The Myth of Universal Patriarchy: A Critical Response to Cynthia Eller's *Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*

In 1993, Cynthia Eller published *Living in the Lap of the Goddess* (1993) hailed by leading spiritual feminists as an illuminating study of the feminist spirituality movement in America. Her more recent book, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future* (2000) published by Beacon Press, seeks to eviscerate this same movement. The key arguments in this book are not original and were presented three decades ago in Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere's anthology *Women, Culture, and Society* (1974). The main thesis of *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory* is stated in the concluding sentence of Joan Bamberger's article, "The Myth of Matriarchy," from the same 1974 volume: "The myth of matriarchy is but the tool used to keep woman bound to her place. To free her, we need to destroy the myth."[1]

The political nature of Eller's book is revealed in the opening quotation by Kwame Anthony Appiah: "The real political question. . .as old as political philosophy. . .[is] when we should endorse the ennobling lie." Such "falsehoods," he writes, are not only "useless," but "dangerous."

The dangerous, "ennobling lie" that Eller attempts to debunk is the recognition that human societies have not always supported male domination in social structure and religious practice. In contrast to Western myth of universal patriarchy and the hegemony of a transcendent male monotheistic God believed to exist from the beginning of time, the so-called myth of matriarchal prehistory posits, in its simplest terms, that women were honored at the center of early non-patriarchal, non-warlike, egalitarian societies and the powers of nature were originally venerated primarily in female forms. Male domination, therefore, is not an inevitable, universal human condition and it is possible to create viable, balanced societies in the future.

Eller tells a revealing story about visiting the archaeological site of Knossos on Crete as a student and hearing from her professor that the Minoans were matriarchal. The derisive laughter that followed from the other students left her with the attitude that pervades this book: "'Matriarchal? So what?' If a lot of snickering was all that prehistoric matriarchies could get me, who needed them?"[2] Sometime later, she became intrigued with the idea of female "centeredness" in society, which she erroneously equated with female rule that represented for her "a reversal that had a sweet taste of power and revenge. More positively," she wrote, "it allowed me to imagine myself and other women as people whose biological sex did not immediately make the idea of their leadership, creativity, or autonomy either ridiculous or suspect."[3] After the appearance of *Living in the Lap of the Goddess* in 1993, Eller became identified with the goddess spirituality movement. As an ideological backlash intensified during the mid-1990s, she reversed that identification by producing *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory* which safely positioned her as one of the movement's most vehement critics.

Feminist Matriarchy

Matriarchy is strategically defined by Eller as "any society in which women's power is equal or superior to men's and in which the culture centers around values and life events described as 'feminine.'"[4] This carefully constructed definition does not diminish the negative projections and historical baggage the word carries concerning the imagined dangers of female power.

Johann Jakob Bachofen, author of *Das Mutterrecht* (1861), is usually associated with the concept of matriarchy, although he actually never used the term.[5] His English translator substituted matriarchy in place of *gynaikokraite* (gynecocracy, meaning rule by women) which he considered a prerequisite for the development of *mutterrecht* in which daughters inherit rights through the mother line. This "mother-right" was conceived by analogy with "father-right" rather than from ethnographic studies of female-oriented social forms.[6] For readers of the English translation, the term matriarchy became equated with the idea of a society ruled by women, dismissed as fantasy by most anthropologists.[7] As Sanday deftly notes, "It is impossible to find something that has been defined out of existence from the start."[8]

Eller admits that "none of the women who champion this version of Western history call themselves 'feminist matriarchalists,' and none refer to the story they tell as 'the myth of matriarchy prehistory,'"[9] yet Eller utilizes this term throughout her book to cast suspicion on anything that "feminist matriarchalists say. . ." Although German researchers, such as Heide Göttner-Abendroth *do* use the term matriarchy (without confusing it with gynecocracy),[10] the Lithuanian/American archaeologist Marija Gimbutas and most American scholars reject its use as a description of prehistoric cultures precisely because it has come to imply a social structure that is the mirror image of patriarchy in which men are dominated by women.[11] Therefore, the honesty of Eller's use of "feminist matriarchalists" as a name-calling device must seriously be questioned.

Although contemporary Western feminism is far from monolithic, with three distinct and nuanced "waves" of theoretical development,[12] it is characterized by a critique of systems of domination for the purpose of promoting equality between the sexes while respecting the human rights of all individuals in society. Nevertheless, just as the word *matriarchy* carries the implication of domination by women, the word *feminist* commonly evokes the connotation of in-your-face-uppity-females who think they should run the world. Eller gives voice to this sentiment: "As if women would ever have run things, could ever have run things. . .and if they did, men surely had to put an end to it!"[13] Therefore, the term "feminist matriarchalists" carries a dual negative which Eller relies upon to strengthen her purpose.

The idea that not all human societies and religions throughout time were male-dominated came as an awakening to thousands of women during the last decades of the twentieth century. A tremendous outpouring of art, literature, ritual, and all manner of creative expression—from the most scholarly to the most fanciful—poured forth from the widening cracks in the myth of universal patriarchy. Drawing from research on the women's spirituality movement, feminist discourse and anthropological theories, Eller attempts to denigrate the idea that non-warlike societies ever existed where women were honored at least as much as men. In her view this is a utopian, escapist fantasy.

