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***THE POSITION
OF WOMAN
IN PRIMITIVE
SOCIETY:
A STUDY
OF THE MATRIARCHY***

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The Position of Woman in Primitive Society: A Study of the Matriarchy

EAN 8596547011842

DigiCat, 2022

Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



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CHAPTER I

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INTRODUCTORY

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THE twentieth century is the age of Woman; some day, it may be that it will be looked back upon as the golden age, the dawn, some say, of feminine civilisation. We cannot estimate as yet; and no man can tell what forces these new conditions may not release in the soul of woman. The modern change is that the will of woman is asserting itself. Women are looking for a satisfactory life, which is to be determined from within themselves, not from without by others. The result is a discontent that may well prove to be the seed or spring of further changes in a society which has yet to find its normal organisation. Yes, women are finding themselves, and men are discovering what women mean.

In the present time we are passing through a difficult period of transition. There are conditions of change that have to be met, the outcome of which it is very difficult to appreciate. A transformation in the thought and conduct of women, for which the term "revolution" is not too strong, is taking place around us; doubtless many experimental phases will be tried before we reach a new position of equilibrium.

This must be. There can be no life without movement.

The expression, "a transition period," is, of course, only relative. We often say: This or that is a sign of the present era; and, nine times out of ten, the thing we believe to be

new is in reality as old as the world itself. In one sense the whole of history is a vast transition. No period stands alone; the present is in every age merely the shifting point at which the past and the future meet. All things move onwards. But the movement sometimes takes the form of a cataract, at others of an even and almost imperceptible current. This is really another way of saying that the usually slow and gradual course of change is, at certain stages, interrupted by a more or less prolonged period of revolution. The process of growth, from being gradual and imperceptible, becomes violent and conscious.

There can be little doubt that what is called the "Woman's Movement," with its disintegrating influences on social opinion and practice, is bringing vast and momentous changes in women's attitude towards the universe and towards themselves. A great motive and an enlarging ideal, a quickening of the woman's spirit, a stirring dream of a new order—these are what we have gained. We are carried on, though as yet we know not whither, and there is, of necessity, a little stumbling of our feet as we seek for a way. Hence the fear, always tending to arise in periods of social reconstruction, which is felt by many to-day as women pass out far beyond the established boundaries prescribed for their sex.

Whoever reflects soberly on the past history of women will not be surprised at their present movement towards emancipation. Women are reclaiming a position that is theirs by natural right—a position which once they held. It may be all very well for those who accept the authority and headship of the man as the foundation of the family and of

society, to be filled with bewildered fear at what seems to them to be a quite new assertion of rights on the part of the mothers of the race. But has the family at all stages of growth been founded on the authority of the father? Our decision on this question will affect our outlook on the whole question of Woman's Rights and the relationships of the two sexes. There are civilisations, older and, as I believe, wiser than ours that have accepted the predominant position of the mother as the great central fact on which the family has been established.

The view that the family, much as it existed among the Hebrew patriarchs, and as it exists to-day, was primeval and universal is very deeply rooted. This is not surprising. To reverse the gaze of men from themselves is no easy task. The predominance of the male over the female, of the man over the woman and of the father over the mother, has been accepted, almost without question, in a civilisation built up on the recognition of male values and male standards of opinion. Thus the institutions, habits, prejudices, and superstitions of the patriarchal authority rest like an incubus upon us. The women of to-day carry the dead load upon their backs, and literally stagger beneath the accumulating burden of the ages.

The "Woman's Movement" is pressing us forward towards a recasting of the patriarchal view of the relative position and duties of the two sexes. It must be regarded as an extremely great and comprehensive movement affecting the whole of life. From this wider standpoint, the fight for the parliamentary suffrage is but as the vestibule to progress; the possession of the vote being no more than a

necessary condition for attaining far larger and more fundamental ends.

