

Matrilineal Descent

Matrilineal descent refers to a kinship system in which ancestry from the mother's lineage is the primary means of establishing ownership of property and power in a society, both in terms of ordering one's position in contemporary society and also in the generational transfer of power from generation to generation. The options for determining lineage are three: patrilineal (through the father), matrilineal (through the mother), and ambilineal (through both). All social institutions (family, economy, education, government, and religion) are effected by a society's kinship system. Native Americans tended to favor matrilineal, while Euro-Americans tended to favor patrilineal. This became one of many sources of conflict in the course of the Columbian exchange.

Matrilineality points to a rise in status for women. A society that includes matrilocality (that newly married couples reside with the mother's kin group) can mean more status for the woman. It certainly means that the physical abuse of the woman is likely to be better contained by her kin group than in a patrilocal system. If the society engages in foraging (hunting and gathering), or engages in horticulture (no plows, no animal husbandry, with smaller plots), then the women's status is elevated compared to agricultural societies (like those of Europe). Thus, the combination of a matrilineal, matrilocality horticultural or foraging society typically results in the highest status women achieved in the world prior to the 20th century.

Matrilineality was common among Native tribes, with estimates running as high as 80% across the continent. It was ubiquitous, in every ecological niche, from New England to the Pacific Northwest, and from the southern woodlands (virtually all societies were in this region) through the Southwest. Worldwide, only about 14% of societies are matrilineal. Early European settlers were confused by the emphasis on female lineages, as evidenced in John Smith's account of his first foray up the James River when he met Pocahontas' chieftan father, "Powhatan hath three brethren, and two sisters. . . For the Crowne, their heyres inherite not, but the first heyres of the Sisters, and so successively the weomens heires." There are numerous examples of European culture shock and confusion about this societal structure.

The best known example of matrilineality is the Iroquois Confederacy. This was a matrilocality, matrilineal kinship system in which the women had considerable power. Descent was ordered through mothers. Women negotiated the marriages; upon marriage, the groom moved into the longhouse of his bride's kin. The primary male in the lives of children here (and in most matrilineal, matrilocality Native tribes) was the eldest maternal brother. The longhouse could be more than 100 meters long. It was subdivided into nuclear family areas, with two nuclear families sharing a hearth. A passageway the length of the longhouse at one side connected all the inhabitants. Female elders also distributed land. All land was held in common, but *usufrucht* (the ability to create and keep wealth using resources you do not own) was determined by the elder women of the tribes.

Female elders of the longhouse would choose *sachems*, the male who possessed political and military power over her kin group. Males were subject to recall (literally "dehorning") if they did not adequately reflect the desires of their kin group. The Iroquois Confederacy had a representative government comprised of 50 *sachems* who passed laws on matters pertaining to the five tribes as a whole, such as warfare.

In societies in which women selected men to rule, the status of the men in council with other clans or tribes (in the case of the Iroquois) was based upon female lineage, war prowess, age, male ancestors, and wisdom (among other things). Thus, the entry to power for males in these societies was through women, but qualification was also determined by gendered male accomplishments. Yet in matrilineal societies women held other roles of power not yet acceptable to Euro-Americans. An example of this was Toypurina, medicine woman to the Tongva tribe, located in what is today Southern California. In 1785 tribal males asked her to lead a revolt against the Spanish soldiers at Mission San Gabriel. On her word, other local tribal chiefs joined the rebellion, though they were ultimately thwarted, and Toypurina was banished to a mission in Northern California to destroy her power.

The Hopi were a matrilineal and matrilocal culture. Since war was rare, there was less of a demand for males to exert military or political leadership. Theoretically, egalitarianism was the rule for all, regardless of gender. Indeed, theologically, the power of women was compared to the generative power of the earth.

Lineages need not be literal tracings of descent to the beginning of society. Fictive kinship exists in order to supply the necessary authority and order to the world. For example, all outsiders to the Choctaw were interpreted as either distant kin or foes.

Women did have comparatively more power in Iroquois and other Native societies than perhaps any other society on earth at the time. According to anecdotal records and captivity narratives, more than a third of European women kidnapped chose to remain with Native cultures, in no small part in accord with the relative status women possessed compared to European societies.

The matrilineal systems of Native Americans offered women dramatically more freedom and power than one could find in agricultural societies. Only in the 20th century did Western civilization strive to catch up with Native cultures in this regard.

Mark Anthony Phelps

See Also: Captivity Narratives; Iroquois Confederacy; Pocahontas; Toypurina.

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Spider Woman

The idea or philosophy of Spider Woman, or Grandmother Spider, is something many pre-Christian civilizations throughout the Americas share for teaching about creation and the creative process. The Huichol of western Mexico call her *Takutsi Nakawe*; the Navajo call her *Sus-Sistinnako* and also Changing Woman; the Hopi call her *Kokyangwuiti*, the grandmother of the sun and the great medicine power who sang people into the fourth and present world. The Kiowa call her *Konatasohi*, and the Cherokee call her *Kanane'ski Amai'yehi*. The Keres of the Pueblo call her *Cochito*, or Thought Woman.

