female Constituted Social Groups in Nso' Polity of the Cameroon Grasslands: Colonial and Post-Colonial Appraisal,' *International Journal of History and Cultural Studies*, 7:1 (2021), 21.

becomes a *fai* (head of a sub-clan within the *fondom*) or a 'notable' by serving as technical advisers to their husbands, who channel their suggestions to the powers that be. The women examine the character, speech, and competence of any aspiring leader of the *fondom* and make their suggestions to the men who take the final decision. In times of crisis, the women influence the decisions of the *fon* by urging him to take a particular course of action. Indirectly, the women advise their husbands to enthrone a leader who will enhance prosperity and wellbeing of the *fondom*.[14]

This work centres on reconciling the formal exclusion of women from Nso political systems with their resilient agency. That is, although women have been very instrumental in the development of the Nso *fondom*, they have mostly been excluded from governance and decision-making. Nso customs and traditions construct governance as a masculine prerogative, thereby sidelining women in issues of administration. Despite this limitation, ethnographic, oral, and historical evidence reveals women's multifaceted power in the areas of marriage, reproduction, and collective action (via women's associations addressing grievances or economic needs), as well as cultural narratives (folktales) that occasionally foreground female intelligence and resourcefulness. All of these contest the apparent passivity of Nso women.

Data for this article was collected from primary and secondary sources. Primary data, which is most of the data, was obtained through oral interviews conducted with traditional rulers, women, and members of the community who live, experience, and participate in the issues discussed in the work. Interviews were conducted with persons between the ages of 40 and 80. This age group was selected to obtain reliable information on the issues discussed. To identify the interviewees, the researcher adopted the use of the snowball method, wherein one participant leads the researcher to another. The choice of those interviewed was dictated by the desire to complement the information gathered from oral sources and secondary data. The interviews were unstructured, with an open-ended question guide. The researcher / author also adopted the participant observation method, by participing in cultural ceremonies and women's association's events; this allowed me to observe activities that were carried out in my presence. Secondary data was collected mostly from textbooks obtained from private and public libraries in Bamenda and Buea. Information was also extracted from online Journals. These books and articles provided useful data on the socio-political and economic history of the Nso ethnic group. The information obtained from these books facilitated our understanding of the issues under discussion.

Methodologically, this work adopts a qualitative historical research method. The qualitative approach is appropriate because it enables an in-depth understanding of

[14] Y.C. Nkeneh, 'The Role of Women in the Political Transition of the Bamenda Grassfields *Fonship* Institutions in Cameroon,' *International Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education*, 10:9 (September 2023), 20-22; URL: www.arcjournals.org; accessed on 23 May 2026.

women's experiences, voices, cultural practices, and agency in Nso *fondom* of Cameroon. Given this focus, qualitative methods allow for a deep exploration of lived experiences, meanings, and symbolic practices within Nso society. The ethnographic orientation is particularly appropriate for examining Indigenous knowledge systems and oral traditions in their natural setting. The historical narration allows the researcher to trace changes and continuities in women's roles.

This paper examines the echoes of resilience embodied in Nso women's voices and agency within the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. It posits that, notwithstanding systematic formal exclusion from core political institutions, Nso women have historically and continue to exercise meaningful voice and agency. This agency manifests through control over agricultural production, reproductive and kinship roles, informal women's associations, oral narratives and folktales. These contributions resonate as enduring 'echoes of resilience' - subtle yet powerful forces that sustain household economies, community cohesion, lineage perpetuation, and cultural identity across generations, including pre-colonial migrations, German and British colonial rule, postcolonial nation-building, and the contemporary challenges posed by the Anglophone Crisis.[15]

Historical Foundations: The Legacy of Ngonnso, Founder of the Nso Ethnic Group

Oral traditions trace the origins and establishment of the Nso *fondom* to the fourteenth century, when Princess Ngonnso, a royal woman of Tikar descent from the Adamawa region (near present-day Bankim or Kimi), led a migration westward with her followers. It positions Ngonnso as the central architect of Nso political and cultural identity. According to Fai Michael Verye, the migratory history of Nso began in c.1387 with the death of *Fon* Tinki of Tikar; he reigned at Kimi from 1350 to 1387, and his death led to a succession crisis. That is, before his death, *Fon* Tinki designated his son Nchare Yen as heir; however, Nchare Yen was by-passed by his half-brother, Mbwandu. Nchare Yen felt humiliated and left in anger with his younger brother Mfoomban. Nchare Yen and Mfoomban did not want their elder sister, Ngonnso, to accompany them because she was already married. The brothers left in secret, but they were followed by Ngonnso and her companions. Like her brothers, Ngonnso vowed never to return to their original settlement at Rifum.

When Nchare Yen and his brother saw that Ngonnso and her band were following them, they hurriedly crossed the Mbam River with the aid of a ntang (a hanging bridge) and then destroyed the bridge to prevent her from accompanying them.[16] Nchare Yen went southwards and founded the Bamum dynasty, while Mfoomban moved eastwards and

[15] The Anglophone Crisis began in Cameroon in 2016. It is a complex conflict rooted in long-standing socio-economic, cultural and political grievances held by the English-speaking regions of Cameroon against the Francophone-dominated government.

founded the Mbam dynasty. Unable to construct a bridge at the Mbam River, Ngonnso and her followers decided to move westwards along the banks of the river Mbam and settled at Mbonso; here they met the Taankum people, who were unfriendly to them. They later moved upstream and settled at Ndzen-nso. From Ndzen-nso,[17] she and her followers trekked to Kovvifem, located to the northeast of Kumbo.[18]

This narration introduces interpersonal and gendered conflict: Ngonnso, as elder sister, acts to join her brothers' migration but faces refusal due to her marital status, a detail that underscores both her agency and patriarchal constraints, even in the origin story. The bridge-cutting dramatizes betrayal or strategic separation, forcing Ngonnso's group to adapt by moving westward along the Mbam River.

At Kovvifem, Ngonnso and her followers met a small group of settlers called the Visale, whose major occupation was hunting. These were the earliest settlers of the area; they later became known as the *Nso Mtaar* (the great lords). They warmly received Ngonnso and her followers and allowed them to settle amongst them. Through a peaceful dialogue, the Visale surrendered themselves to the authority of the Ngonnso migrants because their ruler died without having a male child to succeed him.[19] Grassfield *fondoms* such as Nso, Bafut, Bali, Mankon, Babungo and Bamum, among others, practiced rulership by patrilineal descent, whereby governance and decision-making processes were mostly managed by the men. For this reason, Ngonnso was not enthroned as the first *Fon* of Nso.

There are two versions on who became the first *Fon* of Nso. Leh and Jing were the sons of Ngonnso, and the first version claims that Leh was the first *Fon* of Nso while the second version presents Jing as the first *Fon* of Nso. It is difficult to determine the true identity of first *Fon* because no dates have been attributed to their periods of reign. However, despite the controversy, this legend of Nso origins has some truth. According to Lantum, the son of Ngonnso succeeded the throne in exchange for many rights and privileges, while the Visale were given titles of great lords; they were allowed to own the land and to participate in the administration of the *fondom*. It should be noted that from the outset Nso tradition did not allow women to rule. Without this, Ngonnso would have been the first *Fon* of Nso.[20]

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[16] F. M. Verye, *The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and Nso Kidiif Ritual as Model of Genuine Reconciliation* (Protestant University of Central Africa, Yaounde: Doctorate Thesis, 2007), 74-75.
[17] It is important to note that some of the places conquered were given these names in honour of the Founding Mother, Ngonnso.
[18] Verye, *TRC and Nso Kidiif Ritual*, 74-75.
[19] D.N. Lantum, *The Nso' Went to Mvem 16- 18 December 1994* (Kumbo: Nso History Society Publication, 2002), 65.
[20] Ibid.

Despite not occupying the role of *Fon*, Ngonnso founded the Nso dynasty through peaceful means by merging her group with the Visale, who accepted Nso royal leadership. When she founded the Nso dynasty after moving from one place to another, her people sought to settle in a safer place void of raiders, diseases and hunger;[21] Kovvifem is important in the history of Nso because that is where the first *Fon* was enthroned and the Nso took a separate political identity. The word identifying the people – Nso – is likely to have originated from the name of the founder of the Nso dynasty: Ngonnso. This narrative directly supports the article's theme of echoes of resilience: Nso women's agency amid constraints. With the name 'Nso' derived from 'Ngon-nso,' the story also explains linguistic and cultural structures by linguistically centring female ancestry in ethnic identity.

The Nso migration was prompted by several factors including succession disputes, search for peace, fertile land, favourable climate, and rebellion against injustice, among others. The Nso, during their migratory history, adapted institutions to suit the changing conditions. For example, as they migrated, they brought with them some social features from Rifum: a regulatory society (*Ngwerong* and *Ngiri*) assisted by royal councillors (a traditional council that guarded and advised the *Fon* on issues of administration).[22]

In a nutshell, Ngonnso migrated from her homeland after rejecting patriarchal succession norms that favoured a male rival over more legitimate or capable heirs. Accompanied by a band of followers, she undertook a deliberate migration to establish a new settlement that evolved into the Nso *fondom*. This act of self-determination highlights female initiative in polity formation, negotiation with new environments, and the forging of a distinct communal identity. The story highlights the role of women in Nso history, despite institutional biases toward male power.

Despite the important role played by Ngonnso in the history of Nso, the society developed a more highly centralized patriarchal political structure over time. Today, the *fondom* is headed by a *Fon* who holds sacred and secular authority. He is assisted and advised in issues of administration by traditional male councillors or male titleholders *(Fais* and *Shufais*) and supported by influential regulatory societies. Chief among these societies are the *Ngwerong*, a regulatory body with enforcement, judicial, and ritual powers, and the *Ngiri*, linked to royal princes and dynastic continuity. These institutions concentrate formal decision-making, settle disputes, and carry out rituals for the wellbeing of the society. The majority of Nso women are largely excluded from inner councils and high titles.[23]

[21] Ibid.
[22] Verye, *TRC and Nso Kidiif Ritual*, 76.
[23] C.G. Leinyuy, *Nso Traditional Political Institutions* (University of Yaounde: Post Graduate Diploma in History, 1983), 74.

Ngonnso, therefore, was an active agent who initiated migration and established a new political entity, embedding female initiative at the heart of Nso collective identity.[24] She is one of the female ancestors who connects living Nso to pre-colonial history, embodying continuity amid change. A key restitution document states that "Ngonnso serves as an important leader in the history of Nso. The fondom is named after her."[25] The spiritual and symbolic elevation of Ngonnso transforms her from historical founder to mother deity and incarnation of the Nso worldview. As mother deity, she is central to rituals of fertility, prosperity, protection, and ancestral mediation. The stories told through and about Ngonnso transmit knowledge and practices intergenerationally.[26]

Historically, the statue of Ngonnso, a well carved wooden female figure adorned with cowrie shells, was kept in the Nso palace museum for posterity; the statue was stolen in 1902 during a punitive expedition led by German colonial military officer Kurt von Pavel.[27] The refusal of the Nso people to accept German administration had provoked the Germano-Nso War of 1902 to 1905, and at Nkar, a few German troops were killed. The Germans responded with heavy application of superior weapons, such as machine guns and firearms, which far overwhelmed the Nso's crude weapons. This German expedition was led by Von Pavel and Captain Glauning, who had reportedly killed about three hundred Nso soldiers at Vekovi. Following this victory, German soldiers invaded the Nso Palace where cultural objects and artefacts were kept and took the statue of Ngonnso. The Germans eventually succeeded in weakening the political power of the Nso Indigenous rulers by implementing German administration and policies in the land. The statue of Ngonnso was taken from the Nso Palace to the Berlin Ethnological Museum.[28] Its removal severed spiritual links, interpreted by Nso as contributing to communal imbalances, and crises affecting the community.

Till date, the people of Nso yearn for the return of this statue to the f*ondom*. During the *Fon's* trip to Germany in 2022, he visited the Berlin Museum where the statue of Ngonnso is kept. Recognising Ngonnso as the mother, founder, and spiritual guardian of the Nso people, the *Fon* offered prayers and sought her forgiveness for the prolonged separation of her statue from its homeland. He also implored her to intercede on behalf of the Nso people and to bring peace to the *fondom*, which has been deeply affected by the ongoing Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon.[29] During her own 2023 visit to the Berlin museum, Sylvie

[24] Ibid.
[25] Open Restitution Africa Project, *The Restitution Journey of Ngonnso from Nso in Cameroon*; URL: https://dataplatform.openrestitution.africa/case-study/2/, accessed 29 January 2025.
[26] S. Njobati, personal communication.
[27] H. Yinyuy, *Nso Response to Colonial Administration and Christianity, 1902-1961* (University of Buea: Long Essay Department of History, 2005), 17.
[28] Ibid., 18.
[29] RGL RGL, 'The Fon of Nso meets the Founder of Nso – Ngonnso at last; the visit to Germany,' *Regartless*; URL: https://regartless.org/and-at-last-they-meet-the-fon-of-nso-and-ngonnso-symbol-of-divinity-fertility-and-peace/, accessed 12 November 2026.

Njobati, who hails from Nso, stated that, "It was emotional because I was seeing… our founder… our mother locked up in some glass container. And for 120 years, she's been yelling out. She needs to be back home."[30] Njobati expressed her commitment to repatriating the looted artefact to Nso land once peace and stability are restored to the area. The delay in bringing back the statue of Ngonnso from Berlin is linked to the ongoing Crisis in Cameroon. This effort represents modern echoes of Ngonnso's agency: women and allies reclaiming heritage through activism, education, and international pressure.

The *Ngam Lii Wong* (Nso Annual Cultural Week Festival) was established in 1976 during the reign of *Fon* Ngah Bifon III. That year, the people of Nso *Fondom* began to communally commemorate Ngonnso, the revered heroine, mother and founding matriarch of Nso people, in recognition of her enduring legacy and contributions to the establishment of the dynasty. In 2008, it was rebranded as the Ngonnso Cultural Festival by *Fon* Sehm Mbinglo I in honour of the enduring legacy of Princess Ngonnso. This Festival is celebrated every year in the month of December. Women massively participate through dance, storytelling, presentation of marriage customs, and traditional dishes. The festival fosters cohesion and presents Nso heritage to the world through the various activities carried out. The Ngonnso annual festival is celebrated annually by Nso sons and daughters residing in Cameroon and other parts of the world.[31]

In synthesis, the historical foundations centred on Ngonnso reveal a tradition where female agency is constitutive rather than marginal. From migration narratives of rebellion and leadership, through sacred embodiment and colonial disruption, to restitution activism and cultural festivals, these elements sustain echoes of resilience. They interact dynamically with patriarchal institutions, informing the negotiated gender relations explored in later sections.

Patriarchal Structures and Formal Exclusion from Nso Governance

The patriarchal structures of Nso society confined governance and administrative authority to men, thereby highlighting the remarkable resilience and agency of women. Despite the matrifocal legacy associated with Princess Ngonnso, the Nso *fondom* evolved into a highly centralized political system in which authority was concentrated in the hands of the *Fon*, male titleholders (*Fais*, *Shufais*, and *Sheys*), and male regulatory societies such as *Ngwerong* and *Ngiri*, thereby reinforcing patriarchal governance structures.[32]

[30] K. Chakanetsa, 'Cameroon's Ngonnso: 'My fight to bring our sacred stolen statue home,' BBC News: The Comb podcast, BBC World Service, 17 June 2023; URL: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-65746910, accessed 12 November 2026.
[31] Interview with J. Ayufowontoh Mbinglo, a Princesses of Nso. Mbinglo is a cultural activist, a teacher, and a trader by profession. She is married to one of the notables (rulers) of the Nso *fondom* and they are blessed with four children. Interviewed by author in Buea, 31 December 2025.
[32] *Shey i*s a titled elder who belongs to the traditional hierarchy surrounding the *Fon* and the notables.

Nso political organization is fundamentally hierarchical and male-centered, with the *Fon* at the head of administration. *Fonship* in Nso tradition is seen as divine and the *Fon* is treated with respect and honour by his subjects. As head of administration, the *Fon* appoints traditional officials and councillors. He presides over matters of administration and commands authority in the society. The *Fon* possesses extensive authority and the power to dismiss any official who fails to perform their duties or violates the established rules. He also occupies the highest command in the military hierarchy. Despite these extensive powers, the *Fon* is not above the law; he can be questioned and sanctioned by the *Ngwerong* if he fails to uphold the laws, customs, and norms of the community.

In addition, the *Fon* serves as the traditional religious high priest of the *fondom*. Together with the lesser high priest (*ta-wong*), the *Fon* performs weekly, monthly, and annual rituals and sacrifices on shrines to appease the ancestors as well as the gods of the land to ensure prosperity and the wellbeing of the people**.** During these events, prayers and incantations are also rendered to God through the ancestors, asking Him to forgive the sins they might have committed, and also that He should bless the land and its people with good harvest and prosperity.[33]

With this authority, the *Fon* is seen as a sacred being. This makes his people loyal and obedient to him. The *Fon* lives in the palace and performs rituals to ensure the safety of the community. All important issues concerning the *fondom* are discussed at the palace. The *Fon* is assisted in issues of administration and governance by the *Vibai*, a protective and advisory council of male notables.[34]

The *Vibai* are next in political rank to the *Fon*; members of the *Vibai* are seen as a 'hedge' that surrounds, guides, and restricts the *Fon*. The *Vibai* hold regular meetings in the palace with or without the Fon to discuss matters affecting the community. Most of their titles are hereditary, and selection is based on bloodline. These *Vibai* are grouped in different classes and assigned to control different areas of Nso. The primary members are heads of lineages or villages in the Nso community who serve as collaborators and cabinet members of the traditional council. These notables are classified in various categories according to ranks or positions they hold in the community. The most important of these notables include: *Fai*-o-Ndzendzev, Tankum, Yuwar, Tsenla, Do Ru, Do Ngven, Ndzendzev Tsen, Lun and *Shufai* Waynseeri woo Yer. The second category of notables comprise those

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The title of *Shey i*s both an honour and a responsibility. It is given by the *Fon* or a lineage head to one of his subjects as a sign of honour or acknowledgement for his contribution to the welfare of the village/community. Although the specific responsibilities of individual *Sheys* may vary, they generally preserve and transmit Nso customs, history and values to younger generation.

[33] H. Yinyuy, 'Indigenous Leadership and Governance in Colonial and Post-colonial Cameroon: A Historical Analysis of Traditional Institutions among the Nso People,' in *Journal of Developmental Issues in Education and Humanities*, 1:3 (July 2025), 129.

[34] Ibid.

who were made *Vibai* in recognition of the size of the population of their areas of influence. This category of *Vibai* include the Sop, Shuv and Mvem clans.

The next group of Indigenous male leaders in Nso are the *afai* (plural of *Fai*). The title *Fai* (singular) literally means 'the head of a compound' or the leader of a clan. He exercises control over his subjects and possibly an entire village. Generally, the *fai* pays regular visits to family members to know if they are in good health. When a *fai* dies, his death is announced to the *Fon* by the elders. After that, a new *fai* is enthroned in the presence of members of the compound. Once enthroned, he may serve as the family head, as the priest of the ancestral shrine, and as the *Fon's* delegate. He is expected to be responsible and to exercise good leadership, and if he neglects his duties or wastes the assets of the family, he will be sanctioned by the *Ngwerong* or *Ngiri*. Those with poor conduct are cautioned to change their character, and those who refuse to change are automatically replaced by the *Fon*.[35] The *fai's* wives play a vital role in determining a successor; they serve as technical advisers to their husbands, and they examine the character, speech, and competence of the candidates, among other virtues, without being visible. In times of crisis, the women can influence the decision of the *fon* by urging him to accept their candidate. Indirectly, the women advise their husbands to enthrone a leader who will enhance prosperity and wellbeing of the *fondom*.

Another category of male title holder in Nso is the *Atantoh* (*Tantoh*); these are high-ranking notables. Throughout its migratory history, the Nso *fondom* of Cameroon expanded by integrating leaders of allied ethnic groups, such as the Visale, and vassal communities into its traditional government. Today, these high-ranking notables assist the *Fon* in administration, manage royal agricultural estates (coffee, kolanut, and raffia), and arrange marriages for the *Fon's* daughters and granddaughters. They equally assist the *Fon* in tending to visiting dignitaries. Any one of them can make announcements on behalf of the *Fon* to the Nso community.

Individual *Atanoh* (plural) hold distinct positions in administration. For instance, *Fai* Maamu, the senior *Tantoh*, serves as the *Fon's* spokesperson during their meetings at the traditional or customary court at the palace. Collectively, they generally handle social and economic duties at the palace and take care of palace occupants. They also attend council meetings to serve as the *Fon's* delegates on public occasions and at the installation of clan and village heads.[36]

From precolonial times, women have been excluded from the male dominated patriarchal system of governance. Nso customs and traditions do not allow women to serve as chiefs, *fais*, *shufais* or *tantoh*. However, when there is a vacancy and there are no eligible or

[35] Kaberry, *Women of the Grassfields,* 378.
[36] E.M. Chilver and P.M. Kaberry, *Traditional Bamenda: The Pre-Colonial History and Ethnography of Bamenda Grassfields* Vol. I (Buea: Government Printer, 1967), 98.

legitimate heirs, a woman can be appointed to serve for a short time while making arrangements for a possible male successor to take over.

It is also vital to note that the wives of these notables equally play a special role in the community. The wives of *afai*, *shufais* and *atanto* serve as *vikìy baá* (*wiiy baá*, wives of notables), while the wives of the *Fon* serve as *vikìy nto'*, (*wiiy nto'*, royal wives). These women play the role of peacemakers in their homes and in the community. For instance, in areas or homes where there are marital disputes or conflicts, they usually step in and encourage couples to settle their disputes amicably through peaceful dialogue. Thus, they contribute to peace and development in the *fondom*.[37]

Although the Nso people have a patriarchal system of governance, the women also have various institutions and agencies which contribute to the development of the community. One of the most important female institutions in Nso is the office of the Queen Mother. When a new *Fon* is installed, the title of *Yefon* (Queen Mother) is given to his mother. Each *Fon* appoints a *Yewong* (mother of the country), *a* highly revered royal woman who serves as the deputy Chief Priestess of the clan. These two women advise the *Fon* on social issues and on issues related to women.

The *Yefon* and the *Yewong* embody important dimensions of female authority within the Nso royal institution. The *Yefon r*epresents the strength and authority within the maternal line while the *Yewong r*epresents the younger generation of royal women and the continuity of the royal lineage. Their positions show that women are not simply supporting figures within the Nso political system; they occupy culturally recognised spaces through which maternal identity, royal legitimacy, lineage continuity, and women's influence are sustained across generations. They are indispensable in conducting state rituals and sacrifices vital for the prosperity and wellbeing of the Nso people. They participate in the installation of a new *Fon* and in his burial.

During traditional ceremonies, and other ritual performances, the *Yefon* and *Yewong* carry items like corn *fufu*, pounded cocoyams, cooked pistachio, calabash and a royal basket on their heads. These crops can be read as cultural symbols through which Nso society expresses ideas about gender, kinship, fertility, continuity, and social responsibility. In the framework of matriculture, maize, cocoyam, and pistachio are therefore not simply subsistence crops; their cultivation and circulation can symbolize the female sphere, womanhood, fertility, maternal responsibility, and ancestral continuity. Women's engagement with these crops materializes matricultural values in everyday life, particularly through food provisioning, seed preservation, household productivity, and the transmission of agricultural knowledge across generations.[38] Their significance

[37] Interview with H. Kumela, *Wiiybaa* (wife) of *Shufai* Mbonkisan and daughter of *Shufai* Ntselah, Kiyan-Kumbo; interviewed by author, 25 December 2025.
[38] Ibid.

consequently extends beyond their economic utility to encompass meanings associated with female identity and ancestral blessing.

