

Ine van Staveren is an ex-farmer, independent researcher and author of *Between potatoes and petroleum* (novel 2014) and *The primal paradise of the hunter-gatherer: On the consequences of large-scale agriculture for men, women and the environment* (2019) www.eko-azakh.nl

Sustainable mother cultures and their hidden past

Our western environmental problems have not only led to new thinking models such as permaculture, but also to studies of ancient matriarchal societies. A special way to make our prehistoric past clear is how we at any time lived in these equal and peaceful mother cultures. As a great (bear)mother, nature took care of us, and through her, we took care of each other and our living environment.

That is the way we lived in the days of the hunter-gatherers, but also in the first millennia after the transition to agriculture. According to researchers, this primordial matriarchy is at least 100,000 years old and also occurs in the animal world. Even in the Old Testament there are traces of early matriarchy found. According to the German founder of modern matriarchate research, Heide Göttner-Abendroth, a "matriarchate" is a society in which the clan mother and the women fulfill a respected and central position. **Photo 1**



Characteristics of mother cultures

The most important similarity of modern matriarchal societies is the lineage via the female line (= matrilineal), as the Dutch historian Annine van der Meer puts into words the studies of Göttner-Abendroth.

Three generations of women in a matrilineal context live together in a (large-family)house and together they manage their house, land and livelihoods. In addition, they are economically equivalent and not individually focused on accumulation of wealth.

In these most self-sufficient horticultural and agricultural communities, the land and houses are the 'property' of the clan mother. With a lively circulation of goods, they meet each other's needs: the so-called *gift economy*. So no increase in wealth in one family clan, but a balance between production and consumption. This sharing of goods through the giving of gifts is the economic manifestation of maternal values.

From a social point of view, women are equal (also to men) and rely on mutual assistance. They live in the clan house, there mother's house, and sisters are the mothers of all their children. The brothers support them as the social fathers. Because the lovers or spouses of the sisters also live in their mother's house, these men come only to visit, the so-called visitors' marriage. Furthermore, every generation is respected in the clan house, because children are the born-again ancestors.

Political decision-making develops on consensus in a system organized along that female line of descent, such as clan councils, village councils, regional and interregional councils. At the latter, the men serve as delegates. This gave Western researchers the impression that men are in charge, while they are only intermediaries.

Mother cultures, moreover, are sacral cultures in which the divine feminine is honored. There is a lot of feminine art with feminine symbols because women guarantee the survival

of the clan. As a result they celebrate life as a gift. Because of their belief in rebirth, ancestor worship and shamanism, in addition to the cyclical experience of time, there is also a unity between the visible and invisible cosmos. The Earth is experienced as a unity, as a Mother who keeps all alive. Every daily task therefore has a holy meaning and every house is holy, because at the hearth the living meet their deceased ancestors.

A balanced society

A special example of a mother culture is found in Ladakh: one of the highest and driest habitable areas on Earth. Here in this northern Indian state with dry, arid valleys between the high mountain peaks of the Himalayas, the Buddhist inhabitants live from farming and livestock. Nevertheless, they developed a peaceful and equal society.

But population growth does certainly not belong to their culture, says the linguist Helena Norberg-Hodge in the film *Ancient Futures : Learning from Ladakh*.



Foto2

Her first stay with the Ladakhi in 1975 radically changed her views on traditional societies and her own western culture. Since then she has been committed to protecting the Ladakh culture, but also worldwide to promoting localization according to their example. Localization is limiting the economic activities to a small area. This should stop globalization, says Norberg –Hodge, because the economic global expansion has dramatic consequences for communities such as those of the Ladakhi.

When the Indian government opened the borders of Ladakh in 1975, Norberg-Hodge discovered a society in which there was no waste or pollution, where crime was virtually non-existent and in which people were strong and vital .

Their life force appears to be the result of being inextricably linked to others and their environment: the Ladakhi belong to this place on Earth through intimate, daily contact and through knowledge of their immediate environment with its seasons, of which eight months are winter.

Although Norberg-Hodge does not speak of a matriarchal culture in her book and the film, probably due to unfamiliarity, according to Heide Göttner-Abendroth, this people has many characteristics of that culture. A lack of self-awareness about their exceptional way of life and its origin is not uncommon among matriarchal communities.