It is, however, very necessary to remark that the recognition of this imposes a great responsibility upon women. For one thing the practical difficulties of the present must be faced. It is far from easy to readjust existing conditions to meet the new demands. Present social and economic conditions are to a great extent chaotic. We cannot safely cast aside, in any haste for reform, those laws, customs and opinions which it has been the slow task of our civilisation to establish, not for men only, but for women. We women have to work out many questions far more thoroughly than hitherto we have done. We owe this to our movement and to the world of men. It will serve nothing to pull down, unless we are ready also to build up. Freedom can be granted only to the self-disciplined.

“Thou that does know the Self and the not-Self, expert in every work: endowed with self-restraint and perfect same-sightedness towards every creature free from the sense of I and my—thy power and energy are equal to my own, and thou hast practised the most severe discipline.”[\[1\]](#)

This little book is an attempt to establish the position of the mother in the family. It sets out to investigate those early states of society, when, through the widespread prevalence of descent through the mother, the survival of the family clan and, in some cases, the property rights were dependent on women and not on men. I start from the belief

that the mother was at one period the dominant partner in the sexual relationships. This does not, however, at all necessarily involve "rule by women." We must be very clear here. What I claim is this. The system by which the family was built up and grouped around the mother conferred special rights on women. The form of marriage favourable to this influence was that by which the husband entered the wife's family and clan, and lived there as a "consort-guest." The wife and mother was director in the home, the owner of the meagre property, the distributor of food, and the controller of the children.[2] Hence arises what is known as mother-right.

I am prompted to this inquiry by two reasons: in the first place, the origin of the maternal-system and the subsequent association of the mother and the father appear to me to afford evidence of the working of a natural law of the two sexes, which, both for social and other reasons, is of great interest in the present stage of women's history. The establishing of the mother's position is of great importance. If we can prove that women have exercised unquestioned and direct authority in the past history of human societies, we shall be in a position to answer those who to-day wish to set limits to women's activities. Then, in the second place, I am compelled to doubt certain conclusions, both of those who accept mother-right, and also of the greater number who now deny its occurrence. If I am right, and the importance of the maternal family has been unduly neglected and the true explanation of its origin overlooked, I feel that, whatever errors I may fall into, I am justified in undertaking this task. My mistakes will be corrected by

others with more knowledge than I can claim; and if my theory of mother-right has any merit, it will be established in more competent hands. The vast majority of investigators on these questions are men. I am driven to believe that sometimes they are mistaken in their interpretation of habits and customs which arose among primitive societies in which the influence of women was marked. In dealing with the family and its origin it has been usual to consider the male side and to pass over the female members. This has led, I am sure, to much error.

The custom of tracing descent through the mother, either practised consciously and completely, or only as a survival, occurs among many primitive peoples in all parts of the world. Whether, however, it existed universally and from all time, or whether only in certain races, among whose institutions it remains or may still be traced, is a much debated question. Not all barbarous tribes are in the stage of mother-right; on the contrary many reckon descent through the father. But even where the latter is the case, vestiges of the former system are frequently to be found. There seems to be a common tendency to discredit a system of relationship, which suggests even as a bare possibility the mother, and not the father, being the head of the family. Yet, I believe I can assign some, at least plausible, reasons for believing that descent through women has been a stage, though not, I think, the first stage, in social growth for all branches of the human family.

There can be little doubt of the importance of kinship and inheritance being reckoned through the mother. If the children belong to her, and if by marriage the husband

enters her home, the greater influence, based on the present possession of property, and the future hope of the family rests on the female side. Such conditions must have exercised strong influence on the position of the women members of the primitive clan and the honour in which they were held. It cannot be ignored.

Of course, this does not prevent the hardships of savage life weighing more heavily in many ways upon women than on the stronger men. In primitive societies women have a position quite as full of anomalies as they hold among civilised races. Among some tribes their position is extremely good; among others it is undoubtedly bad, but, speaking generally, it is much better than usually it is held to be.[3] Obviously the causes must be sought in the environment and in social organisation. The differences in the status and power of women, often occurring in tribes at the same level of progress, would seem to be dependent largely on economic conditions. The subject is full of difficulties. Not only is the position of women thus variable, but our knowledge of the matter is very defective. It is seldom, indeed, that the question has been considered of sufficient importance to receive accurate attention.[4] Not infrequently conflicting accounts are given by different authorities, and even by the same writer.