Apart from these royal titles, the title of *Yaa* is awarded to women who are successful in the domains of trade, education and agriculture, among others, irrespective of their status as noble or commoner. These female elites advocate for social justice and fair treatment of men and women in the Nso community. The Y*ewong*, the *Yefon* and *Yaa* participate in traditional religious festivals and serve as custodians of Nso culture. They represent women's voices, and are the spokespersons of the women on vital issues affecting the land and especially the lives of women.[39]

Another female institution is the *kfuə́m se Fon*, whose members are mostly the elderly wives of the *Fon*. They advise the *Fon* on issues concerning women in the royal household. One of its shortcomings is that it is limited to only a few of the *Fon*'s wives, for their main role extensive: to supervise the *Fon*'s farms, control the harvests, welcome visitors to the palace, and to organise women into farming groups.[40]

With the advent of Christianity and the establishment of Christian Women Associations, however, many Nso women, including royal wives, have become deeply involved in Christian life. Consequently, this shift has led to a decline in their participation and active roles in traditional rituals.[41]

In a nutshell, the *Fon* is assisted by a network of male advisors and titleholders, with regulatory functions delegated to secret societies that operate as impersonal enforcers of tradition. This system, while oriented toward communal well-being in Indigenous accounts, has historically prioritized male domination in public spheres. Central to this patriarchal system of governance are the male titleholders - *Fais*, *Shufais*, and *Sheys* who form the administrative backbone of the *fondom*. They constitute the indispensable link between the palace and the clans, and sub-clans that make up the *fondom*. These titles are overwhelmingly awarded to men. From pre-colonial to contemporary times, the title of a *Fai* or *a Shufai* is awarded to males only. The *Fai* and *Shufai* serve as the primary heads of sub-clans and clans of the *fondom*. They are equally in charge of performing rituals, sacrifices, and blessing the marriages of their subjects.

Just below the *Fai* and *Shufai* is the *Shey*. This title is not inherited: - rather it is given to anyone who has contributed to the sociocultural and economic development of the Nso people. Traditionally it was only awarded to men, but things have evolved greatly in this

[39] Yinyuy, 'Indigenous Leadership and Governance,' 132.
[40] Ibid., 133.
[41] H. Yinyuy, *The Evangelising Efforts of the Presbyterian and Catholic Women Associations in Nso, Cameroon, 1961-2013* (University of Yaounde 1, Cameroon: Ph.D Thesis Department of History, 2020), 79.

area and it is now given to women to honour them for great achievements in the community.[42] This is an indication that nowadays women have become a respected public force and their voices are being heard in the land. However, this evolution notwithstanding, the formal patriarchal structure on which the Nso polity is anchored, remains a great stumbling block on the road to women's economic and cultural emancipation in Nso *fondom*.

Economic Agency: Women as the Backbone of Production and Sustenance

Economic agency constitutes one of the most significant domains through which Nso women exercise voice and show resilience within the patriarchal framework of the Bamenda Grassfields. This section focuses on the agricultural sphere where women's intensive labour, and decision-making over crops play an influential role in the development of the society. That is, while men, through patrilineal inheritance and titular authority, allocate and symbolically own the fields, women dominate the processes of cultivation, harvesting, processing, storage, and marketing of food crops.

Agriculture is the major economic activity in the Nso economy. From precolonial times to the contemporary period, agriculture remains an important economic activity because it provides food to the population both at the national and local levels and, equally, serves as a source of employment. Both men and women are involved in agriculture as a source of livelihood; they carry out subsistence agriculture, whereby most of the crops cultivated are for local consumption with little for sale. Division of labour follows gender roles: men own the fields, clear the farm, and assist the women with planting and transporting the crops from the farms to the storehouse.[43] Meanwhile, the women exercise control over planting decisions, crop management, harvesting, selection of seeds, weeding, storage, and the disposition of surplus within the household. This shows that women exercise real rights as producers over the crops they grow, even as land itself remained under (male) lineage authority.[44]

In order to boost productivity and increase yields, women manage multiple plots and practice mixed cropping on the same piece of land. Examples of food crops which they cultivate include staples like maize, cocoyam, beans, potatoes, cassava, vegetables, millet and groundnuts. With the introduction of Christianity and colonial rule in Nso *fondom*, however, men were introduced to commercial agriculture and now most of them practice pastoral farming for commercial reasons. The men also grow cash crops like coffee and

[42] Ibid.
[43] Goheen, *Men own the fields, Women own the Crops*, 73-78.
[44] N.K. Banla *et al*, 'Pictures (images) and Construction of Gender Roles among the Nso' of Cameroon.' in *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 4:1 (2022), 20-21.

eucalyptus.[45] Women's labour forms the backbone of subsistence, while the men only help to clear the farms in preparation for actual farming as well as transporting the crops from the farms after harvest. This shows that at least there is some division of labour between men and women in the area of farming. This division of labour reflects the gendered organization of Nso society where women ensure household food security while also contributing to local economies. Women's control over crop production extends to decisions about what to plant for household consumption and what to do with potential surplus. This grants them influence over food security and intra-household resource allocation.

In practice, Nso women manage a diverse agricultural portfolio centred on food crops that ensure household and community sustenance. Typical activities include intercropping maize with legumes and tubers, cultivating cocoyam, groundnuts, beans, and vegetables on multiple dispersed plots allocated by husbands or lineage heads or rented plots. Women decide planting sequences, weeding schedules, and harvest priorities, often balancing subsistence needs with small-scale surplus for local markets or social obligations (e.g contributions to funerals, marriages, or women's groups). Men might assist with initial clearing or fencing, or focus on certain male-associated crops or livestock, but most of the work in agriculture is carried out by women.[46] This division grants women influence over nutritional outcomes, seed selection, and storage.

Till date, farming remains the main economic activity and it has a strong social importance. Women work collectively on farms through labour-sharing arrangements. These gatherings create opportunities for social interaction, exchange of ideas, and strengthening of kinship ties. The intensive cultivation of food crops enables the women to dominate local markets and sell food crops, crafts, or locally made household goods. Markets serve not only as economic centers but also as spaces for social networking, information sharing, and community interaction.[47]

In 1952, Phyllis Kaberry, an anthropologist who worked with women in the Bamenda Grassfields, presented the challenges faced by women to Elizabeth O'Kelly, the British Colonial Officer in British Southern Cameroons from 1950 to 1960. Among these challenges was the need for hand-operated corn grinding mills. Kaberry advocated for labour-saving technologies, such as the mills, that were affordable and controllable by women, precisely because she recognized how women's overburdened schedules limited their broader agency.[48] Grinding corn was one of the most difficult and time-consuming

[45] Interview with E. Verye, farmer in Kifem /Mbam, one of the agricultural areas of Nso. Interviewed by author 26 December 2025.
[46] Goheen, *Men own the fields, Women own the Crops*, 73-78.
[47] Ibid.
[48] M. Adams, 'Colonial Policies and Women's Participation in Public Life: The Case of British Southern Cameroons,' in *African Studies Quarterly*, 8:3 (Spring 2006), 9-10.

tasks faced by women in the Bamenda Grassfields, especially in Nso, where the women were using mortars and stones to process corn into flour.

In 1954, the first grinding mills were installed in Nso and other areas of the grassfields; an association was established to manage them and membership was open to all women regardless of ethnic origins or religion. Initially, the corn mill association was a non-political initiative intended to improve the wellbeing of women, and it greatly promoted the spirit of socialization irrespective of cultural and religious background. Women equally gained new skills on how to manage a hand-operated corn machine, which included strict rules on how to operate the machine and avoid the destruction of their own property.

This association later gave birth to the formation of other women's cooperative societies in the Grassfield areas.[49] Women strongly participated in cooperative unions, and expansion of female social groups for financial pooling and knowledge sharing. Ngoran identifies the benefits of these associations for facilitating collective action for the purchase of farm tools, business start-ups, and community development, and transmitting new production methods while maintaining mutual trust based on ethnicity, kinship, and shared experience.[50] Thus, women's economic roles shifted from purely domestic struggles for survival to modernised public agency.

According to Angelica Wiysahnyuy**,** agriculture remains the major economic activity in Nso, where both men and women are involved in agriculture (albeit in different ways, as described above) and provide food to the population at the local and national levels. Women organize cooperative farming groups to increase productivity by coming together to work on their friends, relatives, or members' farms rotationally. This helps to reduce individual workloads and to strengthen social bonds.[51] This policy has positively influenced women towards adopting other collective strategies, including female social groups for mutual support, credit pooling (see below), and transmission of new farming methods introduced by the government or Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

Another women's cooperative system is the *njangi*, or *ngwaa vikiiy* (saving and thrift schemes) associations. These are rotating savings and credit associations where women within a community contribute money in a week or month and the total amount is given to one member in turns. Money contributed helps women to start a business or assist in the payment of their children's school fees.[52] These *njangi* groups constitute autonomous financial spaces for and managed by women, especially important in a society where they

[49] Ibid., 10.
[50] Ngoran *et al*, 'Incidental Benefits of Female Constituted Social Groups in Nso,' 21.
[51] Interview with A. Wiysahnyuy, the wife of *Shey* Fabian Bongasov, a farmer, and 'buy am sell am' seller, 6 June 2018. She owns several farms in places such as Nkuv, Tooy, Kai Yeh, Nugha, and Tadu in the Kilum maintain forest area. In addition to farm work, she sells food crops at Mbveh market and uses the money to sponsor her children in schools / colleges in Cameroon.
[52] Ibid.

are excluded from land ownership; they prove that economic agency does not necessary require formal land ownership.

Colonial and postcolonial transformations introduced both opportunities and constraints to women's economic agency. German and British colonial administrations promoted cash crops (e.g. coffee, tea, tobacco, or groundnuts in certain zones), thereby channelling support toward male farmers or cooperatives which disrupted customary tenure[53] and increased pressure on women's labour. Land commoditisation, contrary to traditional rules, threatened women's farmlands. Post-independence policies also enhanced agricultural modernization, sometimes favouring mechanization or large-scale schemes.

The Cameroon Anglophone Crisis, which escalated to insurgency in the year 2016, has further tested Nso women's economic resilience by disrupting markets, displacing farmers, and straining access to land and inputs (particularly in remote areas). Armed confrontations, road blocks, frequent 'ghost towns,' and fear of violence have prevented many women from carrying out farming activates. As such, many fertile lands have been abandoned and allowed to fallow. Women have borne a disproportionate burden in maintaining household food security amid conflict, yet have also mobilized through informal networks for peacebuilding, livelihood support, and cultural preservation. Education and urbanization have enabled more women to diversify into non-farm activities (trading, small businesses, or salaried work), thereby upgrading their status and voices through various domains in the society.[54]

Social and Reproductive Roles: Sacred Continuity and Power

Social and reproductive roles form a vital domain of women's agency and resilience in Nso cultural traditions within the Bamenda Grassfields of Cameroon. Women's contributions to childbearing, nurturing, socialization, and community fellowship grant them significant powers in Nso society. These roles position women as essential sources of prosperity and continuity of bloodlines in the community, even while institutional powers are mostly held by men.

Women were and are still central to the organization of family life and community development in the Nso *fondom*. At the domestic level, they are responsible for

[53] Customary tenure is a traditional system through which a community determines who can own, use, inherit, or control land according to its established customs and practices. Under this system, land rights are usually acquired through inheritance, traditional authorities, or long standing occupation. Traditionally in Nso society, men own the land but women cultivate, manage, and determine what crops are cultivated.
[54] Interview with Kumela, 25 December 2025.

childbearing, nurturing, feeding, cooking of food, healthcare within households, and the moral education of children. Through these activities, women transmit cultural values, customs, and social norms from one generation to another. In polygamous homes, elderly women act as advisers and mediators in family disputes and they promote peace and reconciliation within households and villages. Nso women in various quarters or villages also organize communal labour to clean water catchment areas, and maintain community halls and roads within the vicinity. In addition, they carry out charitable works to assist widows, widowers, elderly men/women and venerable families in the community (assistance may be given in cash or in kind, according to the needs of those visited). For instance, when a member of the community is very sick, the women pay regular visits, pray, encourage them, and assist the family in farm work. It should also be noted that women organize purification and ritual ceremonies linked to stillbirths and funerals. While carrying out these activities, they also pray for God's mercy and restoration.[55] These activities equally contributed to spiritual and social harmony within the society.

In big compounds and palaces, reasonable and mature elderly women were and are still in charge of managing lineage and royal households. They organize work among co-wives, and influence dynastic matters as described above. The ability of these women to come together to advise, warn, and discipline a *fai*, *shufai* and even the *Fon*, when he goes contrary to customs and norms of the society, points to collective action.[56] Although the women are not allowed to serve as *fais*, *shufais* and chiefs, they still participate in the political economy and kinship structures in an indirect way by advising their husbands when these worthies are members of the decision-making council.[57]

Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg explains that in the related Bamileke *fondoms* of the Grassfields of Cameroon, the two highest-ranked royal wives share this advisory role and are thus able to choose the women who will bear the sons who could become the next Bamileke *Fon*. She concludes with an articulation of the links between women's role in human reproduction and the divine king's role in in social reproduction, both occurring in a rapidly changing context of a multiethnic African nation. She argues that procreation, cooking, and social reproduction greatly influence politics and decision-making across the Grassfields societies.[58] Supporting Feldman-Savelsberg's hypothesis, in Nso society, women's reproductive role extends beyond biological motherhood to become a foundation of dynastic continuity since the legitimacy and succession of the *Fonship* depend upon the preservation of the royal lineage through women.

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[55] Yinyuy, 'The Evangelising Efforts of the Presbyterians and the Catholic Women Associations in Nso,' 283.
[56] Interview with J. Ayufowontoh Mbinglo, Princess of Nso *fondom*, interviewed in Buea, Cameroon, 31 December 2025.
[57] Nkeneh, 'The Role of Women in the Political Transition of the Bamenda Grassfields *Fonship* Institutions in Cameroon,' 20.
[58] P. Feldman-Savelsberg. *Plundered Kitchens, Empty Wombs: Threatened Reproduction and Identity in the Cameroon* Grassfields (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 106.

Furthermore, Nso women have established vibrant social groups and cultural associations across the national territory and in the diaspora that enhance unity and collective responsibility. An example of these are the *chong* groups, whose members perform *chong*, a traditional royal dance, during major cultural events. The dance has secret functions associated with the spiritual mandate of cleansing the land or sanctioning errant male leaders while uniting women in mutual support. *Chong* demonstrates how female authority can be institutionalised culturally, rather than being merely informal, by emphasising female solidarity, moral regulation, fertility, and the transmission of knowledge across generations.[59] This female institution provides an important example of how a matricultural institution allows women to preserve cultural continuity, regulate aspects of social life, and exercise collective authority. Through the *chong* group, older women teach younger women about marriage, motherhood, agricultural practices, sexuality, social etiquette, ceremonies, and responsibilities within the community.[60] The institution thus contributes to the preservation of female-centred cultural knowledge which is not transmitted through male political institutions.

According to Ngoran, the spirit of working together to achieve mutual objectives was never uncommon. Historically, Nso female social groups were based on mutual trust, cemented by a common bond of ethnicity, culture, friendship, and neighbourliness. She argues that mutual aid groups, traditionally for births, funerals, and bride wealth, with adaptations addressing school fees, medical costs, farm tools, business start-ups, and knowledge transmission (new farming or health methods), have existed in Nso since precolonial times. Operating on trust networks built through kinship systems, village communities, religious affinity, and occupational commonalities, they enable resource pooling and solidarity without formal institutions.[61] These organisations encourage solidarity, mutual financial support, agricultural cooperation, and transmission of traditional or cultural knowledge within villages.

Cultural Narratives and Representations: Voices in Folktales and Everyday Discourse

Nso women also play a vital role in the domain of culture. Some of the means of the transmission of culture is through storytelling or folktales, riddles proverbs, indigenous music and traditional ceremonies (births, deaths, and marriages among others). Folktales in Nso culture function as powerful mechanisms for socialization, moral instruction, and the reproduction of cultural values, including gendered expectations. Mbu Dora Nyuykighan's work on gender representations in Nso folktales articulates their

[59] Interview with Kumela, 25 December 2025.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ngoran *et al*, 'Incidential Benefits of Female Constituted Social Groups in Nso' Polity," 21.

multifaceted significance.[62] These folktales not only play vital roles in the socialisation process and entertainment arena but equally serve as vehicles for moral education and cultural identity.

It is vital to note that folktales do not merely serve for entertainment but as active agents in shaping societal norms, values, and beliefs among the Nso people. Storytelling is often performed by elders (most often women) at evening gatherings or during communal events, and tales transmit expectations of femininity (nurturing, caregiving, obedience) and masculinity (bravery, leadership, provision) while reinforcing cultural identity tied to the *fondom*'s history, including echoes of Ngonnso's founding leadership. Their dual role in socialization and moral education means tales warn against vice (e.g., disobedience, greed) and promote virtue, with gender serving as a key lens for these lessons.

Nyuykighan's feminist analysis reveals a dichotomy: a pattern of recurrent inequality with men as the dominant group and women as the subordinate class in the stories, yet spaces for subversion where female characters exhibit agency. She acknowledges women's roles in nurturing, domestic, or morally guiding roles as consistent with traditional Nso femininity, while also identifying counter-narratives that portray women as resourceful, intelligent, and influential. However, most of these tales only reinforce patriarchal stereotypes and women's submission. This dichotomy reflects a patriarchally-inflected matriculture, where tales socialise girls into daughterhood, wifehood, and motherhood, and boys into adventurous or leadership roles. The emphasis on "challenging the notion of women as merely passive" is significant for the article's theme of resilience.[63]

One such tale, *Vindze' vi yii bayir ansho'ti tan*' (Wrestling is often encouraged by the bald-headed) by John Suuyka, centres on Kpuboy who marries Princess Yuyar. After five childless years, she bears a son, Mbiin, thus bringing joy to the *Fon* and community. This narrative underscores the centrality of childbearing to royal and familial legitimacy, with women's value tied to reproduction. Child bearing is a sacred duty, and not just a biological function. This is because Nso dynastic lines rely heavily on the spiritual purity of the royal women, and their ability to preserve he cosmological balance of the *fondom* by giving birth to future royal households. It reinforces the sacred reproductive roles of women, and portrays motherhood as redemptive and communal. Barrenness in the story implies temporary trial rather than permanent stigma, yet the emphasis on procreation aligns with broader Cameroonian patterns where childless women face derogatory labels. The tale celebrates female contribution to lineage continuity, thereby linking to economic backbone roles.[64]

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[62] Nyuykighan, "Gender Representations in Selected Nso Folktales of the Northwest Region of Cameroon," 24.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid., 30-34.

Women play active roles in cultural ceremonies surrounding events such as births, marriages, funerals and harvest festivals. During celebrations such as birth, marriage, and death ceremonies, they prepare meals, perform traditional dances, and sing songs of praise or dirges. During these ceremonies, women demonstrate social unity through collective cooking and entertainment activities that enhance communal identity. Nso women also carry out weaving of mats and other embroidery works which are important social activities because they preserve the cultural identity of the Nso people.[65]

Generally, Nso women are very active in socio-cultural life. The activities they carry out have gone beyond domestic responsibilities to include cultural preservation, religious practices, economic cooperation, and social protest for the welfare of the community. Through women's associations, ceremonies, and farming group associations, they continue to enhance solidarity and contribute significantly to the development and preservation of the Nso cultural heritage.

Resilience Amid Constraints: Contemporary Negotiations and Transformations

The contemporary era has brought profound transformations to Nso society, testing the resilience of women's voices and agency while simultaneously creating new spaces for their expression and influence. This section examines how Nso women navigate persistent traditional constraints alongside postcolonial, educational, migratory, and crisis-induced changes. The ongoing Anglophone Crisis has imposed severe hardships such as displacement, violence, economic disruption, and social fragmentation. Yet women have responded with adaptive strategies, collective mobilization, peacebuilding initiatives, and cultural reclamation efforts such as the 'Bring Back Ngonnso campaign.'[66]

Contemporary transformations in gender relations among the Nso, such as access to formal education and urban migration, has enabled many women to challenge restrictive gender norms and participate more actively in public life. Education and urbanization have expanded opportunities for some women, enabling challenges to exploitative customs, while female social groups and diaspora networks sustain solidarity and economic resilience.[67]

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[65] Yinyuy, *The Evangelising Efforts of the Presbyterian and Catholic Women Associations in Nso, Cameroon 1961- 2013*, 70-74.
[66] The online campaign 'Bring Back Ngonnso,' launched in 2021 by Sylvie Njobati and the *Fon* of Nso, and popularised by Amnesty International, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin's official museum account, and the Cameroon Embassy in Berlin, among others.
[67] Personal Observation.

Postcolonial transformations, including independence, state policies, and economic shifts, have created both opportunities and intensified pressures on Nso women's traditional roles. Colonial and early postcolonial eras introduced cash cropping, mission education, and cooperative movements that altered gender divisions of labour. Doreen Bongdzeem Ngoran argues that the colonial and post-colonial eras are characterized by the existence, diversification, and modernization of female social groups in the Grassfields of Cameroon. Nso women have not been left out of this new movement, as several women's groups sprang up within this period, supported by the colonial administrators and missionaries. That is, the colonial era saw the emergence of women's groups as a response to changing realities, with British authorities providing support for associations that promoted self-help, adult education, and economic activities.[68]

In the Nso context, groups like the Mbonyar Women's Group (1950), Sabo Salama Women's Group (1952), and, in the 1960s, Christian Women's groups adapted precolonial mutual aid traditions to address new needs (such as the care of orphans) by providing food, clothing, school fees, medical costs, and farm inputs, among others. These women's groups operated in a patriarchal setup yet served as levers for financial pooling, solidarity funds, thrift and loans, and community development. By 2010, more than two hundred registered women's groups existed in Nso, with objectives ranging from promoting unity and income generation to advocating for women's and children's rights and sensitizing against societal ills.[69]

In the contemporary era, education has been a double-edged sword in Nso women's development initiative. Formal schooling, introduced by missionaries and expanded post-independence, has enabled literacy, delayed marriage, encouraged career diversification, and challenged polygyny or early unions. Education has amplified voices in civil society, with Nso women contributing to advocacy on health, agriculture, and rights. Yet it has also intensified burdens: for example, educated daughters may remit financial support while facing expectations to uphold reproductive roles.[70] This dynamic echoes broader Cameroonian patterns, where women power micro-economies and humanitarian responses, sustaining families amid state limitations.

The negotiation between continuity and transformation is also evident in the socialization of younger generations. Traditional Nso society emphasizes communal responsibility, respect and obedience for elders, and gendered apprenticeship roles. However, exposure to modern education, Christianity, urban lifestyles, and global media has altered intergenerational perceptions of gender and authority. A. Bame Nsamenang argues that Nso socialization emphasises moral instruction and the development of social intelligence

[68] Ngoran, 'Incidental Benefits of Female Constituted Social Groups in Nso Polity,' 21.
[69] Yinyuy, *The Evangelising Efforts of the Presbyterian and Catholic Women's Associations in Nso*, 230-231.
[70] Ibid., 214.

and responsibility by an individual. He notes that traditional socialization methods are in flux, with urban and educated parents showing fewer indigenous viewpoints as compared to rural counterparts.[71] In this light, rural women actively stand at the centre of these transformations as mediators between Indigenous traditions and contemporary aspirations.

The Cameroon Anglophone Crisis represents the most acute contemporary constraint that is profoundly disrupting Nso society through violence, displacement, school boycotts, market closures, and insecurity, among others. Women have borne disproportionate burdens as caregivers, farmers, and survivors of gender-based violence, yet they continue to serve as peace builders and economic sustainers. Many men have been displaced, killed, or detained and some have migrated in search of safety. In a nutshell, the Crisis has exacerbated gender-based violence, including rape. Consequently, women have assumed additional responsibilities which used to belong to men, such as clearing farms, transporting crops, and rearing animals. Women's groups have adapted traditional solidarity funds for trauma support and economic recovery.[72] These efforts demonstrate the evolving roles of women in Nso society. Their actions are visible in humanitarian leadership as they step in to fill the gaps left by the failure of state institutions.

