

# Understanding Matrilineal Descent and its Dimensions.

## PART I

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# Matrilineal Descent Genealogical Diagram

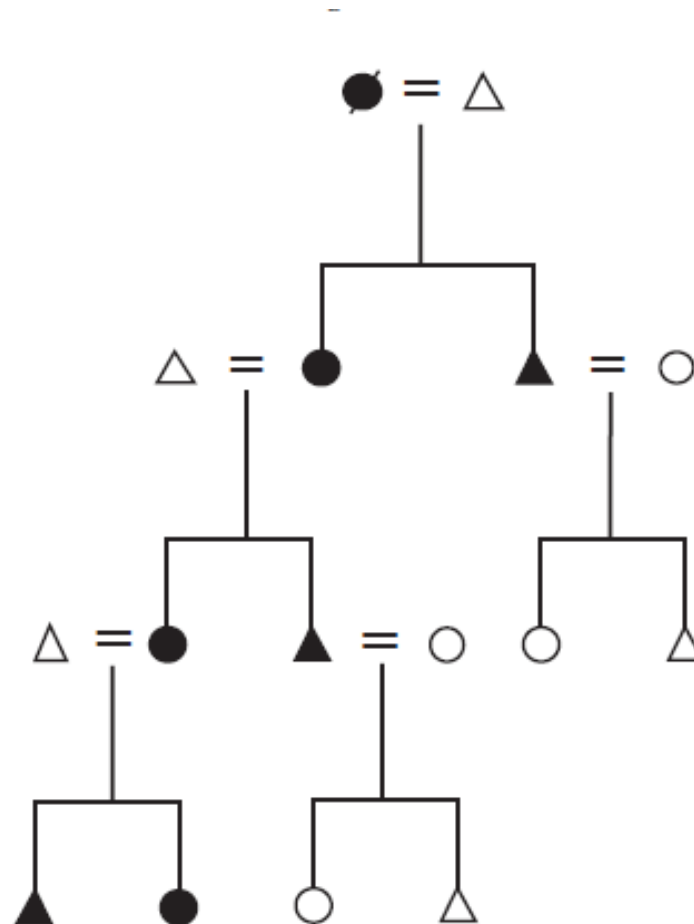


Figure 1.1 People sharing matrilineal descent shaded.  
Taken from Stone (2010: 118).

# Revisiting Matrilineal Society

- Matrilineal descent is descent traced through mother's matriline. Both females and males are members of their mother's matriline.
- The membership is transmitted by women to the offspring.
- Corporate kinship groups can be formed tracing the matriline.

# Revisiting Matrilineal Society

- Matrilineal descents are not mirror images of patrilineal descent but structurally different from them.
- Schneider posits that in matrilineal descent the “authority over the joint activity of the descent group is allocated to male members” (1961: 27)
- \*\*Matriarchy is not synonymous to matriliney.

# Matrilineal Societies

- Schneider (1961:5) said “women are responsible for the care of children” and “adult men have authority over women and children.”
- Meyer Fortes (1959) argues that matrilineal descents are system where descent proceeds not from mother to child but from mother’s brother to sister’s son.
- Kathleen Gough writes “that in matrilineal societies, the higher the productivity of the society from subsistence cultivation, the weaker the shared interests of spouses, father and child, patrilateral kin, and affines, relative to those of matrilineal kin” (1961: 595)

# Were early human societies Matrilineal?

- It was understood that matrilineal descent and matriarchy were an initial phase of cultural evolution among humans and the earliest of the human societies were matriarchal (Bachofen, 1891).
- Patriarchy is considered a developed stage in human civilization and matriarchy a vestigial remain of the past.
- Some scholars also believe that patriarchy existed all throughout human cultural evolution.
- Alas!! The whole stages cultural evolution fell apart and is questionable.
- However convincing cases of true matriarchy is difficult to find (Stone, 2010).



# Matrilineal Dilemma

- Do women enjoy greater power and position in a matrilineal society?
- Is it the woman who owns the corporate matrilineal property?
- What happens to the men who enter the household?

# Variations in Matrilineal Society

Property is  
owned by  
women

- But there are instances where property is owned by men, and ownership being passed on to sister's son

Property is  
owned by  
women

- But in some cases it is taken care of by male member of the matriline.



# Variations in Matrilineal Society

Males are heads  
of matrilineal  
kinship

- But in societies like those of Ashanti (West Africa) female too are heads along with males.

# Reasons for Decline of Matriliney

- Murdock (1969) was of the opinion that the matrilineal descent groups gave way to patrilineal descent because of the change in stage of human cultural evolution from pastoralism to settled cultivation.
- Also this commanded undivided control in hands of men and creation of immovable property. Thus leading to change in residence pattern.

# Reasons for Decline of Matriliney

- Murdock proposed that matriliney is negatively associated with male authority, “[the] concentration of [movable] property [or wealth] in the hands of men” (1969: 207).
- Patriliney was an easy solution to transfer of property and authority from father to son than from sister to sister’s child, where men were more like custodian authority but not complete control over resources and social relationships

# Reasons for Decline of Matriliney

- Aberle discussed matriliney in the light of 'specific evolution' of as an adaptation to ecological system associated with horticulture (1961: 657).
- Aberle writes "the cow is the enemy of matriliney, and the friend of patriliney"(1961: 680).
- Gough (1961) associated the decline of matriliney to rise in nuclear families. The rules of economic and residential unit changed considerably with rise of nuclear families. Also during the colonial rule, the changing economic structure of society led by industrialization impacted the existence of matrilineal groups.

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