> There is nothing in the archaeological record that is at odds with an image of prehistoric life as nasty, brutish, short, and male-dominated. . . [although] it could have been blissful, peaceful, long, and matriarchal. Female and male grave goods of equivalent wealth do not prove that men were not dominant, nor does the absence of weapons of war among the material remains . . . mean that there was no warfare.[14]

As a leveling tactic, she throws everyone who has written positively on the subject into the same pot and admits: "I make no distinction between the tenured professor examining cuneiform tablets, the novelist spinning out imaginative fantasies about prehistoric Europe, and the New Age practitioner writing. . .about past lives as a priestess. . ."[15] Conveniently, the voices of respected scholars are disregarded as easily as the most fanciful interpretations by New Age writers. Strategically chosen phrases are combined out of context from many different sources spanning decades of published work to create a series of parodies crafted for easy dismissal. The divisive tone of Eller's book is typical of the antagonistic postures critiqued by such scholars as Deborah Tannen in *The Argument Culture* (1999) and Phyllis Chesler in *Women's Inhumanity to Women* (2001).

Matriarchal Myth

Eller correctly acknowledges that a myth has arisen that has tremendous psychological and spiritual significance. The word *myth,* however, must be qualified. In contemporary vernacular, myths are equated with lies or with ideological fabrications.[16] More importantly, myths transmit patterns of cultural significance that promote balance, continuity, and mutual identity within societies. The mythologist Joseph Campbell emphasized that the deepest level of myth cannot be ideologically constructed, but is generated from a perception of the wonder and divinity of life and the interconnected unity of the cosmos.[17] The viability of any mythology derives from the ability of its metaphors to provide personal and cultural meaning.

More and more people are recognizing that the constellation of Western myths and symbols have reinforced systems of domination, exploitation, and manifest destiny. The myth Eller seeks to disqualify is inseparably linked with a rediscovery of the sacredness of the earth and the necessity to cultivate respectful relationships between the sexes and with all forms of life.

Research on Neolithic symbolism published by archaeologist Marija Gimbutas during the 1970s and 1980s (1974/1982, 1989) coincided in the United States with publications by Mary Daly (1973, 1978) Merlin Stone (1976, 1979), Susan Griffin (1978), Charlene Spretnak (1978, 1982), Starhawk (1978), Carolyn Merchant (1980), Gerder Lerner (1986), Riane Eisler (1987) and other scholars promoting the second wave of feminism, the reemergence of an earth-based spirituality and the ecology movement. Collectively, their research provided an historical basis for the rejection of entrenched beliefs in the universality of male dominated religions and social structures and the reclamation of women's leadership roles as creators of culture.

Eller counters: "Discovering—or more to the point, inventing—prehistoric ages in which women and men lived in harmony and equality is a burden that feminists need not, and should not bear." In her view, the "matriarchal myth" tarnishes the feminist

movement by leaving it open to accusations of "vacuousness and irrelevance that we cannot afford to court."[18] Scholarship in every field must be continually refined, and it is particularly important to examine the underlying assumptions and methods by which interpretations about prehistory are made. But who presumes the authority to accuse anyone of "vacuousness and irrelevance" for considering the possibility that women and men may have lived, at some time, in balanced, egalitarian societies? Whose interests are served by perpetuating such a fear of criticism?

Gender and Social Structure

From before the time of Plato, Western philosophy equated natural differences with a hierarchy of inequality, leading to the prevailing conclusion that women can never be equal to men. In effect, the doctrine of universal sexual asymmetry (interpreted as inequality) has achieved the status of theoretical as well as political hegemony in Western thought.[19] This assumption has resulted in the naturalization of male-centered reconstructions of the past that have dominated archaeology for more than two centuries.[20]

Archaeologists have traditionally assumed that male activities in all societies represent power, prestige, and spatial segregation, whereas females are associated with subordination, domesticity, the burden of childcare, and the use of tools that are technologically or aesthetically inferior.[21] Male power is considered ubiquitous and is "observed" even when there is none. Moreover, all gender, social, political, and economic differences are typically arranged hierarchically.[22] It has not been uncommon for anthropologists to transform informants' neutral statements of differences between male and female activities into hierarchical gender categories even when the informants considered the categories to be separate but not ranked.[23]

During the last thirty years, explorations of gender from a feminist perspective have precipitated an enormous body of literature that challenges prevailing androcentric bias in anthropology, archaeology, and numerous other fields.[24] While the study of gender has led to radical analyses of socially constructed differences between women and men, a primary anthropological question continues to be asked: Have any societies existed in which women were recognized as equal to or more powerful than men? Eller repeats Rosaldo and Lamphere's outdated thesis from 1974 that "all contemporary societies are to some extent male-dominated and . . . sexual asymmetry is presently a universal fact of human social life,"[25] even though this conclusion was later modified by Rosaldo to reflect a less polarized theoretical approach.[26]

Numerous feminist scholars have criticized the projection of Western assumptions about the universality of male dominance onto past societies and non-Western cultures.[27] In *Female Power and Male Dominance* (1981) anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday did not make sameness of gender identity a condition for equality. After analyzing ethnographic data from over 150 indigenous societies she rejected the notion of universal male dominance.[28] Two decades of her own primary ethnographic research has clearly documented matrilineal, egalitarian, democratic relationships between women and men.[29] Eller, however, who has done no such primary research, insists:

> If there are in fact societies where women's position is high and secure, these exceptions cannot lead us to believe that it was *this* pattern (rather than the more prevalent pattern of discrimination against women) that held in prehistory.[30]