The Crisis has weakened customary governance structures. The firing of gunshots and deadly weapons in the area have disrupted many rituals, destroyed family compounds, and closed communal festivals. Despite the challenges posed by this Crisis in Nso, the *Fonship* has not disappeared despite the disruption; the *Fon* of Nso remains the supreme traditional authority of the Nso people and continues to exercise considerable cultural, spiritual, and symbolic leadership. The *Fon c*ontinues to issue royal decrees and presides over important cultural matters through delegations led by traditional councillors who have been working to encourage reconciliation, unity, and the preservation of Nso traditions. In his various New Year messages to the Nso since the outbreak of the Crisis, he has always called on all the people of Nso to embrace peace and rebuild social cohesion.

However, it must be noted that the *Fon's* powers and authority have been greatly affected by the Crisis. Before the Anglophone Crisis, the *Fon* was sacrosanct and it was inconceivable for his authority to be challenged. His word was virtually law. But the Crisis has undermined some of this authority: he has been kidnapped several times and even though no harm was done to him, this was unfathomable before the Crisis.

Despite these challenges, the *Fonship* and cultural practices of the Nso people remain a central symbol of Nso identity. The Palace continues to serve as a reference point for Nso

[71] A. Bame Nsamenang and Michael E. Lamb, 'The Acquisition of Socio-Cognitive Competence by Nso Children in the Bamenda Grassfields of the Northwest Region of Cameroon,' *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 16:3 (1993), 429.
[72] Interview with Kumela, 25 December 2025.

people within Cameroon and in the diaspora. Many cultural practices have been readapted rather than abandoned. The Crisis has fractured patterns of social interaction and interrupted the transmission of customs, but has also encouraged new forms of cultural preservation through diaspora organizations, digital communication, royal publications, and community initiatives.

The experiences of Nso women in the Bamenda Grassfields reveal a dynamic interplay between resilience and constraint. Although patriarchal structures continue to shape social and political life, women have consistently negotiated spaces of agency through economic activities, social networks, migrations, education, and cultural institutions. Contemporary transformations have expanded opportunities for empowerment while simultaneously generating new tensions and challenges. The story of Nso women is therefore not simply one of victimhood under patriarchy, but rather one of adaptation, negotiation, and continuous redefinition of gender roles within changing historical contexts.

Conclusion

This article examines the multifaceted dimensions of women's voices and agency in Nso cultural traditions of the Bamenda Grassfields. It has sought to place Nso women at the centre of the story of their society, not simply as mothers, wives, farmers, traders, or custodians of tradition, but as historical actors who have continuously negotiated the structures within which they live. Their experiences reveal a complex picture of power. Women have been deeply involved in sustaining families, transmitting culture, producing food, managing households, participating in economic activities, and responding to community crises. Yet these responsibilities have not always translated into equal control over land, resources, political institutions, or formal decision-making. This tension between responsibility and authority is at the heart of understanding women's agency in Nso society.

The concept of matriculture provides an important entry point into this complexity. The cultural significance and the changes attached attached to motherhood, female identity, reproduction, and the continuity of the community demonstrates that women occupy an important but not static place in Nso cultural imagination. The memory of Princess Ngonnso further reinforces the significance of female identity in Nso historical consciousness. However, the study has also shown that matriculture - the system of meanings and symbols associated with women and mothers - should not be confused with matriarchy (the governance and economic authority of women). The cultural recognition of women does not necessarily mean that women possess equal institutional power. Indeed, the coexistence of female cultural centrality with predominantly male political and customary institutions exposes one of the central contradictions of Nso gender

relations.

Formally, patriarchal structures dominate Nso *fondom*; the office of the *Fon*, male titleholders, and regulatory societies such as *Ngwerong* and *Ngiri* coexist with and are sustained by women's resilient contributions across historical, economic, social, reproductive, and cultural domains. From the foundational migration led by Princess Ngonnso in the fourteenth century, through colonial disruptions and postcolonial transformations, to the acute challenges of the Anglophone Crisis, Nso women have exercised power that is neither marginal nor merely reactive, but generative and enduring. By foregrounding these echoes, this article challenges simplistic narratives of female subordination in African chiefdoms and contributes to broader understandings of gender, power, and cultural continuity in patrilineal societies. As understood in Nso matriculture, women's agency is integral to the *fondom's* vitality, social cohesion, economic sustenance, and identity formation, thereby demonstrating that resilience is not passive endurance but an active, negotiated force woven into the fabric of tradition itself. In essence, the echoes of Nso women's voices, from migratory history through colonial encounters to today's challenges, reveal a tradition of dynamic negotiation rather than static patriarchy.

Biography

Happiness Yinyuy is senior Lecturer at the Department of History and African Civilisations of the University of Buea. She holds a PhD (History) from the University of Yaounde 1, Cameroon. She is a researcher with particular interest in Social History, especially in areas like religion, culture, women, education and society.

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Motherhood in *Murzilka*:

Constructing Maternal Ideals for Soviet Children, 1956 – 1964

HELEN LACHAL

Abstract

The Soviet project relied upon its citizens becoming parents, particularly after the vast loss of life suffered in the Great Patriotic War. Not only did Soviet citizens need to have children, they also needed to parent them effectively and bring them up correctly as Soviet citizens. This article focuses on the representation of motherhood within the popular Soviet children's magazine Murzilka *in the years 1956 – 1964 and the role of these mothers as transmitters of matriculture. It identifies particular models of motherhood (tender, loving mothers; working mothers; burdened mothers; deficient mothers) and examines how such models were depicted in stories, poems, illustrations and readers' letters and how they were depicted as interacting with their children. In depicting mothers, model or otherwise,* Murzilka *not only sought to influence its child reader, the future parent, but also the parents of that child, who perhaps read with or to their offspring. What versions of motherhood did the magazine present to its readers and how did these*

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idealised, and sometimes problematised, models serve as agents of matricultural dissemination?

Keywords: Soviet children's magazines; motherhood; double burden; femininity; matriculture.

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Résumé

Le projet soviétique reposait sur le fait que ses citoyens deviennent parents, en particulier après les pertes humaines massives subies pendant la Grande Guerre patriotique. Non seulement les citoyens soviétiques devaient avoir des enfants, mais Ils devaient également les élever correctement et leur inculquer les valeurs de citoyens soviétiques. Cet article porte sur la représentation de la maternité dans le magazine populaire soviétique pour enfants Murzilka *entre 1956 et 1964, ainsi que sur le rôle de ces mères en tant que transmettrices de la matriculture. Il identifie des modèles particuliers de maternité (mères tendres et aimantes; mères qui travaillent; mères surchargées; mères défaillantes) et examine comment ces modèles étaient dépeints dans les histoires, les poèmes, les illustrations et les lettres de lecteurs, ainsi que la façon dont sont représentées leurs interactions avec leurs enfants.*

En dépeignant des mères, qu'elles soient exemplaires ou non, Murzilka *cherchait non seulement à influencer ses jeunes lecteurs, futurs parents, mais aussi les parents de ces enfants, qui lisaient peut-être avec eux ou leur faisaient la lecture. Quelles versions de la maternité le magazine présentait-il à ses lecteurs et comment ces modèles idéalisés, et parfois problématisés, ont-ils servi d'agents de diffusion de la matriculture?*

Mots-clés : magazines soviétiques pour enfants; maternité; double fardeau; matriculture

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The post-war Soviet Union was resolutely pronatalist.[1] Its very existence relied upon its citizens becoming parents, particularly after the catastrophic loss of life suffered during the

[1] For an excellent analysis of the post-war pronatalist policy of the USSR, see Mie Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead*: *The Politics of Reproduction in the Post-war Soviet Union* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

Great Patriotic War.[2] Not only did Soviet citizens need to have children, they needed to raise them correctly in the Soviet way of life. One of the means by which the state sought to educate children in order to ensure appropriate socialisation was through the print media. One such example was the hugely popular monthly magazine *Murzilka*, targeted to Soviet children aged between six and ten years old.[3] *Murzilka* was an official magazine of the *Komsomol* (the youth arm of the Soviet Communist Party) and functioned as an important instrument of instruction for the youngest members of Soviet society who were expected to join the ranks of the *Oktiabrata* (Little Octobrists), the communist youth organisation for young children.[4]

Murzilka was published in Moscow and distributed widely throughout the Soviet Union, with print runs in the millions; in 1958, circulation reached one million copies, increasing to 1.5 million in 1963.[5] According to the magazine's own estimates, each copy of *Murzilka* was passed on between five and ten times, potentially reaching between 7.5 to 15 million Soviet children in 1963.[6] The magazine featured stories, articles, poems, letters and illustrations and a recurring motif was the mother.[7] Like all official media in the Soviet Union, *Murzilka* was produced within the framework of Socialist Realism which prescribed idealised depictions of reality rather than strictly realistic ones.[8] This article explores how motherhood was represented within this official aesthetic and how official Soviet matriculture was transmitted on the pages of *Murzilka* in the period 1956 to 1964.[9] These

[2] The German – Soviet war of 1941 – 1945 is known as the Great Patriotic War in Russia; its war dead are estimated to be 27 million: Mark Harrison, 'Counting the Soviet Union's War Dead: Still 26–27 Million,' *Europe-Asia Studies*, 71, no. 6 (2019), 1036–1047. Further losses were suffered by Soviet people in the years before and after the war due to repression, war, occupation, and deportation.
[3] For a comprehensive discussion of *Murzilka*, see for example Felicity Ann O'Dell, *Socialisation Through Children's Literature: The Soviet Example* (Cambridge University Press, 1978).
[4] Typically, children would then join the Young Pioneers. For more on the *Oktiabrata*, see Jim Riordan, 'The Role of Youth Organisations in Communist Upbringing in the Soviet School,' in *The Making of the Soviet Citizen*, ed. George Avis (Croom Helm, 1987), 136–160.
[5] Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History) (RGASPI), f. M81, op. 1, d. 20, l. 2: letter dated 1964 signed by *Murzilka* editor A. Mitiaev. *Murzilka* remains in print today and is the world's longest-running children's magazine, recognised as such by the Guinness Book of World Records in 2011.
[6] Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva (Russian State Archive of Literature and Art) (RGALI), f. 631, op. 36, d. 105: Transcript of a May 1951 meeting of the children's literature section of the Union of Writers of the USSR.
[7] Across the 108 issues published in the nine-year period 1956 – 1964, mothers alone featured as characters in 136 separate works compared to fathers who appeared alone in 73 works. 106 works depicted both a mother and a father together.
[8] For more information on Socialist Realism, see Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (University of Chicago Press, 1981).
[9] Although *Murzilka* was available throughout the Soviet Union, its representations did not reflect the full ethnic diversity of the population and overwhelmingly privileged Russian cultural contexts.

years are particularly significant as they encompass the period of profound political and cultural change which followed Stalin's death in 1953 and his denunciation in 1956. Commentators at the time decried the state of Soviet youth, and discussions and debates on how best to deal with their declining moral state became increasingly prevalent.[10] The correct socialisation of children into the Soviet way of life took on even greater urgency.

The Soviet Union, emerging from the revolutions of 1917 and the Bolshevik consolidation of power under Lenin, was underpinned by an official Marxist ideology of egalitarianism. The fledgling Soviet state sought to advance the emancipation of women through the dismantling of the bourgeois patriarchal family model.[11] Women were recognised as an integral part of this new, improved society, as workers striving to build communism.[12] However, human biology required them to reproduce and it was this biological imperative that inexorably set Soviet women apart from Soviet men, who had but one task: to build communism through labour.[13] In the immediate post-war period, the Soviet state increasingly foregrounded motherhood as a demographic necessity. This preoccupation with motherhood continued into the 1950s and 1960s, and can be understood as part of a broader ideological and demographic project in which women's reproductive roles were central to national stability. Soviet women and mothers were positioned, then, as both bearers of children and workers, a dual role which structured their representation in official discourse throughout the existence of the Soviet Union.

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[10] For more on this see Ann Livschiz, 'De-Stalinizing Soviet childhood: the quest for moral rebirth, 1953-58,' in *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating cultural and social change in the Khrushchev era*, ed. Polly Jones (Routledge, 2006), 117–134.

[11] For more on the Marxist theoretical underpinnings of the 'woman question' see Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism* (Princeton University Press, 1978), 233–277.

[12] The speed and scale at which women entered the workforce in the Soviet Union was unprecedented; see Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women at The Gates: Gender and Industry in Stalin's Russia* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1.

[13] For all that the Soviet state in its infancy claimed to be a country of gender equality, this was nominal only and the *zhenskii vopros* (woman question) was never resolved. There is a rich historiography which looks at Soviet gender roles; the lot of Soviet women in particular has been well-researched. See for example Lynne Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman: Women's Magazines as Engineers of Female Identity, 1922–53* (Macmillan, 1999); Barbara Evans Clements, *A History of Women in Russia: From Earliest Times to the Present* (Indiana University Press, 2012); Melanie Ilič, ed., *Women in the Stalin Era* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Melanie Ilič, Susan E. Reid & Lynne Attwood, eds., *Women in the Khrushchev Era* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Melanie Ilič, *Soviet Women - Everyday Lives* (Routledge, 2020); Gail Warshofsky Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society: Equality, Development, and Social Change* (University of California Press, 1978); Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia*.

This article approaches matriculture as a heuristic category, following Marie-Françoise Guédon conceptualisation of the term and Clifford Geertz's understanding of cultural symbols as both models *of* and *for* reality.[14] As Rowlatt explains, matriculture encompasses all the ways in which a culture understands and conceptualises mothers and motherhood and its relationship with women, gender and femininity.[15] Within this framework, matriculture refers to recurring patterns through which maternal norms and ideals were depicted for the *Murzilka* readership. Across the corpus of 108 issues in the period 1956 – 1964, these patterns frequently foregrounded maternal care, domesticity, femininity, and labour. Through their repetition across textual and visual forms, these representations contributed to the construction of particular ideals of motherhood as cultural knowledge that could be communicated directly to children.

Tender, Loving Mothers

Melanie Ilič describes Soviet motherhood as "revered culturally."[16] Mothers in the Soviet Union "were expected to be caring, patient and serene," all whilst raising children to be ideologically sound citizens of the future.[17] Academics such as David Hoffman, Lisa Kirschenbaum, and Elizabeth Waters have discussed what Claire McCallum calls the "well-documented sentimentalisation" of Soviet motherhood.[18] In the September 1956 issue of *Murzilka*, the poem *Gde tsvety?* (Where are the flowers?) by Ovsiy Driz (1908 – 1971) and translated from the Hebrew by O. Karysheva appeared. In it, a young boy searches everywhere for the flowers he can smell but cannot find:

> I'm looking – I don't see flowers.
> I see my mother at the window.
> Mum returned from the field,
> Where she was working until late.

[14] Marie-Françoise Guédon, 'Introduction,' *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (2020): 3–7; Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic Books, 1973), 93–94.
[15] Linnéa Rowlatt, 'Two Roads to Travel: Matriculture in the United States of America 2024,' in *Matriculture, Shamanism, and the Authority of Women: The Powers That Be,* eds. Linnéa Rowlatt & Angela Sumegi (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2025), 186.
[16] Ilič, *Soviet Women - Everyday Lives*, 110.
[17] Ilič, *Soviet Women - Everyday Lives*, 110.
[18] Claire McCallum, *The Fate of the New Man: Representing and Reconstructing Masculinity in Soviet Visual Culture, 1945-1965*, (Northern Illinois University Press, 2018), 96; David Hoffman, 'Mothers in the Motherland: Stalinist Pronatalism in Its Pan-European Context,' *Journal of Social History*, 34 (2000): 35–53; Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, *Small Comrades: Revolutionizing Childhood in Soviet Russia, 1917 – 1932*, (Routledge, 2001) 133; Elizabeth Waters, 'The Modernisation of Russian Motherhood 1917 – 1937,' *Soviet Studies*, 44:1 (1992): 123–135.

She brought with her
The scent of mint and camomile,
The scent of clover – the whole field
She brought home with her. [19]

The poem depicts a romanticised version of Soviet motherhood: this woman worked long hours in a physically demanding role yet the scent of flowers which accompanied her highlights her femininity. This directly counters contemporaneous criticism of the Soviet system and its 'masculinisation' of women through mandatory employment.[20] The woman in the poem is celebrated as a mother: her son is clearly happy that she has returned, suggesting that she is a good mother. The double burden of labour and motherhood is not referenced at all. This poem not only romanticises the role of mother but also offers a sentimental portrait of rural life, a common trope in Soviet literature and visual culture.[21]

Such a depiction, however, belies the reality endured by those who were employed in the Soviet agricultural industry, which according to the 1959 census, stood at 53% of all working women.[22] Dodge and Feshbach wrote of the "heavy physical labour" and "unskilled, backbreaking work" inherent to agricultural employment and the lack of stimulation endured by the "brigade[s] of farm women bent to their tasks in the field."[23] Soviet rural dwellers were also limited in their access to education, amenities, and consumer goods while female collective farm workers in particular were often denied full access to certain welfare benefits, including maternity pay.[24] Furthermore Soviet peasants could not simply move elsewhere in search of better living or working conditions; their movement was severely restricted following the introduction of the internal passport system in 1932.[25] Nevertheless, not one of these hardships is referenced in the *Murzilka* poem.

[19] *Murzilka*, September 1956, 11.
[20] For an overview of such criticism found in the Soviet press, see Lynne Attwood, *The New Soviet Man and Woman: Sex Role Socialisation in the USSR*, (Macmillan, 1990), 165–182.
[21] See for example Philippa Lewis, 'Peasant Nostalgia in Contemporary Russian Literature,' *Soviet Studies*, 28, no. 4 (1976): 548–569 and Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 227.
[22] Norton T. Dodge & Murray Feshbach, 'The Role of Women in Soviet Agriculture,' in *Soviet and East European Agriculture*, ed. Jerzy F. Karcz (University of California Press, 1967), 265.
[23] Dodge & Feshbach, *The Role of Women*, 280 and 295.
[24] See Liubov Denisova, *Rural Women in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia*, transl. I. Mukhina, (Routledge, 2010), 165–167; Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society*, 104–105.
[25] See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 92–102.

Annette Kolodny argues in the American context that rural and natural landscapes are frequently coded as feminine and associated with nurture, fertility, and maternal abundance.[26] Victoria Bonnell discusses the gendering of the countryside in the early Soviet period and the hierarchical relationship between urban (male) and rural (female) spaces.[27] Recent scholarship frames water within matricultural systems that link femininity to rural environments, reinforcing the rural space as a site where feminine symbolism is constructed rather than simply reflected.[28] Similar associations can also be found within Eastern Slavic folklore where, as Réjeanne Lacroix demonstrates, certain trees were connected to feminine symbolism.[29] These underlying codes linking femininity and the rural environment reinforce both the mother's feminine qualities and her nurturing nature within the *Murzilka* poem and highlight for readers the ideal version of motherhood which encompassed femininity and work alongside maternal duties.

Just a few years prior to the publication of the *Murzilka* poem, the Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev had launched the Virgin Lands campaign which saw hundreds of thousands of volunteers cultivate previously unfarmed land in a bid to increase Soviet agricultural output.[30] The scheme was promoted as a grand adventure to young *Komsomol* members. In July 1954, an article appeared on the front page of *Pravda*, the primary newspaper of the Soviet Communist Party, inviting young women to the Virgin Lands.[31] Accompanying the article was a photograph of six female Virgin Landers in romantic, floaty dresses with neatly styled hair. There were several campaigns targeted specifically towards Soviet women to encourage them to settle in the Virgin Lands and tens of thousands of women heeded the call every year.[32] The sentimental portrayal of the farmworker mother in

[26] Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 3–9.
[27] Victoria E. Bonnell, 'The Peasant Woman in the Stalinist Political Art of the 1930s,' in *The Aesthetic Arsenal: Socialist Realism Under Stalin*, eds. Matthew Cullerne Bown and Brandon Taylor (Yale University Press, 1993), 152.
[28] See *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*, 4, no. 1 (2025): *Women and Water: The Flow of Matriculture*. URL: https://journal.networkonculture.ca/index.php/matrix/issue/view/3, accessed 3 October 2026.
[29] Réjeanne Lacroix, ''It Takes All Kinds of Trees to Make a Forest:' Trees Associated with Feminine Folklore in the Eastern Slavic Folk Calendar,' *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*, 3, no. 1 (2023) 51–76. URL: https://www.networkonculture.ca/activities/matrix/issues/vol3_iss1, accessed 3 October 2026.
[30] For more on Khrushchev's Virgin Lands campaign, see for example Martin McCauley, *Khrushchev and the Development of Soviet Agriculture: The Virgin Land Programme 1953 - 1964*, (Macmillan, 1976).
[31] *Pravda*, 17 July 1954, 1.
[32] As Michaela Pohl points out, women were sent to the Virgin Lands to become wives and rear animals rather than become agricultural specialists: 'Women and Girls in the Virgin Lands,' in *Women in the Khrushchev Era*, eds. Melanie Ilič, Susan E. Reid & Lynne Attwood (Hampshire, 2004), 53–54.

Murzilka mirrored the widespread depiction of women Virgin Landers at the time, pressing upon readers the romanticism of farming and the rural idyll, priming them perhaps for a similar destiny. As discussed above, though, such sentimentality glossed over the hardships of rural life for Soviet women.

In the March 1959 issue of *Murzilka*, the poem *Maminy plat'ia* (Mum's Dresses) by Galina Demykina (1923 – 1990) appeared. In it, a young girl described her mother's numerous dresses as her enemies: she could not stand them. She only liked the shabby old robe, thrown casually onto the bed. When her mother wore that, it meant they got to spend all evening together and the young girl liked nothing better.[33] This poem, with its portrayal of a romanticised mother-daughter relationship, again depicted an idealised feminine Soviet woman, with a collection of colourful dresses, one for every occasion. A far cry from the "drab…mud-coloured clothes and sensible boots" Australian historian Sheila Fitzpatrick donned in order to assimilate in 1960s Moscow and a far cry from the lived reality of most Soviet women, who usually possessed only one outfit.[34]

The idea of Soviet women as dowdy and drab persisted in the West into the 1950s. Soviet commentators at the time called upon Soviet women to embrace their femininity and engage with fashion, cosmetics and hairstyles.[35] To that end, Soviet women's magazines began to publish more fashion content.[36] In its 8th March 1959 issue, the weekly magazine *Ogonek* stated that "a beautiful, new dress is always a joy for women."[37] Even Khrushchev remarked publicly on the topic, stating in a report to the Supreme Council of the USSR in 1964 that "Working people want to purchase clothes and shoes that have an up-to-date style and beautiful colour and that correspond to the season and to fashion. This is a good thing."[38]

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[33] *Murzilka*, March 1959, 22.
[34] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *A Spy in the Archives: A Memoir of Cold War Russia*, (Melbourne University Press, 2013), 61. For more on Soviet women's fashion see Ilič, *Soviet Women – Everyday Lives*, 127–148; Jukka Gronow & Sergei Zhuravlev, *Fashion Meets Socialism: Fashion industry in the Soviet Union after the Second World War* (Finnish Literature Society, 2015).
[35] Susan E. Reid, 'Gender and the Destalinisation of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union Under Khrushchev,' in *Gender and Consumption: Domestic Cultures and the Commercialisation of Everyday Life*, eds. Emma Casey and Lydia Martens (Ashgate, 2007), 58–59.
[36] Olga Gurova, 'The Art of Dressing: Body, Gender and Discourse on fashion in Soviet Russia in the 1950s and 1960s,' in *The Fabric of Cultures. Fashion, Identity, Globalization*, eds. Eugenia Paulicelli & Hazel Clark (Routledge, 2009), 73–91.
[37] *Ogonek*, 11 (March 1959), 7.
[38] Nikita S. Khrushchev, 'Iz doklada N. S. Khrushcheva na Chetvertoi sessii Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR 'O merakh po vypolneniu programmy KPSS v oblasti povysheniia blagosostoianiia naroda,'' *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR*, 9 (1964), 1.

