

I used to think about Matriarchal societies as some utopia belonging to a remote past, which was, of course, oh-so-much-better. It was all about feminist nostalgia. So I was gladly surprised when I discovered that I was wrong, as there are many matriarchal societies living in the world right now. They are endangered, of course they are, but they are there. And it is not about power shifting from men to women. It is about different priorities.

It is about escaping the heteronormative model and building another type of society around other values, which we are going to explore in this lecture. It is about denying patriarchal heteronormative capitalism in a time when the financial and social crisis that we are living makes it more necessary than ever.

The Mosuo are a community living around lake Lugu, between the provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan, in south-east China, who are about 50,000 people. The Minangkabau are a community in west Sumatra (Indonesia) of four million people.

Modern anthropology denies the existence of matriarchal societies, as they are looking for a society in which power control is reversed and therefore men are oppressed by women. But this is not Matriarchy. Queer theory and postporn feminism is definitely going to help us understand.

### 1. The family unit is built around mothers

'People should never marry, as love is like the seasons of the year, they come and go.' – Yang Erche Namu, Mosuo woman

The matriarch is the boss, and she is chosen among the family members. Children, cousins, aunts and grandparents live together in the same household. Children that are born live in the maternal house are brought up collectively within the family. As a result you will find that the family is always present and available, regardless of the romantic relationships you may have in your life.

Nowadays our families are built upon the concept of romantic love and this is quite a new form of arrangement in history. Pre-arranged marriage was the norm till a few years ago and in a way it seems to me like a more truthful and sincere option if you choose marriage as the main family unit in a society. Mosuo people do not have marriage. Sexuality is outside the family unit.

Therefore, they have the freedom to fall in love without fearing that, if things go wrong, they will lose their house or child custody. They do not have to fight for the right of gay and lesbian couples to marry. If we look closely to the institution of marriage we will see that it is the origin of all evils.

### 2. A room of one's own

When Mosuo girls are around 13 or 14 years old, they get access to a room of their own. This room has two doors, one has access to the interior of the common home and the second door to the outside. The girls have total autonomy in deciding who enters the room. The only rule is that their guests have to leave before dawn. And they also have to be discreet about the visitors. They can bring different partners every night or, on the contrary, they can share their bed with the same person every night. They are not expected to commit to a relationship and the children that they may conceive will be brought up in the communal house, with the help of their mothers, brothers, sisters and all the community.

This room is called 'Babahuago' in Mosuo language and it means flower room.

Would it be possible to create a queer flower room? The flower room is the hostess, so let's imagine that any child in the family who feels like receiving and hosting, no matter which gender or which anatomy, could have a flower room. And privacy is a rule, so you can receive whoever you want in your flower room, men, women and everything in between.

### 3. Women do it better<sup>1</sup>

In matriarchal societies, work is the responsibility of women. There is a phrase that is repeated in all the books I read about the Mosuo, and it says: 'Women do it better'. They do it better because their interest is more focused in caring for the well being of their children and the community, and not so much in capital accumulation. They do it better because they are mothers and they care for the well being of the children. And we are going to go deeper in the motherhood concept. Because Matriarchal societies are societies that put motherhood in a central position inside the society.

### 4. Multiple paternity

Among the Mosuo, men are considered to have no parental responsibilities towards children that they might conceive during the visits to the flower rooms. Mosuo men are responsible of the children of their sisters and their household and family. So the paternal contribution is detached from biological parenthood. In Mosuo the word 'Awu' means both: father and uncle. It makes sense, as in fact, the children of your sisters are children of your own blood.

When Paul Le Jeune, French Jesuit missionary in French Canada in XVII, talked about the dangers of depraved infidelity to an Indian, he got a good lesson on parenting. The missionary told the Indian that it was not all right that their women loved other men, as it often happens amongst them. He explained him that in that way, he could not be sure of being the father of his son, who was present. The

Indian replied: 'You say silly things. You French people only love your children, but we love all the children of our tribe. – Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá, *En el principio era el sexo: Los orígenes de la sexualidad moderna* (Barcelona: Paidós, 2012)

This type of social organization we live in began 8,000 years before Christ, and given that anatomically modern humans have existed for at least 200,000 years, it becomes only 5 per cent of our collective experience. It is not that much. So, let's not accept it as the only possible reality. This is a recent invention, we settled down in a piece of land, we invented agriculture and we domesticated animals, and therefore we started to accumulate possessions which we were not able to carry when we were nomads. We invented inheritance and men wanted to know who were their biological children in order to leave their properties to them. And the only way of knowing if this child is yours, guys, is to control women's sexuality through marriage and monogamy. Patriarchal society is based upon the control of women's sexuality through marriage, placing women at the disposal of men sexually and reproductively.