I wish it to be understood that mother-right does not necessarily imply mother-rule. This system may even be combined with the patriarchal authority of the male. The unfortunate use of the term *Matriarchate* has led to much confusion. My own knowledge and study of primitive customs and ancient civilisations have made it plain to me

that there has been a constant rise and fall of male and female dominance, but, I believe, that, on the whole, the superiority of women has been more frequent and more successful than that of men.

It is this that I shall attempt to prove.

The theory of mother-right has been subjected to so much criticism that a re-examination of the position is very necessary. To show its prevalence, to establish some leading points in its history, to make out its connection with the patriarchal family, and to trace the transition by which one system passed into the other, appear to me to be matters primarily important. The limited compass of this little book will prevent my substantiating my own views as I should wish, with a full and systematic survey of all authentic accounts of the peoples among whom mother-descent may be studied. I have considered, however, that I could summarise the position in a comprehensive picture, that will, I hope, suggest a point of view that seems to me to have been very generally neglected.

It is necessary to enter into such an inquiry with caution; the difficulties before me are very great. Nothing would be easier than from the mass of material available to pile up facts in furnishing a picture of the high status of women among many tribes under the favourable influence of mother-descent, that would unnerve any upholders of the patriarchal view of the subordination of women. It is just possible, on the other hand, to interpret these facts from a fixed point of thought of the father's authority as the one support of the family, and then to argue that, in spite of the mother's control over her children and over property, she

still remained the inferior partner. I wish to do neither. It is my purpose to examine the evidence, and so to discover to what extent the system of tracing descent through the female side conferred any special claim for consideration upon women. I shall try to avoid mistakes. I put forward my own opinions with great diffidence. It is so easy, as I realise full well, to interpret facts by the bias of one's own wishes. I know that the habits and customs of primitive peoples that I have studied closely are probably few in comparison with those I have missed; yet to me they appear of such importance in the light they throw on the whole question of the relationships of the two sexes, that it seems well to bring them forward.

Since my attention, now many years ago, was first directed to this question, I have felt that a clear and concise account of the mother-age was indispensable for women. Such an account, with a criticism of the patriarchal theory, is here offered. Throughout I have attempted to clear up and bring into uniformity the two opposing theories of the origin of the human family. I have tried to gather the facts, very numerous and falling into several classes, by which the theory of the mother-age could be supported. And first it was necessary to clear out of the way a body of opinion, the prevalence of which has opposed an obstacle to the acceptance of the rights of mothers in the family relationship. The whole question turns upon which you start with; the man—the woman, or the woman—the man.

Here it should be explained that this little book is an expansion of the historical section which treats of “the Mother-age civilisation” in my former book, *The Truth About*

Woman. I wish to take this opportunity of expressing my gratitude for the generous interest and sympathy with which my work has been received. Such kindness is very imperfectly repaid by an author's thanks; it is certainly the best incentive to further work.

This little volume was suggested to me by a review in one of the Suffrage papers. The writer, after speaking of the interest to women of the mother-age and the difficulty there was in gaining information on the subject, said that "a small and cheaper book on the matriarchate would be useful to women in all countries." I was grateful for this suggestion. I at once felt that I wanted to write such a book. For one thing, this particular section on the mother-age in *The Truth About Woman*, and my belief in the favourable influence of mother-descent on the status of women, has been much questioned. I have been told that I "had quite deliberately gone back to our uncivilised ancestors to 'fish up' the precedent of the matriarchate;" that I "had allowed my prejudices to dictate my choice of material, and had thus brought forward examples explanatory of my own opinions;" that I "had fastened eagerly on these, without inquiring too carefully about other facts having a contrary tendency." I was reminded of what I well knew, that the matriarchate and promiscuity with which it is usually connected were not universally accepted by anthropologists; the tendency to-day being to discredit both as being among the early phases of society. It was suggested that I "had unprofitably spent my time on the historical section of my book, and had built up my theory on a curiously uncertain foundation;" that I "had relied too much on the certain working of mother-right,

and had been by no means clear in showing how, from such a position of power, women had sunk into subservience to patriarchal rule." In fact, it has seemed to be the opinion of my critics that I had allowed what I "would have liked to have happened to affect my account of what did happen in the infancy of man's social life."