In printing this poem, *Murzilka* further strengthened official matriculture by circulating idealised images of the Soviet woman as both mother and worker who was at the same time feminine, attractive, and well-dressed. This was presented as an exemplary portrait of a Soviet woman and an aspirational role model for young female readers. This depiction, however, reveals a tension between maternal femininity and availability, suggesting that for the child, what mattered most was not the mother's appearance but her presence. By framing the old robe as the preferred outfit over fashionable dresses, the poem suggests that material culture or appearance was secondary to maternal care and affection, a significant distinction given the context of Soviet consumer shortages.[39]

An illustration by Elena Korotkova (1927 – 2000), published accompanying the poem, depicts the young girl sitting alongside her mother who is wearing an old robe. The daughter is holding a book and gazing at her mother who gazes back. The illustration reinforces the daughter's association between her mother's availability and the old robe: its appearance signals her continued presence. The robe also serves as a marker of the mother's private self in contrast to her public persona and makes visible the daughter's awareness of the competing demands on her mother's time. Korotkova positions the pair in a roughly triangular composition, creating a sense of intimacy and togetherness. The pair may be physically touching although it is unclear. Physical touch between mother and child acted as an indicator of maternal tenderness and attachment and more broadly draws upon cultural associations of emotional security.[40]

Within *Murzilka* in the period 1956 – 1964, there were sixty-four instances of physical contact between mothers and children depicted visually, compared with just twelve between fathers and their children. This predominance of female touch links maternal identity with intimacy, enabling touch to function as visual shorthand for maternal tenderness. In contrast, the relative lack of paternal touch constructs a contradictory model of fatherhood, less entwined with physical proximity and bodily contact.[41] The gender differentiation of care extends beyond adult representations in *Murzilka*. Girls are much more frequently positioned as caregivers, pictured in nurturing roles with other children, animals, and toys while boys are less commonly depicted in equivalent caring

[39] For information on clothing supply shortages in the USSR at this time see Larissa Zakharova, 'How and What to Consume: Patterns of Soviet Clothing Consumption in the 1950s and 1960s,' in *Communism and Consumerism: The Soviet Alternative to the Affluent Society*, eds. Timo Vihavainen & Elena Bogdanova (2016, Brill), 85–112.
[40] Geoffrey Batchen, for example, suggests that "All portraits of a mother holding her offspring recall, sometimes consciously, the Christian iconography of Madonna and child, the ideal emblem of maternal performance." Geoffrey Batchen, *Negative/Positive: A History of Photography* (Routledge, 2020), 219.
[41] This difference in frequency between maternal and paternal touch has been studied recently by Flavia Izzo *et al.*, 'Happy Moments between Children and Their Parents: A Multi-method and Multi-informant Perspective." *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 25 no. 3 (2024): 1–28.

positions. In the period 1956 – 1964, there were eighty-two images of girls in *Murzilka* in a nurturing role compared to twenty-eight images depicting boys in comparable roles. *Murzilka* therefore presented caregiving not only as a characteristic of motherhood but as a form of feminine-coded behavior.[42]

Mothers At Work

Prior to the 1917 revolution, Russian women made up a significant proportion of the workforce, but the First Five-Year Plan, initiated in 1928 at Stalin's behest, prompted a mass influx of women into the Soviet labour market.[43] While enshrined in Soviet ideology, however, equality in the workplace was not fully realised in practice. Prejudice against women workers was endemic at all levels.[44] Soviet women workers were generally limited to two kinds of job: high-intensity, low-pay factory-line production, especially within the textile and food industries; and heavy, unskilled manual labour.[45] Furthermore, women, shouldering the double burden of work and home, were limited in how much time they could devote to upskilling or retraining and were therefore less likely to be promoted.[46] According to a study of Leningrad workers published in 1965 and cited by Filtzer, the prevailing factor for women in choosing employment was the absence of any alternative: they simply needed a wage, regardless of the job itself. Men, on the other hand, were more likely to enter a trade because they were interested in it.[47] For many Soviet women then, work did not define them; it was a means to an end and secondary to their role as mother.

In *Murzilka*, the jobs and work of mothers were not given the same prominence as that of fathers, nor were working mothers celebrated or revered in the same way as many fathers who appeared in the magazine. In *Murzilka*, the work of fathers was narratively interesting, contributing explicitly to the building of socialism. Mothers' work was undoubtedly essential labour, but it was uninteresting, irrelevant, and unheroic. In the

[42] Larissa Rudova, 'Transformative Vision and Abiding Traditionalism: Gender in the Canon of Soviet Children's Literature,' in *The Moving Canon(s) of Slavic Children's Literature*, eds. Mateusz Świetlicki, Dorota Michułka, and Zofia Zasacka (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2026), 139–156.
[43] For information regarding women worker's status pre-revolution, see Rose L. Glickman, *Russian Factory Women: Workplace and Society 1880 – 1914* (University of California Press, 1984), and for an excellent analysis of Soviet women in work in the early Soviet Union, Goldman, *Women at the Gates.*
[44] This inequality was not exclusively Soviet; women workers in Europe, the USA, and China also encountered prejudice and hostility; see Goldman, *Women at the Gates*, 207–208.
[45] David Filtzer, 'Women Workers in the Khrushchev Era,' in *Women in the Khrushchev Era*, eds. Melanie Ilič, Susan E. Reid, and Lynne Attwood (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 30–34.
[46] Filtzer, *Women Workers*, 30–34.
[47] Filtzer, *Women Workers,* 34 and 38.

story *Zhuk* (Bug) by Gennadii Snegirev (1933 – 2004) in the June 1956 issue of *Murzilka*, for example, no information about the mother of Galia and her brother was given, other than the fact that she was "at work."[48] Likewise, in July 1956, the poem *Detskii avtobus* (Children's bus) by Zinaida Aleksandrova (1907 – 1983) gave no further details beyond "Mothers came from work, and are waiting for their children."[49] Similarly, a poem by Iurii Korinets (1923 – 1989) called *333 zhil'tsa* (333 residents) appeared in the March 1957 issue of *Murzilka* in which the comings and goings of the 333 residents of a block of flats were documented. Among them are a number of mothers and fathers: "82 fathers went to work. 98 mums went out and about on business."[50] While the fathers in this poem purposefully went out to work, the mothers only attended to vague, undefined business.

In the June 1959 issue of *Murzilka*, an article was published entitled *Nashi Papy i Mamy vypolniaiut semiletku* (Our Dads and Mums are fulfilling the seven-year plan) which explicitly highlighted the value of all work, although the only examples mentioned were those that were materially productive:

> All of our mums and dads work. Some in construction, some behind a lathe, some catch fish, some sow grain for bread, and some build the atomic icebreaker 'Lenin.' It doesn't matter where you work. What's important is that you work well. To work well means to fulfil the directives of the XXI party congress, to fulfil the Seven-Year Plan.[51]

The article featured drawings and information sent into the magazine by readers. One boy drew two fishermen. Another boy drew a new mine, a mine in which he might work when he is older, the editors suggested. Another boy sent in a picture of the icebreaker *Lenin*, another the changing Moscow skyline, and another a rocket on its way to the moon, all worthy communist projects. Svetlana Evdokimova, aged eight from Leningrad, drew her father, a turner in a Leningrad factory, but there was no suggestion that she would follow in his footsteps; that was the preserve of sons only.[52] The only mention of a female worker came from Tania Karandeeva, from the village of Luzhki in Belarus. She wrote of her ambition to become a collective farmer and how she already helped her mother look after chickens. In total, Tania had already raised more than forty chicks.[53]

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[48] *Murzilka*, June 1956, 19.
[49] *Murzilka*, July 1956, 10.
[50] *Murzilka*, March 1957, 6–7.
[51] *Murzilka*, June 1959, 4–5.
[52] A number of stories and readers' letters were printed in *Murzilka* in this period which depicted boys who aspired to be just like their fathers. See for example: 'Slavka' by Evgenii Permiak, *Murzilka*, May 1957, 21; Mikhail Lapygin's poem 'Kuznetsy,' *Murzilka*, September 1957, 19.
[53] *Murzilka*, June 1959, 5.

The only mention of a woman at work, then, came from a romanticised rural setting and featured a woman in a caregiving role. This article contributes to a gendered hierarchy of labour which privileges those forms of (male) productive labour considered heroic and socially significant over those viewed as (female) routine and non-transformative. *Murzilka* fathers' work was important on a national scale, furthering the construction of socialism, while the only example of a mother's job mentioned here was limited to the local domestic sphere. By incorporating children's own contributions, the article encourages the wider readership to assign value to these representations and positions readers themselves as active participants in the ideological process.

This was not the only instance in which readers' contributions constructed a gendered hierarchy of labour. A number of readers' letters appeared in *Murzilka* in the period 1956 – 1964 concerning the rearing of rabbits and the association of girls with this type of labour. In the September 1959 issue for example, Galia Bespertseva, a grade five student from Krasnodar Krai, wrote of how her school kept rabbits and how they helped the older students look after them. Galia also wrote of how her class had recently taken on cleaning duties of their classroom, commenting how nice it was to study in a space for which they themselves were responsible.[54] In the May 1960 issue of *Murzilka*, a letter from the pupils of Tarasovka village in Kyiv oblast was published. They explained how they too took care of rabbits at their school and sent in a story detailing how one second-grader, Lilia Zhuk, the smallest in her class, cared for her rabbit, even when he got sick.[55] Another letter appeared in the October 1960 issue of *Murzilka* from Lena and Iasha Zhurbin, a sister and brother from Ukraine. They detailed how they fed and cared for their ten baby rabbits, bringing them milk and vegetables and fresh grass.[56] These letters demonstrate how *Murzilka* readers were not merely passive recipients of matriculture but active participants in its reproduction and circulation. By detailing the routine work of caring for baby rabbits, these readers, most of whom were girls, performed behaviours associated with idealised motherhood, linking femininity to the nurture of others.

Another example of a working mother appeared in the July 1959 issue of *Murzilka*. In the opening paragraphs of Boris Emel'ianov's (1903 – 1965) *Rasskazy o Mame* (Tales about Mum) we find out that Masha and Misha's father worked on an icebreaker far away at sea: worthy, transformative work on a grand, national scale. On the contrary, very little information was given regarding their mother's work.[57] Instead, her role as a loving mother and as a feminine woman who cared about her appearance was foregrounded in the early

[54] *Murzilka*, September 1959, 22.
[55] *Murzilka*, May 1960, 20.
[56] *Murzilka*, October 1960, 19.
[57] *Murzilka*, July 1959, 4.

part of the story. Later in the story, Masha was rude about her mother's hands, describing them as rough. Her mother said her hands were perfectly ordinary *rabochie ruki* (worker's hands).[58] Masha's disdain for her mother's hands, hardened through physical work, echoed some contemporary critics' concerns about the toll manual labour was taking on Soviet women's physical and emotional states.[59] Later in the story, when Masha and Misha's grandmother reprimanded Masha for being rude, more information was finally given about their mother's work:

> Your mother's hands have done good, ten times as much as you could do, you could cover half the planet with the linen that your mother has woven […] Your mother is no white-handed idler, she is a worker, and there is nothing wrong with that, only a lot of good. You stand in her place and God help you to be like her, offensive girl! [60]

Although clear from the above description that the mother was a textile factory worker, it was never explicitly stated. Unlike the father who was defined by his job early in the story, the mother was never given a job title; that part of her identity was not defined beyond the generic title of 'worker,' which was secondary to her romanticised role as mother. The grandmother's admonition reveals the mother's otherwise unseen labour through the motif of her hands. There is both a rejection of a traditional, delicate femininity associated with 'white-handedness' and a celebration of manual labour.[61] Despite the competing demands of labour and motherhood, the mother is explicitly positioned as a model not just for her daughter, but for the wider *Murzilka* readership.

A Mother's Burden

Soviet mothers were expected to not only birth and raise children appropriately, but also to work. This double burden has been examined in both the global and the Soviet-specific context and boasts a rich and varied historiography.[62] The dual toll of work and

[58] *Murzilka*, July 1959, 6.
[59] See Attwood, *The New Soviet Man and Woman, passim*.
[60] *Murzilka*, July 1959, 6.
[61] Hands as a visual metaphor for labour and the working class had a long history in Soviet visual culture and Soviet children would have been familiar with this established visual vocabulary. For recent scholarship on this, see for example Emma Simmons, 'Tools for Liberation: Labor, Gender, and the Factory Workbench in Early Soviet Culture.' *Arts*, 15, no. 5 (2026), 100 and 103.
[62] For discussion of the double burden generally, see for example Michelle Budig, 'Feminism and the Family' in *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Families*, eds. Jacqueline Scott, Judith Treas, and Martin Richards (Blackwell, 2004), 416–434*;* Arlie Hochschild & Anne Machung, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (Viking, 1989). For a Soviet slant see Filtzer, *Women*

motherhood on Soviet women threw the regime's notion of equality into sharp relief. Soviet women workers who fulfilled their duty to become mothers were expected to maintain their worker status. State-run kindergartens were established in order to facilitate this, yet women were expected to shoulder responsibility for all other aspects of the child's welfare and upbringing as well as other domestic chores, such as shopping, cooking, and cleaning.[63] One contemporary observer noted that at the end of each work day, married women hurried off to queue for groceries, picked up their children from nursery and then went home to cook, clean, and do other chores until late in the evening.[64] Even the basic task of procuring groceries was far from straightforward with frequent widespread shortages and long queues for even everyday supplies. Some women gave up their lunch break in order to shop: "We only had one break of 45 minutes during the day. The men would go to lunch, but I usually went shopping to buy food during that time."[65] When it came to preparing meals, women often had to be inventive due to the lack of available ingredients.[66] These multiple burdens shouldered by Soviet women were famously portrayed in Nataliya Baranskaia's novella *Nedelia kak nedelia* (A week like any other), published in the Soviet literary journal *Novyi Mir* in 1968. Detailing a week in the life of an ordinary Soviet woman Olga Voronskova, a scientist and mother, as she struggled to cope with the demands of Soviet life, the novella was so accurate in its portrayal that it was misidentified in some quarters as non-fiction.[67]

A tongue-in-cheek story by A. Parkhomenko (dates unknown) entitled *Vot tak pomog!* (How helpful!) from the April 1957 issue of *Murzilka* depicted a typical burdened mother

Workers; Lapidus, *Women in Soviet* Society; Lapidus ed, *Women, Work and* Family; Jeni Harden, 'Beyond the Dual Burden: Theorising Gender Inequality in Soviet Russia,' *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory*, 30, no. 1 (2002), 43–68. Some scholarship refers to the triple burden of Soviet women: work, domestic duties including childcare, and political engagement; however, the focus in *Murzilka* is on mothers as caregivers and workers.

[63] State childcare facilities were established in the Soviet Union but supply never matched demand and lack of childcare provision was a perennial problem, widely discussed even into the Khrushchev era. Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing Up in Russia 1890 – 1991* (Yale University Press, 2007), 409–411. For contemporaneous discussion in Soviet women's magazines, see for example *Rabotnitsa*, 1956, 6, 29; *Rabotnitsa*, 1963, 1, 25.

[64] Mary Leder, *My Life in Stalinist Russia: An American Woman Looks Back* (Indiana University Press, 2001), 44 and 168.

[65] I. F. Vainstein, cited in M. Ilič, *Life Stories of Soviet Women: The Interwar Generation* (Routledge, 2013), 97.

[66] Svetlana Yampolskaya, 'Russian Families Past and Present,' in *Unresolved Dilemmas: Women, Work and the Family in the United States, Europe and the Former Soviet Union*, eds. Kaisa Kauppinen and Tuula Gordon (Ashgate, 1997).

[67] Kelly, *A History of Russian Women's Writing 1820 – 1992*, 399. For a detailed discussion of Baranskaia's novella, see Thomas Lahusen, ''Leaving Paradise' and Perestroika: 'A Week Like Any Other' and 'Memorial Day' by Natal'ia Baranskaya.' in *Fruits of Her Plume: Essays on Contemporary Russian Women's Culture*, ed. Helena Goscilo (Routledge, 2015), 205-224.

returning home from work; she "as always, carried milk, bread and sugar."[68] Kolia, her young son, upon seeing her, ran to meet her, demanded sweets, and then offered to carry the bread. When his legs began to hurt, his mother picked him up and carried both him and the bread home. The father met them on the front porch and both he and the mother smiled when the son said he was helping carry the bread. This short, light-hearted story demonstrated the multiple burdens of a Soviet woman in both a metaphorical and literal sense. The fact that both the father and mother smiled, highlighted just how normalised it was. The accompanying illustration by A. Reshetova (dates unknown) draws upon established visual codes in its representation of the working mother in a headscarf.[69] The headscarf, traditionally tied under the chin for peasant women and behind the head for workers, became shorthand for the Soviet working woman.[70] In the *Murzilka* image, the headscarf visually marks the mother as a worker, while the physical act of holding the child close to her body and gazing at his face, reminiscent of the Madonna and child, evokes a longstanding convention in which maternal holding signifies intimacy and care.[71] Reshetova's illustration brings together the two identities of worker and mother, highlighting for readers the compatibility of labour and motherhood within the idealised image of Soviet womanhood.

In the March 1958 issue of *Murzilka*, a light-hearted illustration by V. Andrievich (1908 – 1985) was published, detailing some children's gifts for their mothers on the occasion of 8th March (International Women's Day).[72] One girl promised to clean the floor at home while another girl promised to do the ironing. Another girl was going to launder her mother's jacket for her. One boy was going to do the shopping for his mum and another, who wanted to be a sailor, was going to mend his own socks. The implication being of course that ordinarily, the mothers would be responsible for these tasks. Another gift was the promise of a top grade at school but this again highlighted an additional burden on mothers: on top of everything else, she also had to worry about the children's grades. Such discussions centring on a mother's mental load continue to this day in a number of countries and became particularly prominent amid the privations of the pandemic where the responsibility for home-schooling fell overwhelmingly to mothers.[73] In *Murzilka*, however, Andrievich presents the Soviet woman's lot not as a matter for criticism but as an accepted social reality.

[68] *Murzilka*, April 1957, 18.
[69] Nadezhda Plungian, *Rozhdenie sovetskoi zhenshchiny: Rabotnitsa, krest'ianka, letchitsa, "byvshaia" i drugie v iskusstve 1917–1939 godov* (Garazh, 2020), 55.
[70] Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters Under Lenin and Stalin* (University of California Press, 1999), 102.
[71] See note 40 above.
[72] *Murzilka*, March 1958, 12–13.
[73] Caitriona Delaney, Alicja Bobek & Sara Clavero, ''It was too much for me': mental load, mothers, and working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic,' *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14 (2023), 1–12.

The March 1960 issue of *Murzilka* featured a domestic scene by artist Tatiana Eryomina (1912 – 1995) on the cover: a young boy holding a celebration sign whispers something to his father who is holding a bunch of flowers and a large gift box. In the background, the mother, wearing an apron, is in the kitchen preparing some food. The irony here is that 8th March, a day purportedly devoted to the celebration of women, actually involved more work for them. Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, satire grew around the 8th March holiday and the involvement of men in the domestic space.[74] McCallum argues that such satirical depictions were the only visual representations of men within the domestic space, as though the very idea of their presence was laughable.[75] Certainly in *Murzilka* in the period 1956 – 1964, there are no examples of fathers or men in the kitchen; this was the exclusive domain of women and framed as such for the readership.

These examples highlight the various demands placed upon Soviet women, demands not equally distributed amongst men and women but disproportionately the burden of women. *Murzilka*, in transmitting this officially endorsed matriculture and modelling for girls (and boys) society's expectations of them, both reflected and perpetuated the status quo. At the same time, the magazine's inclusion of demonstrations of appreciation modelled ideal behaviour for its readers, offering a tentative recognition of the demands placed upon women and encouraging readers to acknowledge the double burden they bore.

The gendered nature of domestic labour is mentioned explicitly in a story by A. Sidorov (dates unknown) published in the October 1959 issue of *Murzilka*. In the story, entitled *Kak Boriu shchetka podvela* (How a brush let Boria down), a Pioneer leader (a leader within the Soviet communist youth organisation) asked which children cleaned their own rooms at home. Boria initially thought it was a question for the girls and was surprised to see lots of boys raise their hands. Embarrassed, he raised his own and lied about cleaning his room. Boria was eventually caught out in his lie and suffered great discomfort and embarrassment.[76] This story appears to suggest that a gendered attitude towards housework was a source of shame: a good pioneer helped around the home, regardless of gender. The *Murzilka* story promoted an ideal where boys do their fair share of housework but in reality, housework remained the domain of women and girls.

[74] Claire E. McCallum, 'Man about the House: Depicting Fatherhood and Male Domesticity in Soviet Visual Satire after Stalin,' in *Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union*, ed. Melanie Ilič (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 336–337.
[75] McCallum, *Man About the House*, 338.
[76] *Murzilka*, October 1959, 20.

In the February 1961 issue of *Murzilka*, a letter written by a reader's mother was published. This is the only such example in the period 1956 – 1964. The mother wrote to praise her son Gennadii Kut' (Gena), a second-grader at the Zerendinskaia school in Kazakhstan. Gena's mother wrote how he studied well, helped out at home, looked after his little brother and took him to nursery. She said that by the time her and her husband returned home, Gena had already prepared wood for the stove and peeled the potatoes. She finished by saying that she was glad that her son was growing up to be so attentive and hardworking.[77] That there is no equivalent letter celebrating a daughter in *Murzilka* suggests that girls' domestic labour was treated as expected rather than exceptional. This underlines the contradictory nature of Soviet gender ideology: *Murzilka* attempted to cultivate amongst boys non-traditional, masculine behaviour while at the same time perpetuating the normalisation of women's and girls' domestic labour.

In the 1960s, the newspaper *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, a major Soviet youth publication, ran a series of sociological surveys, one of which, published in December 1961, elicited 3000 responses on attitudes towards love, marriage, and the family.[78] One of the questions related to "women's position of inferiority in daily life" and one of the proffered solutions was "participation of the husband [...] in handling household chores."[79] That this was being articulated in the mainstream press suggests that this issue was of some concern although respondents disagreed sharply with its implications. Some rejected the notion that men should be more active around the house: 27-year-old engineer Velakhin for example, complained that it was time to stop "crying about helping the women" while 29-year-old engineering architect Tat'iana Vlasova disparaged men who cared for children as insufficiently masculine.[80] Others, however, recognised the ongoing inequality between men and women: 24-year-old electrician V. Abakov criticised families in which the man considered himself "the head" while 27-year-old editor Tamara Vinogradova, lamented that women too often shouldered "a burden beyond our strength."[81]

These competing attitudes are corroborated by Lynne Attwood's research into the Soviet women's magazines *Rabotnitsa* and *Krestianka*, which reveals women's complaints at being treated as "household slaves" and the ridicule aimed at men who engaged in "women's work."[82] Even where male participation was accepted, it was often confined to

[77] *Murzilka*, February 1961, 21.
[78] M. Motzenok, 'Youth Has Its Say on Love and Marriage,' *Soviet Review*, 3, no. 8 (1962), 21–40.
[79] Motzenok, *Youth Has Its Say*, 21.
[80] Motzenok, *Youth Has Its Say*, 22–23 and 30.
[81] Motzenok, *Youth Has Its Say*, 35.
[82] Lynne Attwood, 'Celebrating the 'frail-figured welder:' Gender Confusion in Women's Magazines of the Khrushchev Era,' *Slavonica*, 8, no.2 (2002), 165 and 166–167.

certain 'masculinised' forms of activity.[83] Consequently the *Rabotnitsa* and *Krestianka* editors proposed "upbringing work" to educate those men who treated their wives as subordinate and those women who did not problematise sexist attitudes and behaviours.[84] Certainly *Murzilka* was positioned as an instrument of socialist upbringing intended to shape idealised gendered behaviour. In this way, the character of Boria acts as a negative role model which readers were expected to shun. At the same time, the letter from Gena's mother promoted and celebrated male participation in household tasks. Together these sources highlight the contested nature of gendered domestic roles: inequalities were beginning to be acknowledged yet household labour continued to be framed as a fundamentally female responsibility.

