



Does it matter to us today whether matriarchy ever existed? Indeed, was society ever organized and controlled by women? If so, how did this society differ from our present social organization? These questions have intrigued and sparked controversy both in the scientific community and in the woman's movement.

In her latest book, Woman's Evolution, Evelyn Reed examines these questions in the light of accepted anthropological findings and shows how much more sense such findings make if it is assumed that matriarchy did exist in primitive times.

When discussing matriarchy it is important to keep in mind the caution pointed out by Elizabeth Gould Davis in her book, The First Sex: Matriarchy is not patriarchy with an m. It was entirely different. In view of the connotation the -archy ending carries with it, another term would be preferable. Davis uses gynocracy, but Reed, though aware of the confusion it may cause, sticks with the term matriarchy because it is the one used in anthropological literature.

In primitive society the role the father played in procreation was unknown. The fact that women bled regularly with no ill effects and, even more miraculous, were able to create new life (so it seemed) caused men to hold women in great awe. This awe gave women a very powerful position, one which allowed them to exercise a measure of control over their own lives which modern women have yet to attain. Because the concept of fatherhood did not exist, neither did the concept of bastardy. Reed

shows that the taboos, such as the menstrual taboo, which under patriarchy were turned against women, were originally set up by women to protect women.

Reed shows that the matriarchal clan was the basic unit of social organization in primitive times. Cultures existing into historical times with matrilineal descent, a clan structure and matrilocal residence are thought to be vestiges of a time when women more completely controlled society. Property was held in common. Without the concept of private property, slavery didn't exist. Because the taboos set up by women were strictly observed, sexual choice was up to the women. Neither rape nor prostitution existed. Women were independent, totally able to take care of themselves and free, as were men.

Both Reed in Woman's Evolution and Davis in The First Sex conclude that matriarchy did exist in primitive times. In her book, Davis indulges in what some have called far fetched speculations. Her tone has been criticized as being too polemic. Reed's book can be subject to neither of these criticisms. Reed's tone is objective and scholarly. She sticks closely to the accepted anthropological data and draws her conclusions from it. The strength of her argument lies in her demonstration that if one accepts the hypothesis that matri-

archy did exist, then the explanation of many customs, which have long puzzled the scientists observing them, becomes clear.

Even if it can be demonstrated that matriarchy did exist, does it make any difference today? To know your history is to know your strength. If women today know that their history includes millenia in which women did indeed control their own destinies, this can bolster their courage to struggle for a future in which women again control their lives. Reed's book demolishes the assumption, too widely held, that civilization is synonymous with patriarchy. Reed shows in detail the significant role women played in civilizing the species. She challenges the assumption that the father family always existed.

There is, of course, no possibility of returning to the conditions under which matriarchy existed, but, with goals in mind which women in the past have achieved, women today can move forward to structure new and different ways of achieving them. Woman's Evolution is important because it will bolster women's courage to move forward toward a future in which the sisterhood and brotherhood present in prehistoric cultures is once again the basis for human social organization.

Reviewed by Mary Lee George-Geisser