Now, I want to say quite frankly, that I feel much of this criticism is just. The inquiry on the mother-age civilisation was only one small section of my book on Woman. I realise that very much was hurried over. There is on this subject of the origin of the family a literature so extensive, and such a variety of opinions, that the work of the student is far from easy. The whole question is too extensive to allow anything like adequate treatment within the space of a brief, and necessarily insufficient, summary. My earlier investigation may well be objected to as not being in certain points supported by sufficient proofs. I know this. It is not easy to condense the marriage customs and social habits of many different peoples into a few dozen pages. Of course, I selected my examples. But this I may say; I chose those which had brought me to accept mother-right. I was driven to this belief by my own study and reading long before the time of writing my book. What I really tried to do was to present to others the facts that had convinced me. But my stacks of unused notes, collected for my own pleasure during many years of work, are witness to how much I had to leave out.

I know that many objections that have been raised to the theory of mother-right were left unanswered. I dismissed much too lightly the patriarchal theory of the origin of the

family, which during late years has gained such advocacy. I failed to carry my inquiry far enough back. I accepted with too little caution an early period of promiscuous sexual relationships. I did not make clear the stages in the advance of the family to the clan and the tribe; nor examine with sufficient care the later transition period in which mother-right gave place to father-right.

I have been sent back to examine again my own position. And to do this, it was necessary first to take up the question from the position of those whose views are in opposition to my own. I have made a much more extensive study of those authorities who, rejecting mother-right, accept a modification of the patriarchal theory as the origin of the family. This has led to some considerable recasting of my views. Not at all, however, to a change in my belief in mother-right, which, indeed, has now been strengthened, and, as I trust, built up on surer foundations.

By a fortunate chance, I was advised to read Mr. Andrew Lang's *Social Origins*,^[5] which work includes Mr. Atkinson's *Primal Law*. I am greatly indebted to the assistance I have gained from these writers. It is, perhaps, curious that a very careful study of the patriarchal family as it is presented by Mr. Atkinson and Mr. Lang, has brought me to a conclusion fundamentally at variance from what might have been expected. I have gained invaluable support for my own belief in mother-right, and have found fresh proofs from the method of difference. I have cleared up many points that previously puzzled me. I am able now to accept the patriarchal theory, without at all shaking my faith in a subsequent period of mother-descent and mother-power.

The discussion on this question is now half a century old. Yet in spite of the opposition of many investigators, and the support of others, the main problems are still unsettled. What form did the family take in its earliest stage? Did it start as a small group or with the clan or horde? What were the earliest conditions of the sexual relationships? Was promiscuity at one period the rule? Was the foundation of the family based on the authority of the father, or of the mother? If on that of the father, how is mother-kin and mother-right to be explained? These are among the questions that must be answered. Not till this is done, can we establish any theory of mother-descent, or estimate its effect on the status of women.

The whole subject is a very wide and complicated one. If I differ on several important points from learned authorities, whose knowledge and research far exceed my own, I do so only after great hesitation, and because I must. The facts they have collected from their personal knowledge of primitive peoples (facts which I have gratefully used) often suggest quite opposite conclusions to my thoughts than to theirs—the view-point is different, that is all. They were seeking for one thing; I for another: they were men; I am a woman. It would be foolishness for me to attempt any special pleadings for my own opinions. How far I shall succeed, or fail, to make clear to others a period of mother-right that is certain to me, I do not know. I offer my little book with all humility, and yet without any apology. We may read and learn and gather knowledge from many sources; but the opinions of others we cannot take on credit; we

must re-think them out for ourselves, and make them our own.