According to this non-scientific assumption, Eller presents male domination as the most likely template for understanding all forms of social organization, even egalitarian, and she imagines "the broad pattern regarding women's status. . .as lower than men's, whatever the prevailing economy."[31] From this biased perspective she declares: "gender naturalizes male dominance" and "'femaleness' serves sexist interests, was possibly created to do so, and will always threaten to continue to do so."[32] Anthropologist Maria Lepowsky presents a different view:

> A focus upon asymmetry and domination . . . tends to presuppose its universality as a totalizing system of belief and practice and thus to distort analyses of gender roles and ideologies in places with egalitarian relations.[33]

Ethnoarchaeologist Susan Kent notes, however, that egalitarianism is not an absolute or static category and is represented cross-culturally as a continuum between highly egalitarian and highly non-egalitarian societies. She nevertheless points out that

> those scholars who claim that gender egalitarianism does not exist in any society do so because they are unwilling or unable to see highly egalitarian societies outside their own hierarchical cultural filters.[34]

Only by removing those filters and incorporating the full range of non-biased research can scientists accurately document the complete scope of women's cultural roles "negotiating, contesting, exercising and holding power as autonomous agents and individuals rather than as dependents or subordinates of men."[35] To assume that women have always been subservient to men disregards an essential body of scientific evidence.

To essentialize something is to reduce a complex idea or object to simplistic characteristics, thereby denying diversity, multiple meanings and alternative interpretations.[36] By this definition, Eller is "essentializing" the rich variation of world-wide culture systems throughout time by collapsing them into the narrow confines of androcentric expectations. (The typical use of the term "essentialist," however, is similar to "feminist matriarchalist".)

Feminist archaeologists Margaret Conkey and Janet Spector acknowledge that archaeology "has been neither objective nor inclusive on the subject of gender" and that contemporary experience of social roles has been used as the framework to interpret gender in the archaeological record.[37] Eller, however, relies upon the same traditional framework that assumes a lower status for females in prehistory based upon women's essential difference from men—the ability to give birth:

> If it is possible for our ancestors to systematically disadvantage women in spite of (or perhaps *because of*) their unique and essential mothering capacities, why should it not have been equally possible for our prehistoric ancestors to do the same?[38]

She continues: "If gender exists only (or primarily) as the means through which oppression is achieved, surely there can be no merit in reifying it, as feminist matriarchalists do."[39]

Women and Nature

In 1974, Sherry Ortner published her landmark article "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in which she gives voice to entrenched Western attitudes by attributing the devaluation of women's status to a closeness with nature, while associating men with culture and "higher" human activities. Although she admits in her conclusion that "the whole scheme is a construct of culture rather than a fact of nature,"[40] the task of "elevating" women to a level equal with men is described as exceedingly difficult due to the reality of female biology and the perceived universality of male dominance.

At precisely the same period, during the mid-1970s, a movement arose sometimes referred to as "Cultural Feminism." Cultural feminists refused to accept the inevitability of women's oppression, focusing instead on the role acculturation plays in perpetuating the dynamics of sexual inequality.[41] Instead of attempting to transcend and control the body, women began to seek liberation from oppression by embracing and redefining femaleness on their own terms and by personally investigating internalized oppression, rather than focusing primarily on external factors. Women began to celebrate their relationship with the cycles of the earth, cultivating a new respect for the female body in contrast to prevailing attitudes of shame and inferiority. A deepening alignment between embodied spirituality and a responsive kinship with all of life connected the personal with the political as expressed in this excerpt by author/activist Starhawk:

> If the sacred is immanent in nature, then we no longer have license to exploit, pollute and destroy the natural systems which sustain life. If the sacred is embodied, then our bodies carry with them a sacred authority. If the earth herself is the location of the sacred, then we must learn to live in harmony with the earth.[42]

Subsequent investigations into the origin of patriarchy, the search for evidence of balanced, egalitarian cultures, the cultivation of an earth-based spirituality and the desire to create more balanced and humane societies are at the core of what Eller derisively calls the *matriarchal myth.* This movement that embraces nature and the body, experienced by many as a dynamic process of spiritual and cultural renewal, was and is seen by certain feminists (and anti-feminists as well) as embarrassing and ultimately regressive, illustrating a major bifurcation within the feminist movement.

Eller acknowledges that women from many socioeconomic, ethnic, and educational backgrounds—"married, single, lesbian, bisexual, and straight, with no one status dominating"—have been inspired by the so-called *matriarchal myth.* It is true that many women from diverse backgrounds and lifestyles have come to honor the Sacred in female forms, and celebrate the entire range of female (read "human") capacities, while holding the conviction that male domination is not inevitable. In spite of abundant evidence to the contrary, Eller nevertheless asserts that the *matriarchal myth* rests on "gendered stereotypes" that

> work to flatten out differences among women; to exaggerate differences between women and men; and to hand women an identity that is symbolic, timeless, and archetypal, instead of giving them the freedom to craft identities that suit their individual temperaments. . . . Instead of broadening the concept of what women can be, feminist matriarchal thought narrows it, making 'femininity' about as inescapable as a pair of leg irons.[43]

Similar themes are promoted by other feminist scholars. For instance, in an overview of anthropological history, Micaela di Leonardo states:

> Both feminist essentialists and conservative anti-feminists have continued to draw on the nineteenth-century storehouse of moral motherhood symbolism, stressing women's innate identity with and nurturance of children and nature."[44]

The old equation tenaciously reappears: Because conservative, anti-feminist moralists have glorified motherhood, women's nurturing abilities, and "innate" closeness with nature (while keeping women in the kitchen and the bedroom), any woman who honors the reproductive and nurturing powers within her and experiences a deep kinship with the natural world is, therefore, assumed to be playing into regressive, patriarchal stereotypes that will keep her in bondage. What's the alternative? Not to honor motherhood? To deny women's nurturing capacities and resonance with nature in order to escape a patriarchal trap?