In the March 1960 issue of *Murzilka*, the story *Devushka v voennom kostume* (The girl in the military suit), written by Vladimir Zheleznikov (1925 – 2015), appeared. This is the only story in *Murzilka* in the period 1956 – 1964 which explicitly discusses a woman's active military service. In the story, Iurii receives poor grades and lies to his mother, Nina, who becomes angry when she finds out. Later, while his mother is out, a former front-line comrade, Sukhov, arrives and reveals that he owes his life to Nina. He shows Iurii a photograph of a girl in military attire who Iurii eventually recognises as his mother. When Iurii's father returns home, his immediate concern is that Nina is not there to prepare his dinner. Sukhov remarks that it is Nina's absence that matters, prompting Iurii's father to reflect on how little he and his son appreciate her. He subsequently realises that Nina left because they had forgotten her birthday and they go to find her and wish her well.

In this story, Zheleznikov, a frequent contributor to the magazine, juxtaposes Nina's extraordinary wartime contribution with her mundane domestic duties and depicts both Iurii and his father in an unfavourable light. There was a lack of interest in and respect for Nina on the part of her son and husband and this contrasted sharply with the common *Murzilka* trope of sons idolising their fathers. Elena Kononenko, writing in *Rabotnitsa* in 1956, discussed the gender imbalance within the domestic space.[85] Based upon readers' letters sent into the magazine, Kononenko cited one example of a couple who had met as students and following their marriage, the man expected the wife to devote herself to looking after him in much the same way as in the *Murzilka* story. Another letter was from a woman who despaired that her husband wanted to spend his free time only with his friends and not her.[86] Zheleznikov's story is critical of the father and son's treatment of the

[83] Attwood, 'Celebrating the Frail-Figured Welder,' 169. This was also seen in *Murzilka* in the March 1958 article discussed above where a boy who wanted to be a sailor darned his own socks: an appropriately masculine version of a traditionally feminine occupation.
[84] Attwood, 'Celebrating the Frail-Figured Welder,' 165–166.
[85] E. Kononenko, 'Otkrovennyi razgovor (Obzor pisem v redaktsiiu),' *Rabotnitsa,* 3 (1956), 30.
[86] Kononenko, 'Otkrovennyi razgovor,' 30.

mother and tellingly coincided with the major holiday celebrating women and mothers. The story ends with Iurii and his father donning their best clothes and apologising and Nina returning home. This depiction of Iurii and his father's ingratitude and inattentiveness acted as a disciplinary narrative encouraging readers to recognise and appreciate maternal labour and sacrifice. Such negative role models not only functioned as cautionary examples for readers in the present, but also reinforced the idea that such attitudes and behaviours were incompatible with the values of the bright Soviet future. At the same time however, this kind of conduct was commonplace and *Murzilka* perpetuated the idea of the Soviet woman's lot.

Despite the title, the illustrations accompanying the story never show Nina in her military uniform. Instead, artist Iuvenalii Korovin (1914 – 1991) depicts her in a white, ruffled blouse, fitted, navy jacket with puff sleeves, white gloves, handbag and a stylish, feminine hat, tipped at a jaunty angle. Djurdja Bartlett suggests that an image of a Soviet woman such as Nina in an elegant ensemble, complete with hat, was a "visual testament to the official reconceptualization of gender."[87] Korovin's choice of outfit was deliberately removed from Nina's wartime heroics and decidedly feminine. According to Anne Greisse, women's war heroics were forgotten but for a "once-a-year-splash" on 8th March.[88] Certainly in this story, while Nina's heroics are mentioned, the primary image the reader is presented with is an elegant, traditionally-feminine mother and wife.

Problem Mothers

Not all *Murzilka* mothers adhered to accepted ideological codes of motherhood. Mothers that were too loving and caring were seen as the root of certain adolescent problems. One such mother appeared in the February 1957 issue of *Murzilka* in a poem by Iurii Yakovlev (1922 – 1995) entitled *Mamin khvostik* (Mummy's little shadow):

There lived in the world
A boy Kostik
The boy Kostik is
Mummy's little shadow

He's behind his mummy
The whole day long

[87] Djurdja Bartlett, *Ideology and Clothes: The Rise and Decline of Socialist Official Fashion*. PhD Thesis, (University of the Arts, London, 2006), 251–252.
[88] Anne Elliot Griesse, *Soviet Women and World War Two: Mobilization and Combat Policies* (MA thesis, Georgetown University, 1980), 81.

Following behind her
Like a tail.

Mummy to the shops
Little shadow to the shops
Make your way to the counter

Mummy to the kitchen
To get the lunch
Kostik-the-little-shadow
Follows silently

Mummy goes visiting
Kostik goes with mummy.

Mummy is needed at a meeting
Her son is ready in advance
I won't stay behind, not for anything
I've already put on my coat!

And whenever
And wherever
The mother might be throughout the day
Kostya's weak voice can be heard
I'm going with you, take me

He is growing up
The boy Kostik
Mummy's little shadow
Is growing too

Kostia starts school
He goes gloomily, miserable
Because in the early hours
Mummy isn't allowed in class.

Kostia was called to the blackboard
Kostia twirls the chalk in his hand
I can't read without mummy

I can't count without mummy
Tears run down his cheek

Kostia wears a red tie
And plaintively asks the others
To please enrol
Mummy into the squad too

That's how he is
This Kostik
This Kostik
Mummy's little shadow. [89]

While following after your father metaphorically as well as literally was something to be celebrated and encouraged, Kostia's relationship with his mother made him a laughing stock. He was described as weak and miserable and could not perform even the most basic tasks without his mother. In the Soviet Union, any inadequacies within children were usually blamed on the mother, although instances of fathers as responsible for their poorly turned-out children appeared in the latter half of the 1950s.[90] Kostia's inability to enter into the Soviet collective contract marked him as an unworthy member of society and he and his mother served as negative role models for *Murzilka* readers. By including such a poem for publication, *Murzilka* not only appealed to the readers' inherent whimsy but cautioned them against behaving in a similar manner, whether as mothers or as children.

Conclusion

In the period 1956 – 1964, *Murzilka* framed its mothers primarily as loving and nurturing while simultaneously maintaining their femininity and taking care over their appearance. Although they participated in paid employment, work rarely defined them and did not displace motherhood as their primary role. *Murzilka* mothers were presented as capable and able to shoulder multiple burdens with apparent ease. *Murzilka* did not present the demands of employment and domestic duties as competing obligations but as ordinary responsibilities which an ideal mother could fulfil without any problem. The official Soviet matriculture was not merely one of maternal affection but of capable and available femininity where work and motherhood were complementary facets of a mother's identity.

[89] *Murzilka*, February 1957, 5–6.
[90] See Ilič, *Soviet Women – Everyday Lives*, 110; McCallum, *Man About the House*, 338.

The magazine's representations of motherhood did much more than reflect societal expectations of Soviet women. Through their repetition across stories, poems, illustrations, and reader contributions, particular understandings of the maternal ideal were made recognisable and desirable to children. Through the construction of this matriculture, the *Murzilka* mother was a mechanism through which the Soviet state sought to embed maternal norms, encouraging their internalisation and reproduction across generations. Portraying these ideals to the children reading the magazine would, it was hoped, help shape how they viewed motherhood and themselves and, ideally, lead to a new generation of devoted, feminine, working mothers and helpful, hardworking, appreciative fathers. Such a reading reveals how *Murzilka* participated in and perpetuated gendered ideological norms and sought to shape gender identities in accordance with state interests.

Biography

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Pravda

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Good Night, *The Indivisible Sky*: Women, Video, Iran

SANDRA SKURVIDA

Abstract

This article investigates the matriculturality of resistive video art of Iran via a comparative case study of the works of two artists, Jinoos Taghizadeh, a prominent Iranian artist, writer, and activist who lives in exile in Canada since the repressions against the Woman Life Freedom movement, and Anahita Razmi, a German-Iranian diaspora artist based in London. The comparative analysis of their works, Taghizadeh's Good Night *(2009) and Razmi's* The Indivisible Sky *(2025), elucidates the specific sociopolitical conditions to which they are addressed.* Good Night *features a lullaby of revolutionary anthems sung by a female voice translating the sound of awakening during political upheavals—the revolution of 1979 and the Green Movement of 2009—into the regenerative silence of sleep;* The Indivisible Sky *translates and redistributes among speakers of diverse identities fragments of self-reflexive writings by women about their societal roles ranging from the early twentieth century to the present and triggered by Woman Life Freedom movement in Iran. Both artists are dedicated to the creation of a contemporary Iranian matriculture, inserting its signifiers into circulation within a transnational media environment.*

Keywords: video art, Taghizadeh, Razmi, Iranian matriculture, transnational media

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Résumé

Cet article explore la matriculturalité de l'art vidéo de résistance en Iran à travers une étude comparative des œuvres de deux artistes : Jinoos Taghizadeh — artiste, écrivaine et militante iranienne éminente, vivant en exil au Canada depuis la répression du mouvement Woman, Life, Freedom [« Femme, Vie, Liberté »] — et Anahita Razmi, artiste de la diaspora germano-iranienne basée à Londres. L'analyse comparative de leurs œuvres, Good Night *(2009) de Taghizadeh et* The Indivisible Sky *(2025) de Razmi, met en lumière les conditions sociopolitiques spécifiques auxquelles elles répondent.* Good Night *[« Bonne nuit »] présente une berceuse composée d'hymnes révolutionnaires, interprétée par une voix féminine ; elle transforme le tumulte de l'éveil lors de bouleversements politiques — la révolution de 1979 et le Mouvement vert de 2009 — en un silence régénérateur, celui du sommeil.* The Indivisible Sky *[« Le ciel indivisible »], pour sa part, traduit et redistribue parmi des locuteurs aux identités diverses des fragments d'écrits autoréflexifs rédigés par des femmes sur leurs rôles sociaux, allant du début du XXe siècle à nos jours, et inspirés par le mouvement Woman, Life, Freedom en Iran. Les deux artistes œuvrent à la création d'une matriculture iranienne contemporaine, en faisant circuler ses signifiants au sein d'un environnement médiatique transnational.*

Mots-clés : art vidéo, Taghizadeh, Razmi, matriculture iranienne, médias transnationaux

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Listening to the tape recordings by the artist, activist, and writer Kate Millett from her trip to join the Iranian feminist uprising during the 1979 Revolution, media scholar Negar Mottahedeh hears pauses, noises, and mistranslations. She comes to a realization:

> …that the things that preoccupy Millett in Iran simultaneously motivate a complete misrecognition of the realities confronting her in the car, on her way to call her comrades in Paris, Millett has her hand in a bag of unripe, green, unshelled almonds. Four kilos' and twenty tomans' worth. The paper bag crinkles and I hear her crunching on the almonds as she speaks into the microphone. Her senses are fully engaged. But her ambitions and preoccupations are elsewhere, drawn to the future that has yet to arrive: the bold presence of women globally. This requires, in part, the cooperation of the media.[1]

[1] Negar Mottahedeh, *Whisper Tapes: Kate Millett in Iran* (Stanford, California: Stanford Briefs, 2019), 63.

Mediation is essential for conveying experiences we cannot access directly. The paragraph above brings the car scene in Tehran to life like a film scene, capturing Millett and her companions' performance. The car is a liminal space between public and private and plays an important role in Iranian cinema. Films like *Taste of Cherry* by Abbas Kiarostami (1997), *Taxi* by Jafar Panahi (2015), or a video by Negar Tahsili, *Wee-men or Women?!* (2008), featuring a women-only taxi driving around Tehran, add color to our envisioning of Mottahedeh's script of Millett's aural ride. The quote above mediates between the documentary and the imaginary, bringing the archival tapes to life and extending their lifespan, since text lasts longer than tape, even archived tape.[2] Mediation is usually not a one-person act—it requires, at a minimum, a technological vehicle, a sender, and a receiver, but transmission and dissemination can shade the message or even alter or scramble it altogether. In the Millett-Mottahedeh scene, the car and the magnetic tape both serve as technological vehicles—the car as a spatial vehicle and the tape as a temporal one. Mottahedeh's listening to the tapes extends their reach by half a century—hers is a historical listen, informed by the aftermath of the events captured on the tapes. Moreover, her linguistic mediation—translating all sounds into text, including English and Persian speech and the crackling of unripe almonds—constitutes a critically situated narration of Millett's recording.[3]

I find myself in a similar transhistorical situation when I write about Iranian video art. Watching, listening, and interpreting are mediations that constitute a writerly performance for an audience, conveying what is otherwise seldom seen and heard, especially outside Iran. This undertaking is a subjective act aimed at sustaining ephemeral manifestations through description and analysis, metabolizing files into text. Translating data into words that capture unstable images in a more durable medium—language—I'm using my sense of history to trigger the other senses—sight, smell, sound, touch, and taste of the almonds, pears, and cakes eaten on tape time ago, mediating the body and story into text.

Why translate visual media into text? Video art disappears from view in the blink of an eye unless its invisible data is collected, cataloged, updated, screened, and stored indefinitely. Unlike Millet's tapes, Iranian video art doesn't have an institutional shelter such as archives or museum collections that would preserve it for future mediations.[4] Secular contemporary art does not identify with the theocratic state regime and is therefore

[2] The Kate Millet Papers, 1912–2002, bulk 1951–2001, including audio recordings from her trip to Iran, are housed at Duke University's David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library; URL: https://archives.lib.duke.edu/catalog/millett, accessed 14 November 2026.

[3] Negar Mottahedeh, *Whisper Tapes: Kate Millett in Iran,* has been translated into Persian by Arash Azizi (Naakojaa, 2026), bringing the text full circle.

[4] I have written about the representation of Iranian art in the US exhibitions and museum collections in: 'Iranian or Not: Sociopolitical Conditions of Art Representation,' *Transkulturelle Wechselwirkungen durch Künste und Soziales: Iranische Diaspora in Europa und darüber hinaus* (Transcultural Interplay Through Art and Social Life: Iranian Diaspora in Europe and Beyond), eds. Shirin Nowrousian, Michael Hofmann, and Tobias Schickhaus (Würzburg, Germany: Königshausen & Neumann, 2022), 183-89.

officially condemned by the state in the worst case or ignored in the best case, yet unlike film production, which requires state permits, individuals can create and disseminate video under the state radar. Art institutions abroad are equally reluctant to engage with art from Iran because international sanctions effectively prevent financial transactions with Iranian citizens—not by explicitly banning them, but by making them too complicated.[5] Without institutional support, Iranian contemporary art exists precariously on personal drives and in the cloud, briefly appearing in private galleries and alternative art spaces that cannot sustain it long-term. Iranian contemporary art, in general, and video art, in particular, exist in a state of disidentification as described by José Esteban Muñoz: artists negotiate and subvert a public sphere that fundamentally excludes or erases them, and, rather than choosing between assimilation and total rejection, they tactically work "on, with, and against" dominant ideology.[6]

Writing about Iranian art is an act of solidarity with artists marginalized at home and abroad by ideological restrictions and the sanctions regime, which prevent their participation in the international art industry. As an act of mediation, my writing is informed by my experience of Soviet totalitarianism and its lingering effects, including Russian support for the Iranian regime. I am neither a 'native informant' nor an impassioned chronicler; I have followed my subjects from the Green Movement (2009) to Woman Life Freedom (2022), through mass upheavals, life-changing transitions, and endless media transmissions. In this essay, I focus on performance and video art by two women artists—one based in Iran, the other in the diaspora—to reflect, through a transhistorical lens of art, on women's societal positions and lived experiences during the first quarter of the twenty-first century, at two critical junctures of 2009 and 2022.

Political restrictions, rather than ideological differences, largely shape the advantages and disadvantages of twenty-first-century creators in Iran and the diaspora. Creators based in Iran navigate ideological censorship in their expressions and exhibitions, and must overcome international sanctions to participate internationally. Diaspora artists experience censorship and mobility restrictions to a lesser degree. Nostalgia for the 'lost state,' palpable in the art of the generation that emigrated around 1979, is less strongly felt by those born after the Revolution, whether in Iran or abroad. Viewing societal transformations through the lens of artworks activates a transhistorical approach that enfolds the past and unfolds into the future, unlike factual documentation or social media imagery, which are fixed in time. This transhistoricity distinguishes the object of my study —video art—from visual culture studies that survey collective expressions during times of

[5] The US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) classifies art as information and therefore exempts it from sanctions. However, exhibiting material art objects, such as paintings and sculptures, requires services (crating, shipping, insurance) that are not exempt, effectively precluding art exchanges with Iran. Video art is closest to 'information' in its free circulation, yet institutions are reluctant to show art without remuneration to the artist. To pay an honorarium or purchase a video for the collection, the institution would have to apply for an OFAC license.

[6] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

sociopolitical upheaval.[7] The artists and artworks are selected as subjective indicators of sociopolitical events and conditions, yet selections are made with awareness of other possibilities; as a curator working with this material for two decades, I have seen hundreds of videos and screened dozens, always programming with quantitative parameters in mind and treating art as information linking to other information, rather than an aesthetic value with commodity potential.

By taking a focused comparative approach in this article, I seek a deeper understanding of how symbolic and cultural systems intersect in the political. Methodologically, I rely on the concept of matriculture, which suits discussing women's positions in contexts where feminist practice and discourse arrived amid foreign influence and extreme, enforced ideological shifts, such as in Iran. In such contexts, framing struggles for women's rights as 'feminist' may not be acceptable to all factions with a stake in these struggles. The intersectional notion of matriculture allows us to expand methodological perspectives beyond Western-origin feminism.

Nazr: A Hopeful Beginning



Illustration 1a: A Performance for a Nazr, A Nazr for a Performance, *2003*
© Jinoos Taghizadeh

An artist, writer, and activist based in Tehran until 2022, Jinoos Taghizadeh arranged *A Performance for a Nazr, A Nazr for a Performance* in Isfahan, Iran, on September 7, 2003,

[7] Pamela Karimi, *Women, Art, Freedom: Artists and Street Politics in Iran* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2024).

in front of the Sheik Lotfollah Mosque, a private sanctuary designed for women of the court of Shah Abbas (Ill.1a-c). The artist sold her wedding ring and bought seven boxes of pears, spreading the fruit on a long white cloth in front of the mosque as an offering for Nazr—a solemn ritual pledge, often involving a charitable gift, conditional on a desire being fulfilled. The terms of a Nazr must remain secret.



Illustration 1b: A Performance for a Nazr, A Nazr for a Performance, *2003 © Jinoos Taghizadeh*



Illustration 1c: A Performance for a Nazr, A Nazr for a Performance, *2003 © Jinoos Taghizadeh*

At first, passersby hesitated to approach because fruit is not a usual offering for Nazr, and certainly not in such a performative arrangement. Before long, people began asking questions. The answer, indicating Nazr, fit a known cultural idiom and needed no further explanation—the crowd cleared the fruit, the public completing both the performance and the ritual. Participation meant enacting one pledge while undoing another, the artist's marriage. The public's role in the ritual manifested the performance in the public sphere, unwittingly converting a religious act into a secular one. The secret pledge is an aporia, an 'impassable path' indicating a fundamental contradiction—the secret itself is the message, an open secret of the impossibility of free expression, dutifully ingested by the people along with womanly bodies of sweet pears. The performance is documented in black-and-white photographs from a distance, as dispassionate photo-reportage. It testifies to the hidden messages, negotiations, and sacrifices of women's lives, and to the magnitude of those sacrifices and resistances that would unfold in the following decades. It also demonstrates disidentification from state-sanctioned rituals by appropriating a sacrificial act encoded in the dominant symbolic system and publicly subverting it by imbuing the performance with a private meaning.

The patriarchal theocracy that came to power in Iran after 1979 has systematically excluded women from the nation's public sphere—the mandatory hijab law, formally instituted in 1981-83, is the most visible signifier of this exclusion, prohibiting women from self-determining their public appearance. In Iran, public expressions of gender are treated as a public, not a private, affair, and legislated as such. The symbolic system, backed by religious edicts, gradually pushed women out of the state's cultural system

through regulations that prevented the expression and display of female-coded attributes in the public sphere, including the body, voice, and, eventually, public agency. In this situation, women begin 'veiling' their expressions in officially acceptable forms, giving these acts a subversive meaning that is activated in solidarity with other women. This public activation may be obvious, as in uncovering hair during the Woman Life Freedom demonstrations, or latent, as in Taghizadeh's *Nazr*.

Nazr was Taghizadeh's early performance during a relatively calm period of reforms in Iran, which began in 1997 under President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami and lasted until the election of the conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president in 2005. This period coincided with the emergence of a new Web-based infrastructure for art production and dissemination worldwide, spreading rapidly through technological networks that linked producers and spectators, blurring the boundaries between the previously distinct art domains of production and spectatorship, and, in some cases, allowing direct access to art without institutional mediation. The World Wide Web expanded this loop of production and spectatorship beyond national boundaries. Transnational media expansion, among other factors, contributed to the ongoing denationalization of art representations and to shifting identities defined by variable contextualization rather than a fixed place of origin.

In a state where public speech is legislated, communication through contemporary art, often opaque and requiring interpretation and decoding, becomes a potentially freer mode of expression. The language of contemporary visual art requires a reading steeped in multi-layered interpretation of visual referents, so it is less direct than mass-distributed film or literature. Some references may read clearly in one context—such as Nazr in Iran—and remain opaque in others, as the hidden message of Taghizadeh's performance would be undetectable in a context unfamiliar with Muslim rituals. Video, as hybrid media, intersects referents and strategies developed in film, television, music videos, home videos, pornography, closed-circuit video surveillance, advertisements and infomercials, various visual art traditions, and social media. Significations of ready-made imagery appropriated from these sources are contextually reconfigured into another language that is fully operational only within art discourse, and decoding it requires mediation. The bottleneck of art discourse greatly narrows this meta-language's reach but also sharpens its meaning; thus, inflected, it feeds back into the broader spectrum of film, television, home videos, etc. This feedback ensures art circulates beyond the art world and broadens its potential audiences. Moreover, visual art has far fewer audiences, and its far fewer venues do not lend themselves to mass consumption. What, in another context, may come across as exclusivity, also provides an advantage for freer expression, since video makers in Iran do not have to reckon with the same degree of supervision as filmmakers and writers; videos are largely self-made and self-released under the radar of censorship, and the art spaces in which they are shown do not generate the kind of publicity that film festivals do. Moreover, art galleries maintain private viewing rooms where censors may not be invited. 'Video' becomes 'video art' within the art institution, but as it circulates on the Web, it can also survive without that institutional infrastructure. In a state where

public art institutions are utterly divorced from private art production and consumption, the Internet's loopholes and proxies open a unique public space for art and discourse within the country, as well as an avenue for global circulation.

Communications via illegal satellite channels and VPNs connecting to the Web helped create the conditions for video to emerge as a perfect medium for transnational art circulation.[8] Generational, political, and technological shifts in Iran at the turn of the millennium, which have continued into the first decade of the 21st century, positioned video and performance art as sites of resistance not only to the state-regulated cultural realm but also to the market system that, during the second period of relative reforms of the Rouhani years (2013-2021), became loosely aligned with the state. The growing prominence of Iranian art coincided with the art world's global expansion and with conscious efforts to globalize art discourse. Toward the end of the Reform period, activist artists in Iran found themselves subject to a softer and more sophisticated form of censorship: "Political art content did not disappear through prohibition; it disappeared through taste-making, market incentives, institutional preferences, and the gradual normalization of depoliticized artistic production," as Taghizadeh assesses these years in hindsight.[9] Yet women felt this 'soft' repression even more acutely, as it was stifling hopes of freedom of the generation.

