

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

Rule By Mother: Das Mutterrecht
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Philippine Studies vol. 4, no. 1 (1956): 120–121

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RULE BY MOTHER

DAS MUTTERRECHT. *Studia Instituti Anthropos*, Vol. X. By Wilhelm Schmidt, S.V.D. Wien-Moedling: St. Gabriel Verlag. 1955. Pp. 186. sFr. 20.

An outstanding work which anthropologists cannot but welcome.

After an historical exposition of the various theories concerning "Motherright": the theory of the historian J. J. Bachofen and his followers, that of E. Grosse, a precursor of the historical school, and of evolutionists like R. Briffault, Father Schmidt, not basing his assertions on *a priori* evolutionary schemes but upon careful examination of the data of culture, shows how from the *Urkultur*, i.e. the low primitive culture, three other, less primitive, cultures evolved, one of which was the "motherright" culture.

It was brought about by women. In the *Urkultur* the woman was the gatherer of plants for food (while the males were hunting); she became the food producer, the first agriculturist and, quite naturally, also the owner of the land and of all that she could produce from the land by her labor.

This important step in human economy, where and when it occurred, imparted to women a marked economic superiority over the males and, moreover, promoted that new social system which is called "Motherright".

The woman, attached as she was to her land, did not leave her residence when she married; the man who married her had to leave his. At first (i.e. at an early stage of this cultural development) he visited his wife, not residing in her house and abode—visit marriage—where he was but a distinguished outsider. Later he stayed: marriage became matrilocal; yet, he played an inconspicuous role in social life; he remained in the community of his wife as a kind of stranger, the more so that in fact he belonged to his own maternal family.

Besides, "motherright" displayed itself in maternal descent. It was the mother's name that passed on to the children and, in general, the daughters were the sole heirs of all land property.

However, since women even in this culture could not dispense with the assistance and protection of men, the wife found her support and help in her own brother; thus the "avunculate" came into existence, which established special relations between the mother's brother and her children.

According to Father Schmidt the matrilineal culture of soil-tilling communities originated only once in the history of mankind, its cradle being the river valleys of Further India (Burma, etc.). It began to develop there after the glacial period. From Further India it spread out in three directions: 1) southwards to Indonesia, Melanesia and Australia; 2) westwards to India proper and thence to the Near East, Europe and Africa; 3) east and northwards to Tibet, China, Japan, and across the ocean to Central America and thence to North and South America.

The matrilineal culture represents, therefore, a culture cycle (*kulturkreis*) which for some time existed in all parts of the world. Yet, the rate and the extent of this cultural development were not the same everywhere: even in our present days the various stages of its development are recognizable. As a rule, however, the mother (the woman) came to lose her social superiority, so that "motherright" became masculinized (*vermannlicht*), and that especially by the growth in importance of the mother's brother. In other words, women became in many instances practically slave laborers, especially in those places where men practiced polygyny. The men by it acquired several, even many, cheap female workers. Neither were the women able to maintain their superiority in political matters: men by means of secret societies built up for themselves a power which made their opposition and intimidation successful.

"Motherright," no doubt, has to its credit positive cultural achievements, for it discovered the laws that rule the growth of plants, and knew how to utilize its findings; it maintained monogamy during its earlier stages. But on the whole it has been detrimental to women, exactly because it granted too much to women and left men out of the picture. In a society in which one sex wholly dominates the other, cultural progress cannot be healthy; it has to be based on the equality of the two sexes, as Christ has affirmed and taught.

Further research and investigation will be needed to test a number of points in Father Schmidt's scheme and analysis of the "motherright." Whatever the result may be, the great priest-ethnologist has given us a deep insight into a social-economic phenomenon, which had a powerful impact on humanity and which is even today a strong factor in many preliterate societies.

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