The personal lives of countless individuals, named by Eller as *feminist matriarchalists,* have functioned for decades as multidimensional laboratories for personal and societal transformation. These women are hardly the shrinking violets of 19th-century "femininity," yet Eller conflates their individually motivated, embodied inquiries with the simplistic stereotype of sexist "femininity" in which women are assumed to be "clinging to a single concept of femaleness" that she associates with "impotence, restraint, and stasis."[45] Eller insinuates that these feminist women are mindlessly directing their lives according to "universal claims about who 'women' really are, [and] what traits they will (or ought to) evidence as a result of their biological sex."[46] For women who have devoted themselves to the arduous task of reclaiming personal identity from layers of patriarchal conditioning, the imposition of such a narrow theoretical frame discards the validity of their own experiences and achievements. How can such an injustice serve the interests of women or of feminism?

Lamenting that being female evokes male-defined categories and continual victimization, Eller announces: "The obvious option seems to be, as feminist Denise Riley suggests, 'to stand back and announce that there *aren't any* women.'"[47] Then, in a sudden stroke of insight, she adds:

> Defining women by the sexism that labels them does not rule out the possibility of rehabilitating values traditionally dismissed as 'feminine.' We can work to make the world a place that practices compassion and nurturance, that values relationships and the natural world.[48]

Cultivating these human values is what the so-called *feminine matriarchalists* have been doing all along with one major difference: in Eller's scheme, male supremacy is never challenged.

The Presence of the Goddess

For Western women, steeped in androcratic traditions that exclude deity in female forms, the discovery of Goddess worship in multicultural contexts and the profusion of female imagery from world prehistory came as revelation. The title of Merlin Stone's 1976 volume *When God was a Woman* appeared as a banner headline announcing a new consciousness that represented heresy within the Judeo-Christian context.

Women who searched for female imagery in the earliest human art found descriptions of "man the hunter" as the first artist depicting animals and women as objects of his conquests. Ice Age sculptures of nude females, found along the big game corridor between the Pyrenees and Siberia, 30,000-10,000 before present, were named Venuses, implying an erotic function in service to the male imagination. These sculptures, that fit easily in the hand, are typically described as fertility fetishes, Stone Age pornography, or mother goddesses. Such definitions conform to the notion that, from Paleolithic times, men were engaged in cultural activities as artists, shamans, and creators of technology, whereas women were sex objects concerned with fertility, child bearing and primitive domesticity.

The first archaeologist to present an in-depth investigation of prehistoric European symbolism, offering an alternative to the typical androcentric viewpoint, was Marija Gimbutas, whose theories are targeted for dismissal in Eller's book. In Gimbutas' view, Paleolithic as well as Neolithic female sculptures were not produced for the erotic stimulation of males, but expressed concepts of the sacred source and cyclic mystery of life rendered in female forms, which she called "Goddess." Gimbutas stressed that this cosmogonic concept of deity was not limited to fertility or motherhood, but had multiple functions and representations. In order to adequately study these various manifestations, Gimbutas writes: "Attention must be paid to how they are rendered, with what other symbols they are associated, and whether their depiction extends over long ages."[49]

Ethnographic sources provide clues to the possible significance of miniature female sculptures found in Ice Age contexts. For instance, in Siberia where the ice-shield melted slowest in Eurasia, a continuity of Palaeolithic socioeconomic patterns endured in local populations. Various Siberian peoples have long associated the natural world with female spirits. In the mythology of the Finno-Ugrians, for instance, the earth, forests, water, wind, and fire are believed to express the living presence of female deities. The Siberian Evenki people traditionally keep a female sculpture in every tent, symbolizing the spirit of a female ancestor guardian who protects the fireplace and is responsible for the well-being and shelter of the family. The Chukchee people of the Siberian northeast have a custom of giving a "doll" to the bride, symbolizing a protective female ancestor. Moreover, in these cultures, the roles of prominent women, such as female shamans, have been preserved.[50] There is no contradiction between this evidence and Gimbutas' concept of Goddess.

Eller admits that "the idea that [prehistoric imagery] had a religious or magical function is relatively well supported." Nevertheless, she devotes an entire page of drawings that she explains are "intended to illustrate a resemblance between Paleolithic

figures. . .and contemporary pornographic images of women."[51] She discusses the "vulva-finding expedition" of twentieth century male archaeologists, and repeats Sally Binford's remark that Paleolithic vulva symbolism "would be right at home in any contemporary men's room."[52] In contrast, Gimbutas states:

> A serious and continuous obstacle in the study of ancient societies is the indolent assumption that they must have resembled our own. . . the existence of 'a different world' is the hardest thing to admit.[53]