Roof Piece Tehran: The Unfolding of the Movement

The widespread desire for social liberties surged in 2009 with a mass uprising against the contested re-election of hard-liner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president. Protests swelled into what became known as the Green Movement, demanding reforms and freedoms and preceding the Arab Spring that engulfed the entire region the following year. Other scholars have addressed these events; here, we filter them through the lens of women-made video art, seeking truth in images that capture the movement's semantics.[10]
As Millet's tapes captured glimpses of the acoustic horizon of the 1979 Revolution, the soundscape of 2009 is recognizable in calls for freedom reverberating from rooftops across the country. Appropriating the regime's own slogans — such as 'Death to the Dictator' and 'Allahu Akhbar' — people turned them against the regime through shared

[8] Susan Habib and Helia Darabi, *Video Art as a Rising Medium in Iranian Contemporary Art*, paper presented at the International Congress of Aesthetics, Ankara, Turkey, 2007.
[9] Jinoos Taghizadeh, email correspondence with author, June 2, 2026.
[10] See Navid Pourmokhtari, *Iran's Green Movement: Everyday Resistance, Political Contestation, and Social Mobilization* (Routledge, 2021); Seyed Amir Niakooee, 'Explaining the Crisis of the Green Movement in Iran (2009-2017),' *Democracy and Security*, 21(3), 2025, 229-259; Pouya Alimagham, *Contesting the Iranian Revolution: The Green Uprising* (Cambridge University Press, 2020); and Marija Antic, 'Transnational Iranian Poetics of Resistance: the Green Movement and Iranian Women's Agency in Sepideh Farsi's "Red Rose" (2014),' *Feminist Media Studies*, 23(7), 2023, 3498–3514: URL: https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2022.2126870 , accessed October 25, 2026.

public sentiment, using the same disidentifying strategy that turned Taghizadeh's Nazr into a performance. A rooftop, like a car, is an interstitial space connecting the privacy of the house to the publicness of the street. Nightly gatherings of entire neighborhoods on rooftops added new sound waves to the regular calls to prayer from the mosques.

This sociopolitical soundscape inspired Anahita Razmi, a German-born Iranian diaspora artist based in London, to transpose Trisha Brown's *Roof Piece* score to Tehran (Ill.2). First performed in downtown New York in 1971, the score calls for eight to twelve performers, each positioned on a rooftop within sight of another. It begins with a series of improvised movements by one performer, echoed by another, with the movements transferred by sight from one to the other until the chain of bodily transmissions of the theme and its variations, emerging with each repetition, reaches the last performer, completing the chain of transmissions in a kind of 'semaphore' body language.



Illustration 2: Roof Piece Tehran, *2011 © Anahita Razmi*

Brown's piece, too, is an echo of another, from another revolutionary time: *Symphony of Sirens* by composer Arseny Avraamov, first presented in Baku, across the Caspian Sea from Iran, in 1922, on the fifth anniversary of the October Revolution. Avraamov conducted from a rooftop with the help of multicolored flags, his orchestra consisting of "all the ships of GosCasp, VoenFlot, and UzbekCasp, including all small boats and vessels (…) all the mobile machines, local trains, battleships, and repaired steam engines (sic.), cadets, students, and professional musicians, (…) artillery, machine guns, airplanes and hydroplanes" maneuvering throughout the city and harbor and making sounds at

designated intervals, converging into a totality of revolutionary march.[11] This idea of social choreography drifted away from the Soviet state-sanctioned propagandistic mass events toward America's Civil Rights struggles, and, disassociated from state ideology and management, infiltrated the visual language of socially engaged art practices, including Brown and Razmi's pieces. Both artists used spatial and temporal replacement to interpret the score.

Brown takes Avraamov out of the Soviet revolutionary Baku and into individualized grassroots resistance in downtown New York of the 1970s, as Razmi takes Brown's piece from the urban density punctuated by the iconic wood-clad water towers straddling New York's rooftops to Tehran's pollution-hazed blue horizon and the low-slung aerial terrain of houses anchored in the sky by satellite dishes. More precisely, from the democratic public-private space of a New York rooftop to Tehran's highly restricted airspace. Both artists plugged into the network of resistance. Razmi's *Roof Piece Tehran*, 2011, is realized via a series of transpositions—first, the transposition of the protesters' voices into the silence of the dancers' movements; second, the time conversion that links the event retrospectively to the historical and neo-avant-gardes via Brown's score; and third, the translation of the live performance to video, one loop for each of the twelve dancers, to be projected on twelve screens. This shifting spatiality accentuates the diaspora artist's strategic location, which can shift from inside Iran to the outside, including possibilities of wider circulation: *Roof Piece Tehran* was first presented at Frieze Art Fair in London in 2011.

Video is a nimble medium that can move from large screens to small ones and back, and the performative transmissions discussed above reappear in the short viral video posted on social media as the next wave of resistance engulfed the country. It features five adolescent girls in casual Western-style clothing, their hair flowing and faces visible, dancing to *Calm Down* by Rema and Selena Gomez in the courtyard of Tehran's Ekbatan housing complex sometime in March 2023. The girls' choreography is deliberate, as is their choice of site for this performance video: a courtyard visible to the residents of the high-rises but not from the street. The camera is static and low-angled to emphasize the dancers' physicality while also capturing the site and situating the dance in a specific, recognizable location where we know such dancing is forbidden. The performance's impact was amplified on social media, as people in Iran and abroad expressed solidarity with the Iranian girls by posting their own videos of the dance and echoing their defiance across platforms, virtually replicating the visual communication through movement in Brown's and Razmi's pieces. The Ekbatan girls' dance manifested continuity of women's resistance through hybrid physical-digital, decentralized, loosely networked, and fast-shifting acts that gain traction on social media. These acts tie into a broader resistance

[11] Arseny Avraamov first published the instructions, or text score, for *Symphony of Sirens* in Turkish in Baku's three local newspapers on the day before the event, November 6, 1922. See Miguel Molina Alarcón, *Sound Experiments in the Russian Avant Garde: Original Documents and Reconstructions of 72 Key Works of Music, Poetry, and Agitprop from the Russian Avant Gardes (1908–1942)* (London: ReR Megacorp, 2008), 20.

that operates interstitially between identifiable protest events and everyday life.[12] Such performative defiance testifies to matricultural networks operating beyond identifiable political or social platforms, official or alternative.

Like Razmi's *Roof Piece Tehran*, Taghizadeh's video *Good Night* is emblematic of 2009 and foreshadows its aftermath (Ill.3). As the Green Movement swelled into mass demonstrations, the artist captured its hopes in the image of a white cradle with a still baby inside, swaddled in a white shroud edged in lace, set against a green wall on a red floor—the colors of the Iranian flag. We see a hand rocking the cradle and hear a female voice sing revolutionary anthems, usually sung by marching men, in the soft cadence of a lullaby, confounding political awakening with sleep. This tension holds for twenty-two minutes of the video's duration.



Illustration 3: Good Night, *2011 © Jinoos Taghizadeh*

The baby's cradle stands in for the emblem at the center of the Islamic Republic's flag, designed and adopted after the 1979 Revolution. In its stylized interlocking crescents, the emblem contains the Qur'anic phrase *lā ilāha illā allāh* ("There is no god but God"); the central pillar is inspired by the pillar of balance in Surah al-Hadid. Visually, it also

[12] Rana Dadpour and Hosna J. Shewly, 'Dancing *in-between*: Interstitial Feminist Defiance in Iran's Public and Digital Spaces.' *Third World Quarterly* 46 (10): 1229-48.

resembles stylized plant forms that carry symbolic meanings: the tulip (martyrdom), the lotus flower (peace and enlightenment), and the pomegranate (life). The edges of the middle white band of the flag are 'embroidered' with the phrase *Allāhu akbar* ('God is great'), written twenty-two times in Kufic *maʿqel ī* script. The number 22 signifies the Islamic state's victory on the 22nd day of the 11th month of the Iranian calendar, and thus the twenty-two-minute duration of Taghizadeh's video. The substitution of the central emblem of the birth of the theocratic mythos with a baby's cradle—universally a matricultural symbol—is the central subversion of this piece. As a hand rocks the cradle, it rocks the central pillar off balance while the female voice sings the sacred sound of Islam: *Allah*, *Allah*, *Allah*. Its impact is heightened by our awareness of its transgressiveness—women are forbidden from singing in public—and the songs in the video are decidedly of a public nature—yet who can silence a lullaby sung to a child?

Despite its evident transgressiveness, the video was first shown in 2009 as part of the artist's solo exhibition *Rock*, *Paper*, *Scissors* at Aaran Gallery in Tehran, on the 30th anniversary of the Revolution. The long duration and repetitive rocking of the unchanging heraldic image evoke the year's pent-up energy, swelling into mass uprising and then receding into stagnant suspense—Iran's unchanging regime, punctuated by resistive mobilizations in 2009, 2017, 2019, and 2022, followed by waves of state violence. *Good Night* holds the future that was yet to arrive years after its making in 2009—the Woman Life Freedom uprising of 2022 and violent state repression that followed. As a doctor from South Tehran recounts the massacres of February 2026:

> A breastfeeding mother was holding her baby when security forces opened fire on their car… (…) They arrived at the hospital in that same vehicle, riddled with bullets. The bullet passed through the baby's hand and into the mother's chest.[13]

Taghizadeh's long-duration videos unfold the *longue durée* of history, such as *Fatness upon Fatness-100* (2017), created during the year of the economic protests against the ruling classes who continue to enrich themselves at the expense of ordinary citizens (Ill. 4). Like *Good Night*, it begins with an emblematic image—a powdery panoramic postcard view of Tehran fills the screen until a fork starts carving it from a corner and keeps excavating until the image crumbles. Over the next hour, the artist consumes the sugary slab of the picture cake, eating and speaking with her mouth full of contradictions that evoke the overwhelming nausea of life in a society under constant state repression affecting everyday existence. Speaking out is a life-threatening act in her situation, and choking on words is a metaphor for the ideological suppression of free speech. This forced entropic consumption points to the metabolic rift between society and its government:

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[13]Roxana Saberi and Fatemeh Jamalpour, '40 Iranian Doctors and Nurses Describe a Massacre,' *The New York Times*, February 25, 2026; URL: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2026/02/25/opinion/iran-protests-doctors.html , accessed October 25, 2026.

this Marxist concept of disruption of the life-sustaining cycles of labor and production between humans and nature is amplified in totalitarian societies, where the ecological disruption is intensified by an ideological disruption of exchanges between the people and the state.[14]



Illustration 4: Fatness upon Fatness - 100 © *Jinoos Taghizadeh*

The next stage of the ongoing struggle against the regime that erupted in the Woman Life Freedom movement shifted from demands for electoral reforms within the system to an intersectional demand for fundamental systemic change.[15] Emerging in Kurdistan after the murder of a young Kurdish Iranian woman, Jina Mahsa Amini, by the so-called 'morality police' in Tehran on September 16, 2022, the resistance to state repression mobilized various minoritized ethnic and religious groups; it was spearheaded by women and encompassed the working class, enabling its rapid expansion. Engulfing the entire country, the movement spread like fire from the funerary despair of Kurdish women who pulled their hijabs at Mahsa's funeral, through the grassroots organizations and resistance networks that had long operated underground, such as KJAR (The Free Women's Community of Eastern Kurdistan). The movement's titular slogan comes from Iran's Kurdish women's ongoing fight for autonomy: ژن، ژیان، ئازادی. Morphing into the Persian

[14] John Bellamy Foster, 'Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology,' *American Journal of Sociology*, 105 (2), September 1999, 366-405.

[15] For historical analysis of the Woman Life Freedom movement, see Catherine Z. Sameh, 'Woman, Life, Freedom: Iran's Feminist Uprising in Historical and Transnational Perspective,' in Mary Caputi and Patricia Moynagh, eds, *Research Handbook on Feminist Political Thought* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024), 437-447. An important document of the movement appears in the collection of writings by feminist activists in Iran, co-edited by Ghoncheh Ghavami and Bahar Noorizadeh and published anonymously and in translation in *e-flux Journal* #145 (May 2024); URL: https://www.e-flux.com/journal/145, accessed October 21, 2026.

زن، زندگی، آزادی, these words became a rallying cry for yet another resurgence of a long-standing liberation movement dating back to the Persian Constitutional Revolution. Translated as 'Woman Life Freedom,' these words resonated worldwide. This uprising is a significant matricultural event, transcending feminist ideology and asserting every woman's right to live.

Text and speech are the operational principles of Anahita Razmi's video and text objects created as a meditation on Woman Life Freedom in its aftermath, titled آسمانتقسیم‌ناپذیر (*The Indivisible Sky*), 2025 (Ill.5). The video is composed in a videoconferencing format of a grid of multiple screens of 'talking heads' in front of the Green Screen, a bright shade symbolic in Iran and ambivalently associated with both state authority and political dissent.[16] Ethnically and linguistically diverse individuals speak into the camera in Persian, English, and German.



Illustration 5: The Indivisible Sky, *2025 © Anahita Razmi*

The selected texts are writings by women interrogating their societal roles and their feelings as historical events unfold, ranging from the last century to the present, from letters and diaries of an early-twentieth-century modernist painter from Northern

[16] In Islamic tradition, green is revered as the color of the sacred, of life, and the afterlife (the color of garments worn in paradise: Al-Insan: 21), and is associated with the Prophet Muhammad and the mystic figure Al-Khidr ('The Green One'). Anti-colonial, nationalist, and Islamist forces (including Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Islamic Republic of Iran) adopted the color green as their signifying color. Resistance movements in Iran, such as the Green Movement, co-opted this color to signal *their* legitimacy against the state. In all cases, legitimacy is grounded in religion, despite the resistance's largely secular demands. That the verdant green of walled Persian gardens and desert oases becomes a Green Screen, a color replacing the environment in virtual space, is also significant.

Germany, Paula Modersohn-Becker, who writes in her diary on February 20, 1903: "I must learn to express the gentle vibration of things. The curl within them" to an artist in Iran, Koushna Navabi, who reiterates in 2025, "Silent hovering, I close my eyes, my body awakens, restless calm. I push my thoughts beyond borders, I am YOU, you ME, and MeToo."

In the video, words are interchangeable regardless of authorship and origin, affirming an intersectionality that empowered the movement. This interchangeability of languages and messages among speakers reveals Razmi's ability to hold contradictory meanings, transcend representational logic, and communicate shared experiences. Detaching the message from the messenger expands its reach, amplified by media connectivity on one end while remaining anchored in the originary event on the other. The video deliberately pauses identification, creating distance between words and speakers that lets us detach from the situated message's decisive hold and activate it at the time of viewing. As in *Roof Piece Tehran*, transposition from one place to another, or from one person to another, serves as a means of communication and communion.

The Aftermath

The gains of Iran's liberation movements, including the Green Movement and Woman Life Freedom, are both real and symbolic, testifying to an active matriculture in the region. After twenty-five years of struggle, it is no longer unusual for women to appear bareheaded in public spaces; visibility leads to agency, asserting "the bold presence of women globally" that Millett and her comrades dreamt about in 1979.[17] On the other hand, the 2026 war with the US and Israel gave Iran's regime a license to do what it has not done before. What was a hypothetical possibility has become a tested reality: the closure of the Strait of Hormuz at the outbreak of the war in February 2026 gave Iran a strategic external advantage, and the nationwide Internet blackout imposed on February 28 and lasting 88 days shut down the main internal organizing platform and means of communication with the world.

Nondemocratic governments do control information in the public sphere, including the Internet, but despite their intolerance of ideational competition and dissent, few have adopted the extreme strategy of curbing all access to the World Wide Web within their borders.[18] Most nondemocratic governments pursue strategies that combine site bans and Web filtering (state-sanctioned surfing) with limited public access to cyberspace (limited connectivity)—variances in Internet policies depend on whether nondemocratic

[17] See note #1.

[18] See 'Afghanistan's Taliban Bans Internet,' *Reuters*, July 13, 2001, online on multiple sites, such as www.rawa.org/internet.htm. Reporters Without Borders issues an annual report, *Enemies of the Internet* (http://12mars.rsf.org/2014-en), which, in 2014, describes policies on Internet use in Bahrain, Belarus, China, Cuba, Ethiopia, Iran, India, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Vietnam, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, USA, and Uzbekistan.

leaderships ground their legitimacy in economic or ideological factors.[19] State-sanctioned surfing had been Iran's policy until 2026, even though the specter of an Iranian intranet (a national network that is not connected to the World Wide Web, also known as the 'Halal Internet') has loomed since the early 2000s.[20] Both the hardware and software of the Internet depend on the capacity of various societal entities to channel ideas through policies, including legislation, bureaucratic constraints, and normative practices.[21] As information passes through these regimens of control, its denomination may change; for instance, an aesthetic value may be converted into a social value and vice versa. This study is a limited examination of conversions between ideological and aesthetic systems of art production and circulation in a restricted and volatile Iranian context.

Video art resonates with, yet also offers a different dimension to the most widely circulated mass-media representations of Iran's liberation movements. Like art, viral social media transposes raw lived experience into the symbolic order of shared significations and perceptions. A distinctive semiological feature of mass-media representations of Iranian resistance movements is their conflation with femicide, communicated through countless media images. Neda Agha Soltan, a student murdered by a Basij on June 20, 2009, during the protests of the Green Movement, became its icon through a 40-second mobile phone video recording of the last moments of her life disseminated via the Internet. The video's composition aligns with the iconicity of martyrdom, and recording her transition from life to death transubstantiated Neda into a symbol of the movement. Her name, which in Persian means 'voice' or 'divine message,' contributes to her transformation from a person into a symbol of the ideological and spiritual struggle against oppression, and establishes, rather than disrupts, the continuity of that struggle with the revolutionary ideation:

> Her death, enclosing the summa of the sufferings of the reformist movement, expressed the strength and determination of the dissidents and spiritually anticipated the earthly eschatology of the regime change, when the "*mostazafin*" [the "weakened," or the oppressed in Ayatollah Khomeini's discourse of Shiism with a Marxist inflection of Ali Shariati] will triumph over the "*mostakbirine*" [the "arrogant," or the oppressor in the above-mentioned

[19] Geoffry L. Taubman, 'State-sanctioned Surfing, Limited Connectivity, and Varied Access to Cyberspace in Nondemocracies,' *Asian Perspective* 27, no. 2 (2003): 105–140. Case studies exemplify China's state-sanctioned surfing as guided by economic policies, whereas limited connectivity in Cuba is an ideologically driven policy that also stunts economic development.

[20] Reformist president Hassan Rouhani, elected in June 2013, did not immediately reverse this course, stating that a national news and information broadband network was on the agenda for 2015, its implementation aided by the Chinese business expertise. See 'Iran: Cyberspace Ayatollahs,' in *Enemies of the Internet* report by the Reporters Without Borders, URL: http://12mars.rsf.org/2014-en/2014/03/11/iran-the-revolutionary-guards-the-supreme-council-for-cyberspace-and-the-working-group-for-identifying-criminal-content , last accessed October 25, 2026.

[21] Thomas Risse-Kappen, 'Ideas Do Not Flow Freely,' *International Organization* 48, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 185–214.

dialectic].[22]

This underlying eschatology of femicide extends to the precedent that triggered the Woman Life Freedom movement: the murder of a young Kurdish Iranian woman, Jina Mahsa Amini. The photograph of Amini, unconscious and connected to a ventilator, taken by journalist Niloofar Hamedi, became the originary image of the movement, and interpretations of her image proliferated in many forms after her death. Femicide is transposed into martyrdom within the symbolic order, operating within a theological idiom despite the movement's opposition to theocracy and its secular goals.[23]

Video art emerging from the resistance offers an alternative to the mass-media iconicity of femicide as martyrdom, as it appropriates the symbolic into the personal, secular realm, speaking about life rather than glorifying sacrificial death: Taghizadeh transposes Nazr into her performance of personal desire, and Razmi uses words spoken among many people as a manifestation of living exchange. Many Iranian women artists carry out this reorientation from the woman-as-martyr toward woman as a living, speaking, and acting being.

Why do so many women work in video in Iran? Some of the reasons mirror the conditions that made video the medium of choice for women in Euro-America in the 1970s: accessible means of production, portability, weak institutional barriers that enabled women to make this emerging medium their own, and the meager commodity value of video in the art market at the time of its emergence, lessening competition in a marketplace dominated by men. In Iran, video largely escaped regulatory oversight, and sharing was easy through mass media channels outside art-specific circulation, whereas governmental permissions were necessary to ship art objects such as paintings and sculptures. Years of oppression made women in Iran especially adept at locating the cracks in the system and filling these interstitial spaces with content that would pry them open, virtually chipping at the ideological stronghold. As Taghizadeh notes in her reflection on Iranian video art, "video was not simply a medium. It was a space."[24]

In the aftermath of Woman Life Freedom, it becomes increasingly evident that fighting for women's rights within the Islamic Republic's legal system, which is rooted in Sharia Law

[22]Andrea Duranti, 'The Green Screen: Neda and the Lost Voices,' *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013), 1344–1370: URL: https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1554/930 , accessed 14 November 2026.

[23] These goals and expectations are outlined in an anonymous, open-ended survey of 26 Iranian women conducted in September 2022 and presented in the study by Kelly-Ann Allen, Saeed Pahlevasharif, Shiqi Dong, and Steven Roberts, 'Being a Woman in Iran: Lived Constraints, Desired Change, and Calls for Allyship,' *Women's Studies International Forum* 117 (2026), URL: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2026.103326, last accessed October 25, 2026.

[24] Jinoos Taghizadeh, 'Making Art in the Void: Iranian Women Artists between Repression and Creation,' presentation in S4P (Science for Peace) Zoom session, *Iranian Women and Everyday Resistance: Civil Dissobedience , Artistic Defiance, and Activism under Political Repression*, June 10, 2026; transcript published in this issue of *Matrix*.

and privileges men in matters of marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance, faces the dilemma of Lyotard's *différend*, indicating an unresolved conflict in which the parties involved operate under unreconcilable sets of rules, causing "the misrecognition" indicated in the opening quote of this essay.[25] They operate in different registers, which intersect during sociopolitical upheavals like the uprisings discussed in this study. In their aftermath, "We're in a very weak phase, a period of reaction. Yet philosophy thought it had done with the problem of origins. It was no longer a question of starting or finishing. The question was rather, what happens "in between"?[26] Systemic changes, even if not immediately detectable, occur in between movements. The 2026 information blackout marks a watershed moment, returning resistance to grassroots organizing. Despite its apparent ephemerality, video art remains a resilient, enduring medium, supported by advances in digital image production and circulation, and capable of shapeshifting to whatever communication channels open in the future. It holds a mirror up to the ongoing struggle for women's rights and a democratic society.

Biography

Dr. Sandra Skurvida is an art historian and curator working in contemporary art and media. She has published extensively on art and information exchange with Iran, curated numerous video screenings worldwide, and convened an international symposium, 'Iran: Art and Discourse,' at the Asia Society, New York. She teaches at FIT-SUNY.

Illustrations

1. Jinoos Taghizadeh, *A Performance for a Nazr*, *A Nazr for a Performance*, 2003. Performance documentation, b&w photography by Ahmad Kechechian. Courtesy of the Artist.
2. Anahita Razmi, in collaboration with Hasti Goudarzi, *Roof Piece Tehran*, 2011. Video installation, 12 video loops, 18' 11'' each, 2011. The Emdash Award 2011 / Commissioned by Frieze Foundation for Frieze Projects 2011. Video stills. Courtesy of the Artist.
3. Jinoos Taghizadeh, *Good Night*, 2009. Single-channel video, 22'. Video still. Courtesy of the Artist.
4. Jinoos Taghizadeh, *Fatness upon Fatness-100*, 2017. Single-channel video, 30'. Video stills. Courtesy of the Artist.
5. Anahita Razmi, *آسمان تقسیم‌ناپذیر* (*The Indivisible Sky*), 2025. Video Installation, stills. Courtesy of the Artist.

[25] See note #1.
[26] Gilles Deleuze, 'Mediators,' *Negotiations: 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York, Columbia University Press, 1995), 121-134.

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Mending for Unity

GLORIA MACHER

Abstract

In a time marked by war, hardened borders, and the displacement of millions, direct language can collapse complexity into accusation or slogan. Poetry allows another kind of speech to emerge. In Mending for Unity, *language becomes labour: a figure stitches across a vast cloth that resembles the world itself, moving over continents, fault lines, and oceans, trying to loosen the seams that divide lands and people. Each thread attempts repair, even as the work wounds the hands that perform it. Metaphor and myth become a form of protection, carrying what cannot safely be said into the fabric of the poem, until the act of mending itself exacts its cost.*

The poem speaks through metaphor and myth, allowing vulnerability to appear without complete exposure. What cannot be said directly is stitched into the fabric of the poem itself.