#### **5. Rejection of aggression and non consensual government**

The head of each Mosuo village is a man chosen by the community. One of his main functions is to mediate between neighbours. To be aggressive, inside or outside the community, is considered shameful. Violence leads to rejection. Any overreaction, especially the use of strength, is not permitted. What in our world can be seen as courage or even worse, virility, they find it intolerable. So before disputes get complicated, they turn to the village chief to impose his authority, in order peacefully to mediate.

The Minangkabau people in west Sumatra believe that no sort of government is possible, as any decision to be taken must be consensual.

On the other hand, Mosuo people think that men have the ability to make big decisions. Women handle the everyday life and manage the money. But the big decisions, such as a trip, selling an animal, the construction of a house or something of the sort, is not a women's business. It is difficult to understand for our western minds but they do not consider the so-called 'big decisions' to be important.

#### **6. Men need to wear a cap, or whoever wants to have a sexual encounter in the neighbourhood**

On the outside door of the flower room there is a hook where night visitors can put their caps. This is a way of knowing when a room is already busy. I guess that if you want some extra visitors, you can always hide the caps. Or if you don't want to have a visitor, you can always use an old cap and hang it there for the night. Night encounters are arranged during the day anyway. In a queer

matriarchy transgendering would be as easy as taking a simple cap in order to relocate yourself socially and sexually.

#### **7. Respect for individual freedom and social rejection to jealousy**

It is forbidden to talk at home about love or romantic relationships in order to avoid conflicts and jealousy. Everybody is expected to be discreet. Due to the fact that everybody can have as many relationships as desired, it is requested to respect the intimacy of the other members of the community. To show jealousy openly is considered aggressive as you are intruding in the sacred autonomy of other person.

In my many years of pro sex feminist and queer struggle, I have always spoken up. In our patriarchal world, we are in need of bringing to light our non-normative desires. It has been challenging for me to think of a society where you fuck freely throughout your life thanks to being discreet. In a queer matriarchy we wouldn't need to speak up, we would only need to fuck.

#### **8. Walking marriages, or even better, no marriage at all**

The Mosuo people do have long life relationships. Western anthropologists call them 'walking marriages', though there is no marriage at all. The partners may see each other every night, but they will never live together and the offspring will be brought up in the mother's home. The relationship can last as long as they want and when it ends, that's it. No house to split, no economical arrangements, no child custody nightmares, no children undergoing traumatic divorce processes.

Relationships between people who have a great age difference are not approved because they could be father and child.

#### **9. The wellbeing of the offspring as the base of the society**

Mosuo women take care of their babies for about one year after giving birth. Afterwards they return to work and grandparents and aunts take care of the child. The well being of the offspring is the base of the matriarchal society. Matriarchy is not the inverse of patriarchy, but a society that aims for the well being of all the children in the community.

This is the main aspect of Matriarchy and the only one that truly defines it. So in Queer Matriarchy this would also be the main goal of the whole community: the well being of children.

The way children are brought into the world and raised is fundamental for the sustenance of patriarchy. We give birth and raise our children in patriarchy, we are raised also following patriarchal rules. We are disconnected from our true emotions. It is the devastation, not only of our true loving nature, but also of our environment. We are destroying the planet as we are destroying our emotional tissue.

Look at the way women give birth: in extreme pain (whereas a few minority of women are able to have an orgasm in labour), children are systematically separated from the mother when being born (when it is known that the baby needs to be close to the mother in order to start breastfeeding), bottles substituting mother's milk, children being forced to spend long hours sitting quietly in schools. We deny children's sexuality and suppress its expression, teaching kids that it something to be ashamed of. Women's sexuality is devastated, because it is denied since infancy, girls are not allowed to explore it with games.

### 10. Ecology

The Lugu Lake symbolizes the Mother Goddess for Mosuo people. The mountain that goes high upon it, Ganmo, is the Love Goddess. All matriarchal societies have a deep respect for nature and the desire to live harmoniously in it without any violence, either against people or nature. Sexual repression, patriarchal capitalism and destruction of Earth comes all together. Queer matriarchy is ecofeminist.

1 When I talk about men and women in this guide, I mean both bio men/women and non-bio men/women, as well as people whose gender identity is flexible, trans and intersex.

María Llopis, 'Guide for a DIY Queer Matriarchy' (2013). ([www.mariallopis.com](http://www.mariallopis.com))

## Gilbert & George In Conversation with Slava Mogutin//2013

*Slava Mogutin* [...] There's a strong performance element in your practice. Has it changed throughout the years?

*George* We never said performance. We believe these are pictures not by picture-makers but living sculptures.

*Gilbert* We are the centre of our art, so what we leave behind is all us, speaking to the viewer, you see always us, part of being here. It was not a performance but a kind of sculpture, a living sculpture, and for us this is a very good form to speak.

*George* If young people go to college and learn how to make pictures, they should learn how to make these ones. They're letters, visual letters ...