They often have no knowledge of that other, patriarchal culture.

Self-sufficient

In visual details, Norberg-Hodge tells about her first years with the Ladakhi and their self-sufficient and sober way of life. Their small fields of wheat and barley varieties, in an extraordinarily thoughtful irrigation system with glacier water, yield a rich harvest in the short growing season. These yields are supplemented by harvest from the family-owned kitchen-gardens and from the orchards full of fruit trees on the warmer, lower-lying fields. She talks about how families jointly herd the cattle on the higher grounds or how they build their own houses with boulders and bricks of clay and straw - everyone can build a house. How they help each other with house building and grain harvests and how young and old are part of their community. In addition, they offer each other assistance with birth, marriage or death in small social institutions of four to twelve households, the *pasfun* .

According to Norberg-Hodge, the simple manner in which justice is done, the absence of stress and anger, the valued help of instant mediators in a small conflict and their

cheerfulness and singing, such as in a joint harvest, are the result of their small social groups. This directly confronts everyone with the responsibility for their behavior.

Traditional villages in Ladakh are also democratically organized. Every family owns its own land (with an average size of 2-4 ha) and the inequality in wealth is minimal. Approximately ninety-five percent of the population belongs to the middle class and the remaining five percent consists of a small group of aristocrats and a lower class of carpenters and blacksmiths. This subdivision does not cause any tension, because they meet each other every day in a relaxed atmosphere.

Stable population

During her first visit to Ladakh, Norberg-Hodge was not the only one who noticed the spontaneous smile of the women, their teasing and frank talk to men and their great confidence, strength of character and dignity.

Many first travelers to Ladakh also reported the exceptionally strong position and freedom of women. This position as well as their social, economic and political equality prove their original matriarchal culture. Polyandry, a marriage with several men, often two brothers, was still very common in the late 1970s, despite a ban in 1942, and this appears to be the key factor in limiting births and maintaining a relatively stable population in Ladakh throughout the centuries.



Photo3

This stability in turn contributed to a balance in the environment and in social harmony. Agitation or struggle is of course much less present if the number of people, depending on a fixed amount of resources, remains the same from generation to generation. Because regardless of the marriage form, the land ownership with the Ladakhi remains intact and undivided by inheritance. In this way they prevent splitting into smaller and smaller plots. In addition, the household is the center and because there are few decisions in the outside world - these are things that have been regulated in the same way for centuries - the role of men is much less important than in our industrial world.

The Ladakh Women's Association

However, in ten years, Norberg-Hodge saw the pastoral area around the capital Leh change through aggressive Western trade culture into streets full of traffic and air pollution and with soulless concrete barracks in a dusty desert. The once clear water brooks were polluted and the water undrinkable. The increasing economic pressure caused homelessness, unemployment and competition and within a few years friction arose between different communities. All these things had never existed in the last five hundred years!

This change also affected the position of women. That's why Norberg founded The Women's Alliance of Ladakh in 1991. This network strengthens women in their previously decision-making power and helps them with local culture and agriculture .

Despite these problems, the people of Ladakh prove that even in a very inhospitable and relatively infertile landscape you can live together peacefully, provided that the population remains stable. So their original and ecologically responsible way of life can inspire people worldwide, also thanks to the studies of matriarchal cultures, for balance and peace.

Reference:

Dr. Annine van de Meer (2013). "Modern Societies in Balance Basic Knowledge".
www.annine-pansophia.nl/mensenland/moderne-samenlevingen-in-balans-uitgebreid.nl
With reference to the work of Dr. Heide Göttner-Abendroth.

H. Norberg-Hodge (1991). *Ancient Futures: Lessons from Ladakh for a Globalizing World*, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books. www.localfutures.org

62 matriarchal cultures are now known worldwide .
<http://www.matriarchat.eu/Aufzaehlung>

Photos:

1. Venus by Willendorf. Venus statue from 24-22.000 BC. Matthias Kabel (2007). Wikipedia *GNU Free Documentation license*
2. Ladakh: winnowing the grain. www.waladakh.org
3. Ladakh: mother and daughter in traditional dress. www.waladakh.org