Keywords: fabric art, poetry, metaphor

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Resumé

À une époque marquée par la guerre, le durcissement des frontières et le déplacement de millions de personnes, le langage direct risque de réduire la complexité à une simple accusation ou à un slogan. La poésie permet à une autre forme de parole d'émerger. Dans Mending for Unity *[« Raccommoder pour l'unité »], le langage devient travail : une silhouette coud sur une vaste étoffe qui figure le monde lui-même, parcourant continents, failles géologiques et océans, cherchant à défaire les coutures qui séparent les terres et les peuples. Chaque fil tente une réparation, bien que ce travail blesse les mains qui l'accomplissent. La métaphore et le mythe deviennent une forme de protection, tissant dans la trame du poème ce qui ne peut être exprimé ouvertement sans danger — jusqu'à ce que l'acte de raccommoder finisse par exiger son tribut.*

Le poème s'exprime par la métaphore et le mythe, permettant à la vulnérabilité de se manifester sans pour autant être totalement exposée. Ce qui ne peut être dit directement est cousu dans la trame même du poème.

Mots-clés : art textile, poésie, métaphore

*****

Her infinitely long fingers struggled to guide the 13,000-kilometer cloth whenever her hands trembled with the constant roar of greed, envy, and selfishness moving through the world. The fabric lay across her lap like warm, breathing, broken skin ready to be healed.

She began at Polaris, planting small yellow stitches to close the tiny holes made by points of light that asked nothing in return. There, the thread obeyed. It did not snag.

As her needle moved south, through boreal dark and permafrosted memory stretching across Canada into the vast quiet of Siberia, the weave thickened. Ridges rose where none should exist. She smoothed them with blue backstitches, tracing the long breath of the Atlantic Ocean, touching the inland tension of the Great North, trying to erase divisions.

The cloth resisted.
It preferred tension.

She stitched along the planet's old wounds, across mountain spines like the Andes and the Himalayas, never fully healed. Cities flickered like constellations beneath glass as she, through her spectacles, tried to remind the Congo Basin and the Amazon River that they were once one.

At the Rio Grande, her needle struck resistance. Red surfaced, sudden and metallic, then vanished into the flow as if the water had learned to forget the brown bodies, clashing into a dissonant symphony of agony. She laid gold along the lower edge to silence the noise. But gold demanded entry. It pierced her as easily as the cloth.

The canvas gleamed.
Her hands did not.

She turned east, where time layered itself without mercy, dust over dust, empire over ruin across the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. Lines refused to stay buried. They rose through her stitches, crossing and recrossing through cities that had outlived their names. She worked slowly, not erasing but softening, coaxing edges to forget their sharpness.

Across the largest ocean, islands surfaced like unfinished thoughts, scattered from Hawaii to the Philippines. She circled them in green. Still, thin poles pierced their shores. Symbols strained against the wind.

Salt entered her wounds.
The sea accepted everything.

She stitched over waters burdened with claim, the South China Sea, and over lands opened too many times, from the forests of the Congo Basin to the heated margins of the Persian Gulf. The fabric tightened wherever memory refused to settle.

The more she stitched,
the wider the holes became.

At last she set aside the gold. She chose a quieter thread and stitched against the grain over mountains, through cities, across places that insisted on division. She did not follow borders. She crossed them.

For a moment, the fabric loosened.
The world seemed to breathe.

She imagined it whole, with crossings that did not consume those who made them. Inland seas like the Mediterranean returning names instead of erasing them. Places torn open, from Ukraine, Gaza, Haiti, to Sudan, closing without scar.

But the tremors returned. Seams reasserted themselves. Markers multiplied. Rust deepened. Her hands faltered. The cloth took what it needed.

Still she stitched.

Until one morning her dominant hand no longer answered her. Swollen, darkened, it seemed less her own than something claimed by the fabric.

It was taken.
Without ceremony.

She stopped mending.
But the borders continued to form.

Yet somewhere in the folds of the cloth, her soft, luminous lines persisted, faintly attempting to erase what the world insisted on keeping.



Figure 1: Untitled, *2026* © *Dipti Gupta*

Biography

Gloria Macher is an award-winning author and graduate of McGill University and Université de Montréal. She has published eight books, including one translated into French. Her honors include the 2014 International Latino Book Award and finalist distinctions for Ibero-American literary prizes. Her writing appears in Canadian journals and international festivals.

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Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies

https://journal.networkonculture.ca/index.php/matrix/index

Being and Becoming Kin

with an Ancient Matricultural Artefact

MIHAELA ENACHE

Abstract

My identity story had started long before I was aware I had an identity, long before I was aware I had a story. It started with my ancestors, born on a beautiful piece of land at the crossroads between Orient and Occident in southeastern Europe: Romania. In my adulthood, when I immigrated to New Zealand, I wanted to forget where I was born and start life anew. Communism had imprinted a painful scar on my being. But I could not forget. Anything. My memory was etched with stories in my mother tongue, with images of my mother and father, my grandmothers and grandfathers, a house like a train full of children, my childhood village, river and secular forest, cherry trees and freedom to explore. Everything was still vivid and needed to be attuned. So, I brought them to the Land of the Long White Cloud. I encapsulated them in a matricultural Romanian artefact called ia, *a blouse I made with my own hands, an agentic nonhuman who speaks in symbols and meanings. She speaks about*

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history, feminine power and authority, strength and creativity. She is my armour. Through ia, *I found my place in Aotearoa. She and I became kin.*

Keywords: traditional Romanian blouse *ia*, cultural artefacts, sewing, Romanian matriculture, communism

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Résumé

L'histoire de mon identité a commencé bien avant que je ne prenne conscience d'avoir une identité, bien avant que je ne réalise que j'avais une histoire. Elle a pris racine chez mes ancêtres, nés sur une terre magnifique au carrefour de l'Orient et de l'Occident dans le sud-est de l'Europe : la Roumanie. Lorsque j'ai émigré en Nouvelle-Zélande à l'âge adulte, j'ai voulu oublier mon lieu de naissance et recommencer ma vie à zéro. Le communisme avait laissé une cicatrice douloureuse sur mon être. Mais je ne pouvais rien oublier. Absolument rien. Ma mémoire était imprégnée de récits dans ma langue maternelle, d'images de ma mère et de mon père, de mes grands-parents, d'une maison semblable à un train rempli d'enfants, de mon village natal, de sa rivière et de sa forêt séculaire, de cerisiers et de cette liberté d'explorer. Tout était resté si vif, appelant à être mis en harmonie. Alors, j'ai emporté tout cela avec moi au « Pays du long nuage blanc ». J'ai tout encapsulé dans un artefact matriculturel roumain : la ia, *une blouse que j'ai confectionnée de mes propres mains — une entité non humaine, dotée d'agentivité, qui s'exprime par des symboles et des significations. Elle parle d'histoire, de pouvoir et d'autorité féminins, de force et de créativité. Elle est mon armure. Grâce à la* ia, *j'ai trouvé ma place en Aotearoa. Elle et moi sommes devenues parentes.*

Mots-clés : blouse traditionnelle roumaine (*ia*), artefacts culturels, couture, matriculture roumaine, communisme

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As the identity story I write here unfolds, my identity continues to evolve and change, meaningfully entangled with historical, geographical, political, cultural and artefactual threads. Among the last ones mentioned, there is a matricultural artefact, a traditional Romanian blouse called *ia* that represents the core of my identity (Figure 1). This threaded story is written in Aotearoa New Zealand, the Land of the Long White Cloud, where I have

resided for the last twenty-five years, but it started with my ancestors in the other part of the world, hundreds of years ago. Like them, I was born in Romania, a beautiful piece of land, situated in a troublesome location, at the crossroads between Orient and Occident in the southeast of Europe. My identity story is framed within a system of symbols, values, and beliefs passed down by my ancestors and the land upon which *ia* and I were born. My ancestors and birthland, their histories and entanglements, are reflected in *ia* and *ia* is reflected in who I am today.



Figure 1: Ia *and me at Browns Bay beach, Auckland, New Zealand*

Ia is the most significant part of the traditional Romanian costume; it is worn only by women and traditionally made by hand. Historians and ethnologists believe that *ia* dates all the way back to ancient Dacia – a piece of land where Geto-Dacians lived before the Roman Empire conquest in 106 BCE, where Romania is today. Geto-Dacian women were depicted wearing blouses gathered around the neck, similar to the present *ia* (Buzila, 2022), on monuments such as the Tropeum Traiani in Adamclisi (Romania) and Trajan's Column in Rome (Italy).

During the Middle Ages, *ia* was worn by both simple women in villages and noble women, with the design being the same and differing only in the quality of the materials (Cherciu, 2021). During the two world wars, the traditional costume and *ia* were perceived as items of national identity. Queens Elisabeta and Maria of Romania, as well as ladies from the contemporary high society, introduced it to the royal court and promoted the costume, emphasizing its incommensurable historical and artefactual value.

Unfortunately, under communism in Romania (1947-1989), the traditional costume was distorted and mass-produced. The communist ideology wanted everyone to be the same, so regional differences, colours, and designs were neglected, distorted, and amalgamated in a cacophony of fabrics and threads with no regard to the ancient customs. Whereas in the old times every woman wanted to be unique and took pride in her bespoke *ia* in the countryside, communism celebrated uniformity. Mass-produced costumes invaded the market for folkloric dance assembles, choirs, and singers. In the last decades, there has been a revival of traditional sewing and wearing of *ia*, following the ancient patterns and symbols, both in Romania and abroad.

I lived in communist and post-communist Romania well into my adulthood and immigrated with my family to New Zealand in 2001. Romanians experienced an anti-communist revolution in 1989, overturning forty-five years of dictatorship. We, as citizens, thought our country was free and democratic after that historical event, however, 'ghosts' from the communist past had still been around for many decades after the revolution, hence our family's decision to look for a better future elsewhere. I wanted to start life again. Communism had imprinted a painful scar on my being. But I couldn't forget. Anything.

Ia came into my life activated by a feeling of *dor*. *Dor* could be partially translated as a feeling of longing, of missing something or someone, possibly from the Latin *dolor-dolus* meaning desolation or sadness (Antonescu, 2016). However, *dor* is a semantically and culturally complex word that a direct translation cannot fully explain. For example, some linguists attribute a pastoral origin to the word, due to the geographical distances that separate people in love, with the women in villages waiting for the shepherds and sheep to return home (Antonescu, 2016; Istrătescu-Târgovişte; 2009).

Another interpretation of the word *dor* is the long-twisted road that partners engage on, walking towards each other. It is dramatic not because the road is long, but because it is full of obstacles; most of these obstacles are mountains, rivers, hills, and deep valleys, all being interdictions imposed by the communitarian morality code, sometimes the distance between the two being real, and thus conducive to the suffering of a long-distance love that remains unfulfilled (Antonescu, 2016). In my identity story, *ia* encapsulates the feeling of *dor* for family, friends, and the land left behind, a long-distance love for my roots.

After immigration, I discovered my birth country anew, from a vantage point, at a distance of 17 000 km that makes everything more alluring. The entanglement with my birthland, its history, geography, and way of life - especially in the countryside - continues to haunt me and pulls me towards that part of the world. My fascination is partly due to the fact that many crucial historical events were taken out of our school history books by the communist propaganda. As students, we never learned about Romania as a monarchy (1881-1947), about our kings and queens who were influential political figures. They transformed Romania into a prosperous and modern country. The geography of the land also fascinated me. I started to reconnect with the landmarks more deeply, discovering regions of Romania I had not explored before. The history and geography of the country guided me in finding out about the history and locations of my family.

The history of my extended family, similar to that of the many other families, had been marked by political and social events. My maternal great-grandparents were illegal communist fighters before 1947, when the Romanian Communist Party took the power. My maternal grandfather married my grandmother who, on the other side, admired royalty. On my father's side, my grandparents lived in a village and suffered the effects of

forced collectivization; their land and animals were confiscated by the Communist Party, supposedly for the mutual 'benefit' of all citizens and they were exploited in agricultural cooperatives. Family life and close relationships among our family members always prevailed. After the severe economic austerity measures installed in the 1980s, with shortages of food, electricity, fuel, lack of freedom of speech, and restricted overseas travel, family and friendship bonds became closer, evolving into extended networks of material and moral support. My great-grandparents, who had printed flyers of communist propaganda in the attic of their small home, passed away before their ideals of a democratic life were shattered. My maternal grandparents, who were living in the same small house as my great-grandparents, were forced to move into an apartment building when the whole neighbourhood was bulldozed down. The developing infrastructure of the communist regime at the time required more housing for the massive movement of population from the countryside to the big cities, to work in factories. Industrialisation was on its way. My father left his village to take up an apprenticeship in the capital, Bucharest, and became a foreman at Vulcan factory, manufacturing industrial boilers for thermal power plants. Thus, he met my mother.



Figure 2: (upper row, left to right) My mother, grandmother, and aunt; (lower row, left to right) my great-grandfather, me, and my great-grandmother.

I only saw *ia* in all her complexity, essence, and beauty far away from our mutual birthplace. I discovered *ia*'s core symbols, meanings, and agentic nonhuman nature in New Zealand. After immigration, my memory was etched with stories in my mother tongue, with vivid images of my mother and father, grandmothers and grandfathers, a house like a

train full of children, my childhood village, rivers and ancient forests, cherry trees and freedom to explore. Everything was still vivid and needed to be attuned. So, I brought them all to the Land of the Long White Cloud, encapsulated in my *ia*, a blouse I made with my own hands.

More than two decades after immigration, I sewed this blouse during my doctorate, as a part of it, and an embodied material representation of my teacher identity. It is a non-identical replica of an original *ia* that was sewn by an anonymous woman at the end of the nineteenth century. Both blouses, the old and the new, speak about feminine power and authority, strength, ambition, and creativity, traits that my mother, my grandmothers, and my aunts fuelled into my life. I have also been inspired by the anonymous women who sewed *ia* in the past and by women in present times, in Romania and throughout the diaspora, who discover themselves and a new universe through sewing and/or collecting *ia*. Their individual and collective voices embodied in *ia* have carried me far away, both physically and metaphorically (Enache, 2026). *Ia* is my armour, my shield, with apotropaic powers – she protects and gives me the audacity to fly and become more than I have ever been. Through *ia*, I found my place in-between two lands, a subliminal spacetime of belonging. She and I became kin.

Biography

Dr. Mihaela Enache is a lecturer and researcher at Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand. Her scholarship is situated at the intersection of identity studies with critical autoethnography and arts-based methods. She investigates traditional craft as a creative research practice. Mihaela founded *Antipodean Ia*, a community sewing group, in 2019.

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Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies

https://journal.networkonculture.ca/index.php/matrix/index

Making Art in the Void:

Iranian Women Artists Between Repression and Creation

JINOOS TAGHIZADEH

Abstract

The author explores the reason so many Iranian video artists are women. This is the transcript of a presentation given at the Science4Peach Forum panel discussion Iranian Women and Everyday Resistance: Civil Disobedience, Artistic Defiance, and Activism under Political Repression *on 10 June 2026; a link to the live recording is provided below. Reproduced here with permission.*

Keywords: Iranian women, civil disobedience, video art, Iran

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Résumé

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L'auteur explore les raisons pour lesquelles tant de vidéastes iraniens sont des femmes. Voici la transcription d'une intervention prononcée lors d'une table ronde du forum Science4Peach, intitulée Iranian Women and Everyday Resistance: Civil Disobedience, Artistic Defiance, and Activism under Political Repression *(« Les femmes iraniennes et la résistance au quotidien : désobéissance civile, défi artistique et militantisme face à la répression politique »), qui s'est tenue le 10 juin 2026 ; un lien vers l'enregistrement de la séance est disponible ci-dessous. Reproduction autorisée.*

Mots-clés: Femmes iraniennes, désobéissance civile, art vidéo, Iran

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When a curator first asked me, almost fifteen years ago, why so many Iranian video artists are women, I did not know how to answer.

Since then, I have encountered the same question many times from curators, critics, journalists, and historians of contemporary art.

Each time, I found myself thinking about it again. At first, I was surprised by the question itself. I had never looked at my generation of artists through that lens. We were simply making our work. I had not stopped to consider why women seemed to occupy such a large part of this field.

Today, I think I know the answer.

To explain it, I should briefly say what I mean by video art, for those who may not be familiar with it.

Video art is an amphibian medium. It lives between territories. It is not quite cinema, not quite documentary or short film, not quite TV music video, not quite performance, and sometimes it borrows from all of them. It is a hybrid form of moving image that emerged internationally in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when artists began using portable video cameras as artistic tools.

Unlike cinema, video art did not require audiences to sit in a dark theater and follow a narrative from beginning to end, although some works could also be screened like short films.

It could appear on one screen or many screens, become part of an installation, a performance, or an art exhibition. Audiences could enter and leave freely and experience it in different ways.



Figure 1: Proliferation 2 © *Jinoos Taghizadeh*

Historically, video art also carried a critical position against the art market. It challenged the idea of the artwork as a unique object to be owned, collected, and sold. In that sense, it was not simply a cheaper or more accessible medium. It was also part of a larger artistic rebellion against the commodification of art. Of course, like many radical forms, it was later absorbed by the market and became part of museums, collections, and high-value art economies. But in its early logic, video art offered another way to think about art: less as an object, and more as a conceptual event, a transmission, or an experience.

In Iran, video art began to flourish much later, during the early years of the twenty-first century, when contemporary art itself was expanding and finding new audiences during the so-called Golden Years of the reformist period. I say ‘so-called’ because under this hopeful surface there were political suppressions, the serial murders of intellectuals, and the violent crackdown on the student movement.

Yet for contemporary art, new possibilities were emerging. Contemporary art, new media, and international cultural exchange became part of a broader effort to present an image of Iran as modern, cultured, and globally connected. While this opening was limited and often contradictory, it created opportunities that artists were able to use in unexpected ways; almost in ways that exceeded the intentions of those who created them.

For my generation, video was not simply a medium. It was a space.

At that time, cinema and theater were heavily regulated, more than now. Publishing was censored, as it still is. Public speech was restricted, the same. Internet and social media did not exist. Contemporary art spaces were really limited. Many artistic fields were already occupied by established hierarchies, official institutions, academic structures, and mostly male networks that had developed within a modernist art atmosphere. And then, on top of all that, there were the restrictions that had always existed for women: restrictions on our presence, our visibility, and the ways we wanted to express ourselves.

Video existed somewhere in between. It was new, unfamiliar, and largely ignored. It was not important enough to attract the full attention of censorship, and it was not desirable enough for the market to control.

In other words, it was a void.

Or perhaps more accurately, a blind spot.

A territory that neither censorship nor the market had fully occupied.

And women have always known how to work with such spaces.

Throughout history, women have often been excluded from the centers of power, culture, and decision-making. As a result, we learn to survive, communicate, and create in overlooked places.

We learn to find the cracks in the wall and the way to slip through them. We occupy neglected territories. We build communities and languages where others see emptiness.

This is why I believe so many women artists were drawn to video art in Iran.

Of course, this does not mean that men were absent from the field. Many important male artists worked with video, and some of the most influential artists, curators, and promoters of video art in Iran were men. In fact, several of them played a crucial role in presenting younger women artists through screenings, and independent platforms. I am speaking about the bigger picture and about consistency. When we look at the field over time, women maintained an unusually strong presence and played a major role in shaping its language and direction.

It was not because women are naturally more interested in technology or moving images. It was because generations of exclusion had trained us to recognize possibilities in places others overlooked.

At first, perhaps we did not even realize that we had discovered a new territory. We were simply curious. We were willing to experiment. We were not afraid to fail. The toxic perfectionism that often dominates established artistic fields, had not yet colonized this space. We entered it freely and began exploring its possibilities.

Soon, many women artists used video to address women's rights, human rights, social issues, everyday life, memory, body and cultural taboos. But I believe the significance of women's contribution to Iranian video art was not only in the subjects we addressed.

Our achievement was structural.

We recognized an unclaimed territory and transformed it into a space of visibility and agency; finding opportunity of expression inside a space that nobody thought was important.

Of course, the presence of Shirin Neshat, one of the most influential Iranian artists and a pioneering figure in contemporary video art, was important for my generation. Many of us did not necessarily interested in her aesthetic language or artistic approach, but seeing an Iranian woman occupy such a prominent international position in the field was encouraging.

In a different medium, Marjane Satrapi played a similar role. As many of us are still mourning her recent loss, I have found myself thinking again about the impact she had on our generation. We belonged to the same generation. Through the graphic novel, a form situated somewhere between literature, drawing, autobiography, and cinema, she found a language that made certain stories accessible to audiences that traditional literary or cinematic forms had not reached.

There was another important aspect of video art that made it attractive to many Iranian women artists. Unlike painting or sculpture, video could travel.

A painting must be shipped. A sculpture requires transportation, customs paperwork, storage, and considerable expense. In Iran, these processes often involved official permissions and state supervision. Cinema faced its own restrictions. Even when filmmakers succeeded in making independent films, presenting them internationally often

required navigating layers of bureaucracy and official approval. Refusing to do so could create serious problems for the filmmaker.

A video file, on the other hand, could cross borders almost invisibly. It could be copied onto a hard drive, sent online, screened in an alternative space, included in a festival, biennales or shown in an exhibition thousands of kilometers away, often without any direct interaction with official institutions at all.

For artists living in a country that was politically, culturally and legally isolated from much of the world, this was important.

Video allowed our voices to travel before our bodies could.

At the same moment, digital technologies and the internet were becoming more accessible. For the first time, artists could communicate directly with curators, art directors, and audiences beyond national borders. The circulation was still limited and often difficult, but it no longer depended entirely on official institutions.

Video and the internet arrived together. Together they expanded the possibility of independent artistic exchange.

Another important factor was economics.

In Iran there has never been substantial independent public funding for artists. Most resources traditionally came either from state institutions, which often carried ideological expectations, or from commercial galleries and collectors, who generally preferred artworks that are easier to sell and less politically challenging.

Video existed outside both systems.

It was difficult to commodify and difficult to control.

This freedom, of course, came with disadvantages. Video artists often worked with very limited resources and lack of financial support. Yet the same condition created space for experimentation.

Interestingly, during the brief periods when museums, institutions and annual exhibitions in Iran commissioned video works, many opportunities went to already established male artists. Some of them produced a few video pieces and then returned to their primary

mediums. Meanwhile, many women artists continued working with video without commissions, institutional support, or sponsors' incentives.

Perhaps because for us it was never simply a medium.

It was a necessity.

Video was also closely connected to another important medium: performance art.

Many early performances in Iran survived only because they were documented on video art form. Sometimes the documentation itself became the artwork. Performance and video grew together, both were relatively inexpensive, both could happen outside traditional institutions, and both allowed artists to use their own bodies as material.

For women artists especially, this was significant.

When access to public space is restricted, the body itself becomes a site of expression, negotiation, and resistance.

Of course, this situation did not last forever.

As contemporary art became more visible and fashionable, the market arrived. Video art became a fashionable side dish, a sign of intellectual prestige within a male-dominated art market, rather than a space for genuine expression. Yet by then, the language of Iranian video art had already been profoundly shaped by women artists.

And when I look back today, I think the story is not really about video art.

It is about the ability to recognize possibilities where others see nothing.

A kind of intelligence born from limitations, from exclusion, from restricted opportunities, and from an insatiable desire for self-expression.

So today, if somebody asks me why so many Iranian video artists were women, I finally have an answer.

Video art was not a territory that women conquered. It was a territory that others ignored and we Women simply recognized its possibilities first.

We entered that space, shaped its language, and transformed it into a place from which new voices could be heard.

The real achievement was turning a void into a stage, a platform for free expression.



Figure 2: Proliferation © *Jinoos Taghizadeh*

Biography

Jinoos Taghizadeh is an Iranian multidisciplinary artist, writer, and art critic based in Toronto. Working across video art, performance, installation, and literature, she explores memory, censorship, gender, and political resistance. Her artworks have been exhibited, and her books and essays published internationally. She is an activist and PEN Canada member.