Marija Gimbutas had a long and esteemed career in archaeology before she was discovered by the Goddess movement. After establishing her reputation as a renowned scholar of European prehistory at Harvard University, Gimbutas became Chair of European Archaeology at University of California, Los Angeles, and was project director of five major Neolithic sites in southeast Europe (1967-80). Her research on the earliest agrarian cultures of southeast Europe (c. 6500-3500 BC) resulted in a pioneering study of Neolithic symbolism. Neveretheless, Eller describes her status as "peripheral," insinuating through the press that Gimbutas "built a career upon her belief in a matriarchal past."[54]

While Gimbutas did not ignore the existence of male imagery (which she called "gods"), she interpreted the vast majority and variation of female iconography (which she called "goddesses") as expressions of the centrality of the female in myth and ritual and the significance of women's participation in the continuity of cultural life. While the term "Goddess" is often problematic for Westerners who tend to imagine a female version of the transcendent Father God, Gimbutas defined "the Goddess" as "the unity of all life in nature" and "the infinite powers and patterns of nature expressed through plant, animal, and human life"[55] a metaphor of the powers of the living earth rendered in myriad anthropomorphic and zoomorphic forms.

Although Eller actually agrees that goddess worship is the "most likely" explanation of Neolithic figurines, she also asserts: "There is no warrant for. . . the assumption that prehistoric goddess worship, insofar as it existed, conferred greater respect upon women or insulated them from misogyny or subordination to men."[56] Anthropological research by Peggy Reeves Sanday, relegated to a footnote in Eller's text, supports the opposite conclusion: "male gods correlate with male power while goddesses or mixed-sex pantheons correlate with greater status for women."[57] Sanday asks:

> Which sex is imbued (naturally or socially) with the reproductive powers that recharge the sources of supernatural fecundity? What is the gender of the dominant symbols tying the archetypal to the social? How do males and females complement one another in the political arena and how is this arena tied to the cosmological order?[58]

Recognizing the difficulties involved in adequately interpreting the belief systems and social structures of prehistory, Gimbutas developed an interdisciplinary methodology called "Archaeomythology" to broaden the scope of descriptive archaeology by incorporating scholarship from ethnology, mythology, linguistics, anthropology of religion, historical documents and other fields. Importantly, this

multidisciplinary approach provides the ability to test the validity of theories and assumptions: if an interpretation is acceptable according to one discipline but is invalidated by another, the interpretation must be reexamined.

One of Gimbutas' assumptions is that the core beliefs of traditional societies are typically slow to change and may be perpetuated through folklore, mythology, religion, and social structure over many generations, even as remnants of archaic cultural patterns.[59] Applying an archaeomythological approach, Gimbutas determined that matrilineal succession in the non-Indo-European societies of Europe and Asia Minor—Minoan, Etruscan, Pelasgian, Lydian, Lykian, Carian, and Basque, among others—did not arise from patriarchal conditions, but represents substratum continuities from earlier egalitarian, matricentric cultures where the primary deities were female.[60]

> The worship of female deities is connected to a mother-kinship system and ancestor worship in which the sexual identity of the head of the family and kin formulated the sexual identity of the supreme deity. In the mother-kinship system, woman as mother is the social center . . .venerated. . .as the progenitor of the family and stem.[61]

Similar societies are well attested by ethnographic studies, such as the Minangkabau people of West Sumatra, one of the largest ethnic groups in Indonesia. These egalitarian people, studied by Peggy Reeves Sanday for over two decades, express many of the elements described by Gimbutas as Old European. Sanday writes that in their tradition-based society, ultimate authority does not rest in political roles but in a cosmological order that pivots around female oriented symbols upheld by ritual acts coordinated by women.[62] Their social structure is based not on a gendered division of political power but on gendered divisions within the sociocultural and cosmological orders in which males and females compliment one another. The mother/child bond is sacred and customs associated with matrilineal descent are treated as foundational to personal and cultural identity. All persons are connected through females to a common ancestress who exemplifies primordial principles of conduct. Women's life-cycle ceremonies bring members of different clans together and maternal symbols are venerated, representing "a female ethos that emphasizes love, duty, and common commitment to a sacred tradition."[63] The Minangkabau people refer to their own culture as matriarchal with no implication of domination by women.[64]

Interpretating Figurines

The symbolism of Neolithic figurines was rarely a topic for discussion before Marija Gimbutas' research on Old European symbolism began to appear. *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe* was published in 1974, the same year as Ortner's article in Rosaldo and Lamphere's anthology. The fact that Gimbutas described women at the center of Neolithic cultures and that her work (especially *The Language of the Goddess,* 1989) was discovered and celebrated by the women's spirituality movement has disqualified her as a true scientist in the eyes of certain critics.[65] Gimbutas' theories struck a nerve at the center of the nature/culture debate that triggered a rising wave of uninformed criticisms. She is typically accused, for instance, of collapsing the diversity of female images under the rubric of fertility or mother goddesses.[66] Instead of

considering the full range of her theories, the critics repeatedly cite each other and parrot the same tired phrases while disregarding Gimbutas' actual voice:

> It is true that there are mother images and protectors of young life, and there was a Mother Earth and Mother of the Dead, but the rest of the female images cannot be generalized under the term Mother Goddess...They impersonate Life, Death and Regeneration; they are more than fertility and motherhood.[67]

In Gimbutas' view, Neolithic sculptures and related symbolism are visual metaphors that "represent the grammar and syntax of a kind of meta-language by which an entire constellation of meanings is transmitted."[68]

> My primary presupposition is that they can best be understood on their own planes of reference, grouped according to their inner coherence. They constitute a complex system in which every unit is interlocked with every other in what appears to be specific categories . . .[of a] cohesive and persistent ideological system.[69]

Gimbutas' methodology is not recognized as valid by processualist archaeologists who consider the symbolic dimensions of culture inaccessible to properly scientific investigation,[70] nor is it accepted by feminist archaeologists who have ignored the archaeomythological basis of Gimbutas' investigations.