The spider defined the world by stretching its legs from the place of emergence and by partitioning the earth into four parts. Among the Laguna, Grandmother Spider, or Old Spider Woman brought the light, weaving, medicine and life. Among the Keres, she was known as Thought Woman who created humans and keeps them in creation even now. Spider woman, *Ts'its'tsi'nako*, or Thought Woman, created through her thinking mind. She also created the *Kacina*, or spirit messengers and protectors.

These women, through their changing nature and creative thought, teach several fundamental principles that seek to guide the development of balanced relationships and “keep humans in harmony with the rest of the world.” The intricate patterns of the web Spider Woman weaves teaches followers to look for the patterns in the world, “the power of connection” and that all beings are creations and therefore relatives, making survival tied to respect for all life. Her web forms a medicine wheel, a way of discovering oneself and ones place in the world by learning how to perceive the proper balance of relationships among all creation. The gifts of medicine she teaches take infinite forms of knowledge and understanding and are gained through seeking life in all its infinite forms.

Spider Woman also reflects the recognition of many civilizations that the female creativity is central to the universe and finds balance with male forces. Concepts of masculinity and femininity, like sexuality, were unlike those introduced with European Christianity. The creator was most often identified as female, though at times transformed into male. In the Southwest, spider webs along with vulvas were incised into rocks about 7500 BCE to 600-900 BCE. In circular or polygonal houses and temples throughout the Americas, symbols of this understanding or perception of creation include the full moon, spider web, womb, or place of emergence into the present world; and a multilayered vertical universe or cosmic egg.

These perceptions not only informed gender relationships and promoted complimentary and equal relationships between men and women, but also respected and allowed space for all expressions and variations of gender and sexuality. Women were valued in their role as vitalizers and not just child bearers. The feminine is also recognized as being both creative and destructive. Destruction being a force that allows for regeneration and recreation, rather than brute or unnecessary force. The Lakota also understood all the earth and its creatures as being intelligent, alive, and intricately and inherently connected. Mothers and mother goddesses are all an aspect of grandmother spider, or thought woman.

The universal characteristics of life are embodied in the oral tradition, composed of rituals and narratives that begin with Grandmother Spider, or aspects of creation. With the social transformation from egalitarian to patriarchal systems caused by European

conquest, mother creators were masculinized. The primacy of female as creator was displaced with ideas like the Great Spirit. The Hopi Goddess of Spider Woman became *Maseo* or *Tawa*, referred to in the masculine. Among the Cherokee, the Goddess of the River Foam was replaced by thunder in many tales. Among the Iroquois, Sky Woman often then gathered her ideas from her dead father or her monstrous grandson. This was the first step in replacing a gender-complimentary system with masculine deities. Scholars and activists believe that recovering imagery of mother creators is crucial to Indian resistance to cultural and spiritual genocide.

Leleua Loupe

See Also: Matrilineal Descent.

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Pocahontas (c. 1595-1617)

Disney has honored her in film. She is a staple of the public school curriculum. Pocahontas is a symbol of a good Native American. We think we know her, but the events of her life have grown beyond the bounds of history. She has become a myth, one useful in telling a particular version of the American past. Even historians cannot always be sure what is true and what is not when it comes to Pocahontas. In many ways she is the American version of Eve, the progenitor of a new race of humans and a new destiny for her people and for Euro Americans. Because much of what is known about Pocahontas came from the writings of the Europeans, her story is often couched in the bias that Native Americans were primitive and godless savages grateful for the civilizing influence of Euro Americans. The Pocahontas story also works to redeem Anglo-Native Americans relations by representing the belief that Euro Americans and Native Americans could coexist peacefully in a racial hierarchy that embraces white superiority.

Pocahontas belonged to a group of people who lived in the deciduous forests that once covered Virginia. The chief of this region, Powhatan, may have had more than 100 wives and dozens of children, among them Pocahontas. It is difficult to pinpoint her birth. Historians tend to fix it in 1595, though the day and month are almost certainly lost. At least one historian believes that Pocahontas was Powhatan's favorite child. Historians appear to know nothing about her mother, suggesting that Euro Americans largely ignored Powhatan women. Powhatan apparently named her Matoake or Matowaka, meaning Little Snow Feather. Historians are not sure why the father chose this name. Perhaps the name signified that Pocahontas had been born in winter. The name Pocahontas means playful and mischievous. She was likely born at her father's chief estate, Wenowocomoco, meaning "royal."

As a girl, Pocahontas may have tended a garden to supplement a diet of meat, fish, marine invertebrates, roots, nuts, and berries. Powhatan's wives likely cared for Pocahontas as she grew into adolescence. She probably learned to swim at an early age and bathed at dawn and dusk. Along with other girls, Pocahontas may have gathered wood, made pottery, wove baskets, made clothes, and helped raise younger children. It is possible, however, that Pocahontas' status elevated her above mundane chores.