Footnote

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[1] The *Mahābhārata*. The Great God thus addresses Shakti, when he asks her to describe the duties of women. I quote from a pamphlet by Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy: *Sati: A Vindication of the Hindu Woman*.

[2] McGee: "The Beginning of Marriage," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. IV, p. 378.

[3] Westermarck, "The Position of Women in Early Civilisations," *Sociological Papers*, 1904.

[4] For instance, Maine (*Early Law and Custom*), in speaking of tribes who still trace their descent from a single ancestress, says, "The outlines" (*i.e.* of the maternal family) "may still be marked out, *if it be worth any one's while to trace it.*"

[5] This book was mentioned to me in a letter from Mr. H.G. Wells.

CHAPTER II

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AN EXPOSITION OF BACHOFEN'S THEORY OF THE MATRIARCHATE

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FIFTY-THREE years ago in his great work, *Das Mutterrecht*, [6] the Swiss writer, Bachofen, drew the attention of the world to the fact that a system of kinship through mothers only prevailed among many primitive peoples, while survivals of the custom could be widely, if but faintly, traced among civilised races. Drawing his evidence from the actual statements of old writers, but more from legends and the mythologies of antiquity, he came to the conclusion that a system of descent through women had, in all cases, preceded the rise of kinship through males. Almost at the same time Dr. J.F. McLennan, [7] ignorant of the work of Bachofen, came to the same opinion. This led to a reconsideration of the patriarchal theory; and for a time it was widely held that in the early stages of society a matriarchate prevailed, in which women held the supreme power. Further support came from Morgan, with his knowledge of the maternal family among American aborigines, and he was followed by Professor Tylor, McGee, and many other investigators.

Obviously this gynæcocratic view, which placed woman in a new relation to man, was unlikely to be permanently accepted. Thus a reaction to the earlier theory of the patriarchal family has set in, especially in recent years.

Many writers, while acknowledging the existence of mother descent, deny that such a system carries with it, except in a few exceptional cases, mother-rights of special advantage to women; even when these seem to be present they believe such rights to be more apparent than real.

In bringing forward any theory of mother-right, it thus becomes necessary to show the causes that have led to this reversal in opinion. To do this, the first step will be to examine, with considerable detail, the evidence for the matriarchal theory as it is given by its two great supporters. Now, an interesting point arises, if we compare the view of Bachofen with that held by McLennan. No two ways could well be further apart than those by which these two men arrived at the same conclusion. Both accept an early period of promiscuous sexual relationships. But Bachofen found the explanation of mother-descent in the supremacy of women, and believed a matriarchate to have been established by them in a moral revolt against such *hetairism*. Mr. McLennan, on the other hand, regarded the custom as due to uncertainty of paternity—the children were called after the mother because the father was unknown.

Let us concentrate our attention on the *Das Mutterrecht* of Bachofen, whose work as the great champion of matriarchy claims our most careful consideration. And it is necessary to say at once that there can be no doubt his view of women's supremacy is greatly exaggerated. Such a rule of women, at the very early stage of society when mother-kin is supposed to have arisen, is not proved, and does not seem probable. Even if it existed, *it could not have originated in the way and for the reasons* that are credited

by the Swiss writer. I wish to emphasise this point. Much of the discredit that has fallen on the matriarchate has arisen, I am certain, through the impossibility of accepting Bachofen's mythical account of its origin. This great supporter of women was a dreamer, rather than a calm and impartial investigator. Founding his main theory on assumptions, he asks us to accept these as historical facts. Much of his work and his belief in women must be regarded as the rhapsodies of a poet. And yet, it is the poet who finds the truth. The poetic spirit is, in one sense, the most practical of all. Bachofen saw the fact of mother-power, though not *why* it was the fact, and he enfolded his arguments in a garment of pure fiction.