Eller accurately states that feminist archaeologists operate out of entirely different assumptions from Gimbutas who never entered the gender and archaeology discussion.[71] In contrast to Gimbutas' focus on symbolism, for instance, feminist archaeologists Ruth Tringham and Margaret Conkey insist that prehistoric European figurines must be studied in terms of gender ideology and the negotiations of power relations, an approach that Eller also embraces. They are cynical about "Gimbutas' scenario of egalitarian, peaceful coexistence" which they see as encouraging conformity and discouraging resistance that would challenge the authority of the Goddess.[72] Tringham and Conkey prefer to imagine competition between Neolithic households in which residents supposedly used figurines to express and maintain symbolic autonomy. They also imagine figurines and rituals used by senior males as a way of dominating and exploiting other groups.[73] As an explanation for the increase in figurine production, they endorse the notion that figurines could have been created by women, as a "muted group," to serve as insults as a way of resisting male domination due to increased competition between the sexes.[74]

It is imperative to point out here that there is absolutely no evidence whatever of competition between households or male domination in pre-Indo-European Neolithic cultures. The assumption that competition and struggles for power are forever ubiquitous is used as the primary "evidence" for such interpretations when no other evidence exists. This is a prime example of "presentism"—the projection of contemporary conditions and expectations onto the past.

Collision of Cultures

Major social and economic changes took place in Europe within the 4th and 3rd millennia BC resulting in the establishment of Bronze Age societies. Gimbutas' "Kurgan

Hypothesis" remains the most accepted and consistently debated explanation of these changes, which she described as "a collision of cultures" resulting in radical transformations of ideology and social structure. The sophistication of this theory is lost when it is rendered simply as a cartoon of "evil warriors on horseback" sweeping through Old Europe, destroying the "good Goddess cultures." The peoples from north of the Black Sea (Proto-Indo-European speakers whom Gimbutas named Kurgans) who began entering Europe after 4400 BC lived in small bands and, Gimbutas writes, "their encroachment on Old Europe cannot be thought of as an organized, massive invasion of the type we know from historical times."[75] Nevertheless, when their barrow-type graves appeared in Europe for the first time (primarily containing males with weapons), nearly 700 major habitation sites, representing a rich fabric of cultural and technological developments, disintegrated after flourishing undisturbed for many hundreds of years. Tellingly, Eller misrepresents a statement by archaeologist James Mallory from his landmark book, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans,* to give the impression of wholesale rejection of Gimbutas' theory.[76] Mallory was, in fact, reporting a minority viewpoint. Eller intentionally omitted his primary message:

> The Kurgan solution is attractive and has been accepted by many archaeologists and linguists, in part or total. It is the solution one encounters in *Encyclopedia Britannica* and the *Grand Dictionnaire Encyclopédique Larousse.*[77]

According to Gimbutas' theory, fundamental changes in language, economy, social structure, and religious beliefs took place over two millennia as a result of complex processes of external and internal influences. The stable, egalitarian, matricentric cultures of Neolithic Europe were replaced by patriarchal patterns of dominance although Old European patterns continued as substratum elements in subsequent European societies. As Susan Kent comments: "Culture forms an integrated whole system in which gender is culturally constructed. If other parts of culture change, gender is also influenced."[78]

Eller and other critics (even feminist archaeologists) seem squeamish about inquiring into the origins of patriarchy and appear more comfortable imagining societies as always male dominated. After all, if the beginning of patriarchy in Europe can be traced to the Bronze Age, its eternal status is threatened. Eller remarks:

> The very attempt to ask and answer origins questions about sexism—which is both matriarchal myth's motivation and method—is fraught with danger . . .[leading to] a totalizing image of 'patriarchy'. . .[and a] nostalgia for a lost past. . .[which] is usually escapist.[79]

Conkey and Tringham, who hold a similar position to Eller's, state that theories about "the origins of patriarchy become a 'narrative of closure' which shuts down our imaginative powers about the many ways in which people could have lived."[80] Instead of considering the veracity of the Kurgan Hypothesis on the strength of the evidence, they simply reject it. For example, at the end of the Eneolithic (Neolithic with copper) period in the Balkans, so many houses were burned that this period is called the "Burned House Horizon." Instead of considering the wholesale burning and abandonment of villages,

the disappearance of figurines, and the simultaneous appearance of Kurgan burials as evidence of Gimbutas' theory of the end of Old Europe, Ruth Tringham (who excavated a burned house at the site of Opovo, former Yugoslavia) proposes that the inhabitants burned their own houses upon the death of the resident "patriarch."[81]

As Alison Wylie has indicated, our knowledge of the past is not as limited by the fragmentary nature of our data as it is by the limitations of our epistemologies.[82] Ironically, Conkey and Tringham ask: "Are we, as feminists, still embedded in scientific traditions of discourse and argument that are patriarchal, dominating and exclusionary?"[83] One might suggest that the answer is, unfortunately, "yes."