Pocahontas was about twelve when Europeans settled Virginia in 1607. In the tense relations between the two peoples, the Powhatan Native Americans captured one of the leaders of the European colonists, John Smith. When they brought Smith to Powhatan, Pocahontas had her first glimpse of a European. According to Smith's account, Powhatan, conferring with his lieutenants, decided to kill the Englishman, but Pocahontas intervened to save him. Herein lies the source of the romantic view of Pocahontas that has eclipsed all other interpretations of her: that Pocahontas instantly fell in love with Smith when she saw him and begged her father not to kill him.

Because this story comes from Smith's own recollections, one might be tempted to believe it. Smith, however, wrote other accounts in which beautiful women rescued him from death, leaving his story about Pocahontas in doubt. Moreover, Smith waited seventeen years to write this account,

leaving historians perplexed by the delay. Pocahontas was twelve years old when the event occurred and thus unlikely to fall instantly in love with any middle-aged Englishman. According to historians, it is more likely that Pocahontas acted as part of a ritual acceptance or adoption of Smith in her embrace of him. Smith may have been mistaken to think his life in danger. Pocahontas' actions may have signified that Powhatan royalty, of which she was a member, had embraced Smith as a friend of the tribe. Even if some Native Americans were suspicious of Smith, they would have recognized the political advantages of adopting an Englishman. Certainly, in ensuing decades the story has played an important part in the racist notion that Indians recognized their own inferiority when faced with the greatness of Euro Americans.

Smith temporarily settled in a hut near Powhatan's palace, and in the ensuing weeks Pocahontas befriended him. Smith was not free to return to Jamestown, but neither did he appear to have been Pocahontas' slave. In January 1608, Powhatan freed Smith, though the chief expected tribute from him in gratitude for his freedom. Pocahontas, surely with her father's blessing, brought food to the colonists, saving them from starvation. She also served as Powhatan's mouthpiece, carrying messages from the chief to the Englishmen. The frequency of her visits and her gifts led the colonists to esteem her. She was a symbol of peace and prosperity.

When relations between the settlers and Native Americans deteriorated, Smith took several of the latter as captives. Powhatan sent Pocahontas to secure their release, believing that Smith would not ignore her, either because of his friendly relationship with her or because of her status as Powhatan's favored daughter. As the chief had foreseen, Smith relented and released the captives, undoubtedly recognizing that the English were in no position to fight a war with Powhatan's people.

Throughout 1608, Pocahontas continued to visit Smith and his men, but because the natives had a poor harvest, she could not provide them a steady supply of food as they had come to expect. That winter Powhatan invited Smith to his palace on the pretext of dining with him. In truth he had apparently decided to kill Smith and his retainers. When Pocahontas learned the truth she warned Smith to leave his encampment. It is impossible to know why Pocahontas did this, or how much Powhatan knew. She may have been saving Smith and his men from violence, or acting so as to trick the English into leaving the area, thus avoiding armed conflict. Whether Smith ever showed appropriate gratitude for the risks Pocahontas had taken for him is also unclear.

In about 1610, Pocahontas may have married Native American warrior Kocoum. Certainly by 1613, in her next encounter with the English, no husband accompanied her, leading historians to believe Kocoum died, the marriage had dissolved, or he never existed in the first place. In 1613, the English, who owed so much to her, captured Pocahontas. During her imprisonment with the English, Pocahontas adopted European customs. She converted to Anglicanism, adopted European habits, manners, and clothes, and learned the English language. Powhatan was unable to buy his daughter's freedom, though he made every effort to secure her release.

As a native princess, Pocahontas retained her status as a noblewoman in European society. In 1614, she married tobacco baron John Rolfe. Powhatan did not attend his daughter's wedding to John Rolfe. In English society, Pocahontas took the name Rebecca. Between 1614 and 1622,

Jamestown enjoyed the Peace of Pocahontas, so named to honor the woman who had brought peace to the colony. In 1615, Pocahontas gave birth to a son, Thomas. At the invitation of investors in London, John Rolfe, Pocahontas, and Thomas crossed the Atlantic Ocean to meet King James I. English nobility held parties in her honor and found her a fascinating, charming woman. While in London Pocahontas expected to be reunited with her friend John Smith. In January or February 1617, near the end of her life, Smith at last visited Pocahontas, though by that time she may already have contracted tuberculosis, a disease to which Native Americans had no immunity. His visit did not cheer her.

On a return voyage to Virginia, Pocahontas fell gravely ill. Some suspect that tuberculosis was causing her lungs to bleed. The ship turned away from the Atlantic Ocean and took her back to England. She died there on March 21, 1617. John Rolfe arranged a Christian mass and burial, perhaps at St. George's Church in Gravesend. Fire destroyed the cemetery so no one now knows where Pocahontas is buried. Two statues, one in England and the other in the United States, commemorate her.

Today the myth of Pocahontas, exacerbated by the inaccuracies of the Disney animated movie, overshadow the real woman whose life was both interesting and tragic. Her power appears to lie more in the stories Americans tell that reassure them of their cultural superiority than in any real lessons about the conquest of North America, the genocide of native peoples, and the costs of colonialism.

Christopher Cumo

See also: Jamestown; Malinche; Slavery, Native Americans Roanoke; Virginia Company

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