To disengage from his learned book, *Das Mutterrecht*,^[8] his theory of the origin of the Matriarchate is no easy task. There is, for one thing, such bewildering contradiction and confusion in the material used. Then the interpretation of the mythical tales, so freely intermingled everywhere, is often strained—prompted by a poetic imagination which snatches at every kind of allegory. Often the views expressed are inconsistent with each other, the arguments and proofs are disconnected, while many of the details are hopelessly obscure and confused. Yet it seems to me possible to recognise the idea which brings into unity the mass of his work—the spirit, as it were, that breathes into it its life. It may be found in the clear appreciation of the superstitious and mystical element in primitive man, and their close interweaving with the sexual life. As I understand Herr Bachofen, the sex-act was the means which first opened up ways to great heights, but also to great depths.

Bachofen strongly insists on the religious element in all early human thought. He believes that the development of the primitive community only advanced by means of religious ideas.

“Religion,” he says, “is the only efficient lever of all civilisation. Each elevation and depression of human life has its origin in a movement which begins in this supreme department.”[9]

The authority for this belief is sought in religious myths.

“Mythical tradition appears to be the faithful interpretation of the progress of the law of life, at a time when the foundations of the historical development of the ancient world were laid; it reveals the original mode of thought, and we may accept this direct revelation as true from our complete confidence in this source of history.”[10]

This mystical religious element, which is the essential part of *Das Mutterrecht*, is closely connected by Bachofen with the power of women. As it is his belief that, even at this early period, the religious impulse was more developed among women than men, he bases on this unproved hypothesis his theory of women’s supremacy. “Wherever gynæcocracy meets us,” he says, “the mystery of religion is bound up with it, and lends to motherhood an incorporation in some divinity.”[11]

Doubtless this theory of a higher feminine spirituality is a pleasing one for women—but is it true? The insuperable difficulty to its acceptance arises, in the first place, from the

fact that we can know nothing at all of the spiritual condition of the human beings among whom mother-kin was held first to have been practised. But we must go further than this in our doubt. Can we accept for any period a spiritual superiority in the character of woman over man? To me, at least, it is clear that a knowledge of the two sexes among all races both primitive and civilised—yes, and among ourselves, is sufficient to discredit such a supposition.

Bachofen would have us believe that[12] the mother-right of the ancient world, was due to a revolt of women against the degraded condition of promiscuity, which previously had been universal among mankind, a condition in which men had a community of wives, and *openly lived together like gregarious animals*.

“Women, by their nature nobler and more spiritual than men, became disgusted with this lawless *hetairism*, and, under the influence of a powerful religious impulse, combined in a revolt (the first Amazonian movement) to put an end to promiscuity and established marriage.”

Over and over again Bachofen affirms this spiritual quality in women.

“The woman’s religious attitude, in particular, the tendency of her mind towards the supernatural and the divine, influenced the man and robbed him of the position which nature disposed him to take in virtue of his physical superiority. In this way women’s position

was transformed by religious considerations, until they became in civil life what religion had caused them to be.”[13] And again: “We cannot fail to see that of the two forms of gynæcocracy in question—religious and civil—the former was the basis of the latter. Ideas connected with worship came first, and the civil forms of life were then the result and expression.”[14]

We may note in passing, the greater affectability of woman’s nature, which would seem always to have had a tendency to expression in religio-erotic manifestations. But to build up a theory of matriarchy on this foundation is strangely wide of the facts. Bachofen adduces the spirituality of women as the cause of their power. But on what grounds can such a claim be supported?

It is on the evidence of licentious customs of all kinds and on polyandry, that he bases his belief in a period of promiscuity. He regards this early condition of *hetairism* as a law of nature, and believes that after its infraction by the introduction of individual marriage, expiation was required to be made to the Earth Goddess, Demeter, in temporary prostitution. Hence he explains the widespread custom of religious prostitution. This fanciful idea may be taken to represent Bachofen’s method of interpretation. There is an intermediate stage between *hetairism* and marriage, such as the group-marriage, held by him to have been practised among barbarous peoples. “Each man has a wife, but they are all permitted to have intercourse with the wives of others.”[15]