Conclusion

According to Cynthia Eller, the so-called *matriarchal myth* is based on sloppy scholarship and wishful thinking which must be abandoned if feminists want to avoid being accused of "vacuousness and irrelevance." On the other hand, she insists that the idea that all human cultures throughout time have probably been male dominated is the most reasonable, scientifically sound approach to prehistory. The myth of universal patriarchy and the myth of universal objectivity are apparently inseparable and ideology indeed masquerades as aetiology.

Eller recognizes that a primary motivation of the so-called *feminist matriarchalists* (as denizens of the "ennobling lie") is to overturn patriarchy by a change of consciousness, but she asserts that they are so misled that they can only manage to further incarcerate themselves into self-inflicted domestic cages by playing into sexist stereotypes. Nevertheless, Eller argues that such women are dangerous: "Men have ample reason to fear that the desire for revenge would run high if the tables were ever turned and women took power."[84]

In spite of the extensive research she did for *Living in the Lap of the Goddess,* Eller seems to have missed the point that women's spirituality has nothing to do with revenge or power politics, but it *is* about transformation and the retrieval of inner authority which systems of domination externalize. In so doing, the so-called *matriarchal myth* does present a story that challenges the foundation of universal patriarchy, which is akin to heresy. Eller writes, "For those of us with ears to hear it, the noise the theory of matriarchal prehistory makes as we move into a new millennium is deafening."[85] The fact is, the "noise" Eller refers to, is the sound of liberation from the very myth of universal male dominance that she seeks to uphold.

While conveniently stating that she does not intend to offer an alternative account of gender roles in prehistory, Eller nevertheless admits to being a "partisan" of the belief that male dominance has been universal, at least up until now.[86] She also asks:

> How can women attain real power when it seems we have never had it before? How can we hope that sex egalitarianism is possible, that male dominance can be ended, when it has been a mark of who we are as a species from time immemorial?[87]

She suggests that we "comfort ourselves" with the thought that "male dominance may be perpetuated through inertia and have no better reason to exist than tradition."[88] However, as Susan Kent reminds us: "In patriarchal societies, men expend much energy and

resources to maintain their hierarchies, economic sources, purity, and status that, from their perspective, allow them to control women."[89]

Let us also not forget that one of the main goals of feminism is to correct the androcentric bias that places the interests of men above all else. On this front, Eller contributes absolutely nothing. Instead, she adds weakly, "The fact that a goal—in this case, eradicating sexism—is in principle unreachable does not mean it is not worth pursuing with every ounce of moral fiber we can muster." All we need to do is to "decide what we want and set about getting it."[90] The problem is, the belief in the universality of male dominance acts as an internal template in which any impulse toward liberation is dangerous. In other words, as long as one believes in the inevitability of domination, that inevitability is replicated in the present and projected into the future and onto the past. Eller, therefore, is proposing a safely "unreachable" goal while leaving the androcentric model intact.

One way to keep from being criticized by those who hold power is to say what they want to hear as cleverly as possible. While posing as the savior of feminism, Eller's thesis draws strength from a wealth of anti-feminist attitudes, making her the darling of the *status quo*.

Eller does make a useful distinction between an origin myth that does not require historical veracity to be powerful, and a viable reconstruction of the past that depends upon accurate interpretation. The question of what qualifies as reliable scholarship, or as science, however, has yet to be universally agreed upon, especially concerning reconstructions of prehistoric societies. Anglo-American archaeology has been mired in philosophical debates about the dilemma of interpretation for decades and true objectivity remains an illusion, regardless of the chosen methodology.[91] All interpretations are based upon assumptions which influence the range and direction of interpretive possibilities. To assume, for instance (even unconsciously), that male dominance "has been a mark of who we are as a species from time immemorial"—or that balanced, peaceful societies are, by definition, utopian—promotes a biased lens that diminishes any evidence to the contrary. In the same way, the work of Marija Gimbutas is treated to ideological dismissals by critics who do not possess the multidisciplinary competence that informed her scholarship. Instead of evaluating her work on its own terms, they continue to cite each other, repeating the same false representations of her work.[92]

Eller has laid out an entire range of arguments that exposes fanciful elaborations on both ends of the ideological spectrum. Her approach, however, is snide and divisive and serves to intensify a split within feminism that has festered for three decades. In 1982, Charlene Spretnak initiated the first published debate on the nature/culture divide in an appendix in *The Politics of Women's Spirituality.* It is time now to take another step in that direction by creating an environment of mutual respect that is broad enough to embrace our differences and encourage fruitful dialogues.

In the meantime, as Eller has stated: "We still have to confront the possibility that prehistory happened just as matriarchal myth says it did." Indeed. It is the myth of universal patriarchy that will not give women a future.

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[1] Bamberger 1974, 280. Interestingly, Bamberger's article is not included in Eller's list of references.
[2] Eller 2000, 4.
[3] Ibid 5.
[4] Ibid 13.
[5] The first writer to use the term was E.B. Tylor in his article "The Matriarchal Family System (1896).
[6] Sanday 1998, 2002, xi. See Bamberger (1974, 263-4) who accepts "matriarchy" to mean domination of the mother over family and society.
[7] Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974, 2.
[8] Sanday 2002, xi.
[9] Eller 2000, 12.
[10] Göttner-Abendroth 1999 defines *matriarchy* as "in the beginning, the mothers." See discussion with Heide Göttner-Abendroth in Marler 1998,45.
[11] For a redefinition of matriarchy, see Sanday 2002, 1998, 1993.
[12] For a perceptive overview of the development of feminist thought and gender studies see Gilchrist 1999, 1-16.
[13] Eller 2000, 4.
[14] Ibid 181.
[15] Ibid 11.