Websites

Jinoos Taghizadeh: https://jinoostaghizadeh.ca/

Live recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsjn2i8hURE

Panel Information page:
https://science4peace.com/Public-Events/Entries/2026/6/science4peace-discussion-iranian-women-and-everyday-resistance.html

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Matrix: une revue d'études matriculturelles

https://journal.networkonculture.ca/index.php/matrix/index

Critique de livre :

Susan Ackerman, *Maturity, Marriage, Motherhood, Mortality: Women's Life-Cycle Rituals in Ancient Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2025; online edn. Oxford Academic, 3 September 2025), pp. 408, $ 39.99 USD

Critique rédigée par YOLANDE FRANÇOIS-SCHWAB

Ritualiser le féminin ?
Corps, norme et narration dans l'Israël ancien à partir de Susan Ackerman

L'ouvrage de Susan Ackerman, *Maturity*, *Marriage*, *Motherhood*, *Mortality: Women's Life-Cycle Rituals in Ancient Israel*, s'inscrit dans un double champ de recherche, à la croisée des études bibliques et de l'anthropologie du rituel.[1] Il se donne pour ambition de

[1] Susan Ackerman, *Maturity, Marriage, Motherhood, Mortality: Women's Life-Cycle Rituals in Ancient Israel*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2025, 391 pages.

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reconstruire, à partir de sources fragmentaires, les principales étapes du cycle de vie féminin dans l'Israël ancien, en interrogeant les formes rituelles qui en accompagnent les transitions. En mobilisant explicitement les modèles classiques des rites de passage, notamment ceux d'Arnold van Gennep et de Victor Turner, l'autrice propose une lecture structurée autour des moments de séparation, de liminalité et de réintégration, tout en soulignant que ces schémas ne s'appliquent qu'imparfaitement aux expériences féminines.[2]

L'intérêt majeur de l'ouvrage réside dans cette tension : d'un côté, l'ambition de restituer une anthropologie du féminin à partir de traces textuelles lacunaires ; de l'autre, la nécessité de recourir à des modèles comparatifs extérieurs pour combler ces silences. Dès lors, la question centrale devient moins celle de la description des rituels que celle des conditions mêmes de leur reconstruction. Dans quelle mesure l'analyse proposée permet-elle de saisir la spécificité des expériences féminines dans les sociétés bibliques, et dans quelle mesure reconduit-elle, sous couvert d'interprétation anthropologique, des cadres théoriques qui leur sont étrangers ?[3]

C'est à l'examen de cette tension que le présent compte rendu se propose de contribuer, en mettant en lumière à la fois les apports heuristiques de l'ouvrage et les limites inhérentes à son dispositif méthodologique.

Un projet de reconstruction du cycle rituel féminin

L'ouvrage de Susan Ackerman se présente comme une tentative ambitieuse de restitution des formes rituelles qui structurent le cycle de vie féminin dans l'Israël ancien. À partir d'un corpus textuel nécessairement lacunaire, l'autrice cherche à identifier les moments clés — maturité, mariage, maternité, mort — comme autant de seuils marqués, sinon toujours par des rites explicitement attestés, du moins par des indices permettant d'en reconstruire la logique.[4]

Ce projet s'inscrit explicitement dans le sillage de l'anthropologie classique des rites de passage. Ackerman mobilise ainsi le modèle tripartite élaboré par Arnold van Gennep — séparation, phase liminale, réintégration — et prolongé par les analyses de Victor Turner sur la liminalité, entendue comme moment de suspension des statuts sociaux et de transformation identitaire. Ce cadre théorique est posé dès l'introduction comme un outil

[2] Ibid., p. 8–10, où l'autrice mobilise explicitement les modèles de Victor Turner et des rites de passage.
[3] Ibid., p. 8–11
[4] cf. chap. « The Birth of a Female Child ».

heuristique central, bien que l'autrice souligne d'emblée que les rituels féminins ne s'y conforment pas de manière systématique.

L'un des apports majeurs de l'ouvrage réside précisément dans cette mise à l'épreuve du modèle.[5] Là où les rites masculins, notamment dans les sociétés étudiées par l'anthropologie classique, présentent souvent des structures fortement codifiées et visibles, les rites féminins apparaissent ici plus diffus, moins spectaculaires, et parfois même difficilement isolables comme tels. Ackerman met ainsi en évidence une forme de liminalité étendue, qui ne se réduit pas à un moment ponctuel mais peut s'inscrire dans la durée, notamment à travers les expériences corporelles liées à la menstruation, à la sexualité ou à la maternité.[6]

Ce déplacement est décisif. Il conduit à penser les rites féminins non comme des versions atténuées des rites masculins, mais comme des dispositifs structurants distincts, dont la logique repose moins sur la rupture que sur la continuité, moins sur la visibilité sociale que sur l'inscription corporelle et domestique. En ce sens, l'ouvrage propose une reconfiguration implicite du paradigme des rites de passage, en suggérant que les expériences féminines exigent un ajustement des catégories analytiques traditionnelles.

Toutefois, cette ambition se heurte à une difficulté méthodologique majeure : l'absence de sources directes. L'essentiel de l'argumentation repose sur une lecture interprétative de textes bibliques qui ne décrivent que rarement des rituels féminins de manière explicite, ainsi que sur des comparaisons anthropologiques empruntées à d'autres contextes culturels. Cette double médiation — textuelle et comparatiste — constitue à la fois la condition de possibilité de l'analyse et son principal point de fragilité.

Corps, liminalité et reconfiguration du paradigme rituel

Si l'ouvrage d'Ackerman s'inscrit formellement dans le cadre des rites de passage, il en déplace en réalité les coordonnées en faisant du corps féminin le lieu privilégié de la transition. Là où l'anthropologie classique a souvent privilégié des séquences rituelles visibles, collectives et ponctuelles, l'analyse proposée met en lumière des processus plus diffus, étroitement liés aux transformations physiologiques et à leur inscription sociale.

La puberté, la menstruation, la sexualité ou encore la grossesse apparaissent ainsi comme des moments de passage qui ne sont pas nécessairement accompagnés de rites

[5] chap. « Women's (and Men's) Coming of Age », où l'absence d'un rite féminin unique comparable à la circoncision est explicitement soulignée.
[6] Ibid., p. 10–11.

formalisés, mais qui n'en constituent pas moins des seuils structurants. Loin de se réduire à des événements biologiques, ces expériences sont interprétées comme des opérateurs rituels implicites, en ce qu'elles engagent des reconfigurations du statut social et des modalités d'intégration dans la communauté.[7] Le mariage constitue également un moment décisif de redéfinition du statut féminin, en ce qu'il opère un déplacement de l'inscription sociale de la femme, désormais médiatisée par de nouvelles structures familiales et relationnelles.[8] En ce sens, Ackerman propose une extension du concept même de rituel, qui ne se limite plus à des pratiques explicitement codifiées mais inclut des processus incorporés et souvent invisibilisés.

Cette perspective permet de rendre compte d'une forme de liminalité spécifique, caractérisée moins par la rupture que par la continuité. À la différence des rites masculins, fréquemment marqués par une sortie temporaire du corps social suivie d'une réintégration spectaculaire, les transitions féminines tendent à s'inscrire dans des temporalités longues, parfois récurrentes, et à se déployer dans des espaces domestiques plutôt que publics.[9] La liminalité ne constitue dès lors plus un moment exceptionnel, mais un état susceptible de se prolonger, voire de se répéter au fil du cycle de vie.[10] Les pratiques funéraires féminines participent elles aussi de ces processus de transition, en inscrivant la mort dans une dynamique d'intégration différenciée au sein de la communauté des vivants et des ancêtres.[11] Un tel déplacement n'est pas sans conséquence théorique. Il conduit à interroger la pertinence d'un modèle fondé sur la discontinuité et la visibilité, et à envisager la possibilité de formes rituelles moins immédiatement perceptibles mais tout aussi structurantes. L'ouvrage suggère ainsi que les catégories classiques de l'anthropologie du rituel — séparation, liminalité, agrégation — doivent être repensées à partir de l'expérience féminine, et non simplement appliquées à celle-ci.

Cependant, cette transformation s'accompagne d'une tension. En faisant du corps féminin le principal support de la ritualité, l'analyse court le risque d'une naturalisation implicite des différences de genre. Si Ackerman insiste sur l'inscription sociale des processus corporels, le glissement entre description des expériences physiologiques et interprétation de leur signification rituelle n'est pas toujours pleinement problématisé. Autrement dit, ce qui est présenté comme une spécificité des rites féminins pourrait aussi

[7] Ibid., p. 8–11 ; voir également chap. 1 « The Birth of a Female Child », chap. « Women's (and Men's) Coming of Age », chap. « Israelite Betrothal Rituals ».
[8] Ibid., chap. « Israelite Betrothal Rituals ».
[9] Ibid., chap. « Women's Coming of Age: The Story of Jephthah's Daughter » ; Ibid., chap. « Israelite Betrothal Rituals ».
[10] Ibid., p. 8–11 ; cf. chap. « Women's (and Men's) Coming of Age », chap. « Women's Coming of Age: The Story of Jephthah's Daughter ».
[11] Ibid., chapitres consacrés aux rites funéraires féminins.

relever, en partie, d'un effet de lecture induit par la rareté des sources et par le recours à des analogies anthropologiques.

Cette ambiguïté apparaît notamment dans la manière dont la liminalité est conceptualisée. En soulignant son caractère étendu et parfois permanent dans les expériences féminines, l'ouvrage tend à brouiller la distinction entre état transitoire et condition structurelle. Or, une telle extension du concept, si elle permet de mieux saisir certaines dynamiques, risque également d'en affaiblir la portée analytique. La liminalité, pensée comme moment de passage, devient alors une catégorie englobante, susceptible de désigner toute forme de marginalité ou de transformation, au prix d'une certaine indétermination.

Une reconstruction sous contrainte : sources, comparatisme et enjeux épistémologiques

L'ambition reconstructive de l'ouvrage se heurte à une difficulté bien identifiée par l'autrice elle-même : la rareté, voire l'absence, de descriptions explicites de rituels féminins dans les sources bibliques.[12] Cette contrainte documentaire conduit Ackerman à adopter une méthode indirecte, fondée sur une lecture interprétative de textes normatifs ou narratifs, ainsi que sur un recours au comparatisme anthropologique.[13]

Ce double déplacement — du texte vers l'inférence, et du contexte israélite vers des analogies extra-bibliques — constitue à la fois la condition de possibilité de l'analyse et son principal point de fragilité. En effet, si les textes bibliques évoquent à plusieurs reprises des situations liées au cycle de vie féminin, telles que la menstruation ou la maternité, ils les inscrivent prioritairement dans des logiques de pureté rituelle ou de régulation sociale, sans pour autant les constituer en rites de passage au sens strict. Ainsi, les prescriptions du Lévitique relatives à l'impureté menstruelle (Lv 15) ou post-partum (Lv 12) définissent des états et des procédures de purification, mais ne décrivent pas de séquences rituelles structurées comparables à celles mises en évidence par l'anthropologie classique.[14]

Toutefois, la difficulté liée au silence des sources mérite d'être nuancée. Si les textes bibliques offrent peu de descriptions explicites de rituels féminins, les traditions juives ultérieures — en particulier celles consignées dans la Mishnah et le Talmud — témoignent

[12] Ibid., p. 8–11 ; cf. chap. « Women's (and Men's) Coming of Age ».
[13] Ibid., chap. 1 « The Birth of a Female Child ».
[14] Lv 12 ; Lv 15 ; voir Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, New York, Doubleday, 1991.

d’une élaboration particulièrement riche des statuts et des pratiques liés au corps féminin.[15] Les lois de *niddah*, telles qu’elles sont développées dans la littérature rabbinique puis systématisées dans la halakha, organisent par exemple une temporalité précise de la séparation et de la réintégration, articulée autour des cycles menstruels.

Ces traditions ne peuvent toutefois être mobilisées comme des témoins directs des pratiques de l’Israël ancien. Leur valeur est d’un autre ordre : elles attestent la constitution progressive d’un système normatif dans lequel la féminité est étroitement régulée à travers des dispositifs temporels et rituels continus. En ce sens, elles invitent à déplacer la question : l’absence de rites de passage féminins explicitement attestés dans les sources bibliques doit-elle être comprise comme un manque, ou comme l’indice d’une organisation symbolique différente, dans laquelle la ritualisation s’inscrit dans la durée du quotidien plutôt que dans l’exception de l’événement ?

Dans cette perspective, le recours au comparatisme anthropologique, s’il permet de pallier certaines lacunes documentaires, tend aussi à orienter la lecture vers des modèles de ritualité fondés sur la discontinuité et la visibilité. Les modèles mobilisés — souvent élaborés à partir de sociétés où les rites de passage féminins sont fortement institutionnalisés et collectivement visibles — reposent sur une conception de la transition comme rupture ponctuelle et formalisée.[16]

Or, les sources juives, qu’elles soient bibliques ou rabbiniques, suggèrent une configuration différente, dans laquelle la structuration du féminin passe moins par des rites ponctuels que par des dispositifs normatifs continus, articulés autour du corps et de ses cycles. Cette différence ne rend pas le comparatisme caduc, mais elle en déplace les conditions d’usage : il ne s’agit plus de rechercher des équivalences formelles, mais de penser des variations de régime rituel. La spécificité du cas israélite ne tient pas nécessairement à l’absence de rites féminins, mais à une modalité particulière de ritualisation, moins spectaculaire et plus diffuse, où la frontière entre norme et rituel tend à s’estomper.

Ainsi, la force de l’ouvrage réside moins dans la démonstration de l’existence de rites féminins strictement homologues aux modèles anthropologiques que dans la mise en évidence d’un problème : celui de la visibilité et de la conceptualisation des expériences féminines dans les sources anciennes. En ce sens, l’ouvrage ouvre un espace de réflexion

[15] Mishnah *Niddah* ; Babylonian Talmud, *Niddah* ; voir Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, Stanford, 2000.
[16] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, Chicago, 1990 ; voir également dans Ackerman, chap. 1.

qui dépasse son objet immédiat, en invitant à repenser les outils mêmes de l'analyse du rituel.[17]

Cette relative discrétion des rites féminins dans les sources bibliques ne signifie pas pour autant une absence de transformation du féminin. Les récits de la Torah et des livres historiques mettent en scène de manière récurrente des figures féminines dont les trajectoires sont fortement marquées par les enjeux de fertilité, de maternité et d'alliance — de Sarah à Rachel, en passant par Rebecca ou Hannah. Ces figures donnent à voir des moments de transition essentiels, souvent chargés d'une forte densité symbolique, mais sans que ceux-ci soient encadrés par des dispositifs rituels explicitement formalisés.

Ce décalage est significatif. Il suggère que, dans les sources bibliques, la structuration du cycle de vie féminin passe moins par la codification de rites de passage que par une mise en récit des expériences corporelles et sociales. Autrement dit, là où l'anthropologie classique identifie des séquences rituelles, les textes bibliques proposent des configurations narratives, dans lesquelles la transformation du statut féminin se donne à lire plutôt qu'à voir comme un rituel institué.

Dans cette perspective, l'absence de rites féminins clairement identifiables ne doit pas être interprétée uniquement comme un manque documentaire, mais comme l'indice d'une autre modalité de structuration symbolique, où narration, norme et expérience corporelle s'articulent sans nécessairement se cristalliser dans des formes rituelles distinctes.

Conclusion : entre reconstruction et reconfiguration du féminin

L'ouvrage de Susan Ackerman constitue une contribution importante aux études bibliques et à l'anthropologie du rituel, en ce qu'il propose une relecture systématique du cycle de vie féminin dans l'Israël ancien à partir d'un cadre théorique clairement assumé. En mobilisant les outils classiques de l'anthropologie des rites de passage, l'autrice met en lumière un ensemble de processus souvent négligés, en insistant sur la spécificité des expériences féminines et sur leur relative invisibilité dans les sources.

L'un des apports majeurs de l'ouvrage réside dans cette tentative de rendre pensables des formes de ritualité qui échappent aux catégories habituelles de l'analyse. En soulignant le caractère diffus, prolongé et parfois peu formalisé des transitions féminines, Ackerman

[17] Ibid., épilogue « Of Fragments and (W)holes ».

invite à élargir la définition même du rituel et à interroger les biais d'une tradition théorique largement construite à partir de modèles masculins. À ce titre, son travail s'inscrit pleinement dans les préoccupations contemporaines des études de genre et des approches dites « matriculturelles », en contribuant à rendre visibles des dimensions du religieux longtemps restées marginalisées.

Cependant, cette entreprise se déploie sous contrainte.[18] La rareté des sources explicites conduit à un usage intensif de l'inférence et du comparatisme, qui, s'ils permettent de proposer des reconstructions heuristiques, tendent également à orienter la lecture vers des modèles de ritualité fondés sur la discontinuité et la formalisation des seuils. Or, l'examen conjoint des textes bibliques et des traditions juives ultérieures suggère une configuration partiellement différente, dans laquelle la structuration du féminin passe moins par des rites ponctuels que par des dispositifs normatifs continus, articulés autour du corps et de ses cycles.

À cet égard, les récits bibliques eux-mêmes offrent un éclairage complémentaire. Les figures de femmes qui traversent ces textes — qu'il s'agisse des récits de stérilité, de grossesse ou d'alliance — donnent à voir des moments de transition essentiels, mais sous une forme narrative plutôt que rituelle. Cette observation ne contredit pas l'analyse d'Ackerman ; elle en déplace plutôt les enjeux, en suggérant que la ritualisation du féminin dans les sources anciennes ne passe pas nécessairement par des séquences instituées, mais peut s'inscrire dans des configurations discursives et symboliques plus diffuses.

Dès lors, la portée du comparatisme doit être redéfinie. Il ne s'agit plus tant de rechercher des équivalences formelles entre des systèmes rituels que de penser des variations de régime, dans lesquelles les modalités de visibilité, de temporalité et d'inscription sociale du rituel diffèrent sensiblement. En ce sens, la spécificité du cas israélite ne tient pas à une absence de ritualité féminine, mais à une forme particulière de son déploiement, située à l'intersection de la norme, du récit et du corps.

C'est précisément dans cette tension que réside la fécondité de l'ouvrage. En cherchant à reconstruire des rites féminins là où les sources semblent les taire, Ackerman met au jour une difficulté plus profonde, qui concerne les outils mêmes de l'analyse. Son travail 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 ancien.

[18] Ibid., épilogue (« Of Fragments and (W)holes »).

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Book Review:

Karen Coody Cooper, *Cherokee Women in Charge: Female Power and Leadership in American Indian Nations of Eastern North America* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2022), pp. viii, 237, $49.95 USD

Reviewed by PATRICK J. JUNG

While the title of Karen Coody Cooper's recent publication delivers on its promise of examining the lives of Cherokee women up to the present day, the subtitle hints at a broader examination of Native women. In fact, the content extends beyond the Cherokees to explore the history and lives of Indigenous women in other societies of southeastern North America such as the Powhatans, Choctaws, and Seminoles; Iroquoian tribes such as the Mohawks and Senecas of northeastern North America; Indigenous communities in the Caribbean, particularly the Taino; and Maya city-states of the Yucatan Peninsula in present-day Mexico. Casting such a broad net is not necessarily problematic, but it requires a strong organizational structure and the requisite research into both primary and secondary sources to be successful. Thus, while there is much to commend in this book, it suffers at

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certain points from trying to do too much and not always doing it well. More specifically, the author would have been well advised to focus on the lives and histories of Cherokee women and dispense with those chapters and sections that somewhat inexplicably wander beyond this focus.

The Cherokee are a matrilineal society, which, of course, means that women are central to family structures, particularly clans. In Chapter 2, Cooper defines several terms that scholars in the social sciences (particularly anthropology) have employed to examine the roles of women, including matrilineality, matrifocality, matriarchy, and matrism. She declines to embrace the idea of the Cherokees ever being a matriarchal culture and instead emphasizes that the matrilineal nature of the society afforded women important social and economic roles as well as political influence and, oftentimes, political authority. Cooper writes, “Occasionally situations arose in Cherokee life that could tip the scale in favor of female or male authority, but the goal was always to achieve balance. Everyone had to be respected” (p. 6). Thus, the theme of balance between the genders tends to be the organizing principle throughout the book.

Cooper divides her work into three parts, with Part I presenting an ethnohistorical account of Cherokee women and their lives before the removal era of the 1830s. Cooper makes her greatest contributions in this section and provides a well-researched and lively examination of Cherokee women and their roles during the pre-removal period. Cherokee mythology had several important female deities such as the Sun and Selu, the Corn Mother, who bequeathed maize to the Cherokee people. Women controlled agriculture and had other important economic roles, including textile, leather, basket, and pottery production. They also possessed far greater sexual autonomy and freedom than their White, settler-colonial counterparts. Of particular importance were their military and political roles. The title of War Women among the Cherokees referred to pre-menopausal females who could attend war councils and accompany war parties. War Women also possessed unchallenged authority to decide the fates and final dispositions of prisoners of war. The title of Beloved Women, according to Cooper, “was reserved for War Women who attained post-menopausal status. Elders were always accorded added respect” (p. 66). So important was this second title that the Eastern Cherokee Band of Indians revived it in 1984.

Part II, titled ‘Women of Matrilineal Cultures of Eastern North America,’ presents the reader with several puzzles, particularly since it examines culture areas quite a bit outside of the region of eastern North America, such as Hispaniola and Mesoamerica. The author never clearly explains why she includes this section, except that these societies, like the Cherokees, “apportioned a balance of authority to females” (p. 101). Not all these societies were matrilineal; the classical Maya present stronger evidence for patrilineality

than matrilineality, although some women rose to become rulers of Maya city-states. Cooper is on firmer ground with her examinations of female leaders among the Senecas and Mohawks (who, like the Cherokees, were matrilineal and spoke Iroquoian languages), and other matrilineal southeastern tribes such as the Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles. Cooper provides short, often interesting vignettes of female leaders such as Lady K'awiil Ajaw (Maya), Anacaona (Taino), Cockacoeske (Pamunkey), Aliquippa (Seneca), Mary Musgrove (Creek), and Chickie and Chockie LaFlore (Chickasaw and Choctaw). However, why the author chose these women, and how they contribute to the book's overall theme of gender balance within Cherokee society remains a mystery. Moreover, Cooper's research on these women is often wanting and based not on primary sources or even well-researched secondary sources. Instead, the author often cites museum webpages, online encyclopedias, and other rather flaccid sources when detailing the lives of these subjects.

Part III examines the lives of Cherokee women in the post-removal era, and here Cooper returns to more familiar territory and more solidly researched source material. The tragic history of the Trail of Tears, whereby the Cherokees and other southeastern Native societies endured tremendous hardships as they were forced westward, is a well-chronicled episode in United States history. Even before the movement to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma), Christian missionaries and European-style governmental and legal systems under male Cherokee control eroded the status of Cherokee women. The Civil War brought additional catastrophe to the Cherokees, who generally sided with the Confederacy and whose farms were often ravaged by raiding parties of the southern armies. Of great importance to Cherokee women was the opening of the Cherokee Female Seminary in 1851, an institution that educated about three thousand Cherokee women, many of whom went on to become leaders in their society. Cooper details the lives of many of these women as well as those such as Stella Livers, Sally Lacy, and Ella Mae Blackbear who worked to preserve and pass on knowledge of traditional Cherokee cultural traditions such as basketmaking and beadwork. Of particular importance were the careers of Wilma Mankiller and Joyce Dugan, the first elected chiefs of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and the Eastern Cherokee Band of Indians in North Carolina, respectively.

Cooper presents a significant amount of information concerning Cherokee women, and while she does not employ the concept of matriculture, much of the material in her book certainly lends itself to matricultural analysis. As noted, her book exhibits clear shortcomings in organization and research material; her over-reliance on non-peer-reviewed online sources is particularly problematic. Nevertheless, those interested in the lives of Cherokee women will still find a great deal they might find useful.

Biography

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