[16] See Bamberger 1974, 267.
[17] See Campbell 1986, 17-18; Marler 1987. The ethnologist Adolf Bastian (1826-1905) distinguished two mythic levels: the universal (*Elementargedanken*), and the local inflections, or folk ideas (*Völkergedanken*), discussed in Campbell 1986, 11.
[18] Eller 2000, 8.
[19] Sanday 1993, 5.
[20] Arnold and Wicker 2001, vii.
[21] Kent 1998, 19.
[22] Kent 1999, 38.
[23] Ibid, 32.
[24] See, for example, Gero and Conkey 1991; di Leonardo 1991; Nelson 1997; Sweely 1999; Gilchrist 1999; Mascia-Lees and Black 2000. For an introduction to the complexities of the subject of gender, see Oakley 1997, 29-55.
[25] Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974, 3.
[26] Rosaldo 1980; Nelson 1997, 116.
[27] See, for instance, Gero and Conkey, 1991; Kent 1998, 1999; Nelson 1997.
[28] Sanday 1981, 1993.
[29] Sanday 2002.
[30] Eller 2000, 180-81.
[31] Ibid, 118.
[32] Ibid, 77.
[33] Lepowsky 1993, 283-4.
[34] Kent 1999, 38-41, 45.
[35] See Sanday 1993.
[36] Tringham and Conkey 1998, 22. The typical use of the term "essentialist," however, carries the same negative implication as "feminist matriarchalist."
[37] Conkey and Spector 1984, 1-2.
[38] Eller 2000, 97.
[39] Ibid, 77.
[40] Ortner 1974, 87.
[41] See Spretnak 1991, 128.
[42] Starhawk 1997, 519-20.
[43] Eller 2000, 8, 68.
[44] di Leonardo 1991, 26.
[45] Eller 2000, 67, 65.
[46] Ibid, 79.
[47] Ibid, 77.
[48] Ibid, 79.
[49] Gimbutas 1991, 223.
[50] Haarmann 2000, 8, 13.
[51] Eller 2000, 137.
[52] Ibid, 123.
[53] Gimbutas 1991, 324.
[54] Eller 2000, 90; Jernigan 2001. Gimbutas insists that her work on European prehistory was never motivated by ideological concerns. See interview with Gimbutas in Marler 1997, 18-21.
[55] Gimbutas 1991, 343.
[56] Eller 2000, 139, 141, 181, 107.
[57] Sanday in Eller 2000, 216, n. 38.
[58] Sanday 1998, 8.
[59] Eller misrepresents my quote that "mythology and folklore are conservative and slow to change" by saying that "any history contained within myths could be carried along intact for many generations" (2000, 173). I was referring to metaphor, not literal history. The example she presents of the use of Romanian funeral laments actually endorses, rather than disproves, the continuity of folkloric motifs. The lament in question was performed in a traditional manner to merge the deceased person's death with an ancient mythic theme, transforming his personal history into a larger, timeless story.

[60] Gimbutas 1991, 344.
[61] Ibid, 342.
[62] Sanday 1998, 8.
[63] Sanday 2002, xi-xii.
[64] Other peoples considered "living matriarchal societies" include the Mosuo in China, near Tibet (see Göttner-Abendroth 1999, 31-41) and the women-centered society of Juchitán, Oaxaca, Mexico, among others.
[65] See Marler 1997, 20 for an interview with Gimbutas in which she states that she was not motivated by ideology or by the women's movement to conduct her research.
[66] Conkey and Tringham 1995, 214; Beck 2000.
[67] Gimbutas 1989, 316.
[68] Ibid, xv.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Wylie 2002, 4. In an attempt to address the ideational and symbolic dimensions of prehistoric culture neglected by processual archaeology, Renfrew and Zebrow (1994, xiii) introduced the "new" field of "cognitive archaeology" as rooted in the scientific tradition and in an empirical methodology that "seeks to draw upon the cognitive, and the mathematical and computer sciences."
[71] Eller 2000, 89.
[72] Tringham and Conkey 1998, 42-43.
[73] Ibid 38, 42; Conkey and Tringham 1995, 228.
[74] Tringham and Conkey 1998, 42 repeating the ideas of Shirley Ardener.
[75] Gimbutas 1991, 359.
[76] Eller 2000, 165.
[77] Mallory 1989, 185.
[78] Kent 1998, 18.
[79] Eller 2000, 183.
[80] Conkey and Tringham, 1995, 211.
[81] Tringham and Conkey 1998, 38-9. Tringham attributed the house burning to the death of the "patriarch" during her presentation at the 7th Gender and Archaeology Conference, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, California, Oct. 4, 2002.
[82] Wylie 1991.
[83] Conkey and Tringham 1995, 231.
[84] Eller 2000, 178.
[85] Ibid, 3.
[86] Ibid, 186.
[87] Ibid, 185.
[88] Ibid, 187.
[89] Kent 1998, 18.
[90] Eller 2000, 188.
[91] For a masterful overview of the history of conceptual issues in archaeology, see Wylie 2002.
[92] For an overview and analysis of the criticisms of Gimbutas' work, see Maguire 2002.