# THE FRAGILITY OF MARRIAGE IN MATRILINEAL SOCIETIES

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**Abstract**

Matrilineal descent and the societies that have it have long been seen as being more in need of explanation than patrilineal descent, which tends to be treated as humanity's default when discussing descent. There is a long history of theories of matrilineal exceptionalism in anthropology, dating from the theory of an evolutionary priority for 'mother right' in the nineteenth century to its contemporary revival through what has become known as the 'grandmother' hypothesis, positing female coalitions as prior in evolutionary terms, with a grandmother looking after her daughter's children so the latter can go gathering. Along the way matriliny has been explained with reference to horticulture, increased women's rights and the so-called 'matrilineal puzzle'. However, it is also reasonable to suggest that matrilineal systems are not simply mirror images of patrilineal ones and that they potentially have characteristics of their own such as the 'visiting husband' phenomenon and the more frequent tendency generally for the marriage bond to be weak and unimportant. The article explores these latter aspects further.

## Introduction

My aim in this article is to take thinking about matriliny forward by concentrating on two specific features occasionally found with it, though by no means invariably. The first is the existence of a specifically matrilineal form of family organization based on a brother-sister tie rather than a husband-wife tie; there are very few examples of this in the literature, though its distinctiveness is obvious. The second, rather more common, though also an aspect of the matrilineal family, is a weakness in the marriage bond[2] in a situation in which husbands do not live with their wives during the day, but simply visit the latter at night. This is the phenomenon of all the men in a village moving between households twice a day, to stay with their wives at night, but return to their sisters in the morning, where they may work and more generally have their main economic interests. Kathleen Gough suggested the term 'duolocal' for this practice as a form of post-marital residence (1961a: 335), while admitting its rarity (1961b: 561). Given its distinctiveness, it is relatively familiar to those specializing in the study of kinship in anthropology, more so than its rarity would suggest.

I am therefore not suggesting that all societies with matrilineal descent have these features, as that is clearly not the case. Indeed, as Rodney Needham pointed out many years ago (1971: 11), it is rarely appropriate to characterize whole societies with reference to modes of descent, that is, as patrilineal, matrilineal or cognatic (or bilateral), because there is

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[2] Some time ago, Lucy Mair stated that 'it is generally accepted that divorce is more common in matrilineal than in patrilineal societies' (1971: 183).

frequently a tendency to transmit different things through different modes. However, in the case of societies with matrilineal family organization discussed below, which exhibit matriliny in what might be called an extreme form, a definition as 'matrilineal' seems more appropriate, as it tends to indicate use of the matrilineal principle more comprehensively.

The basic principles underlying matrilineal descent are well known. Descent in this case, whatever it transmits, goes through women, at its most basic and literal from mother to daughter, and forms chains of mother-daughter links down the generations. However, it also links men not only *to* women but also *through* women. The classic male to male tie with matriliny is that between mother's brother and sister's son, which goes not directly between men, as with father to son ties in the case of patriliny, but indirectly, through a woman who is the sister of the former and the mother of the latter. As Nongbri points out (2010: 160), this means that, unlike with patriliny, where descent typically goes directly through males who have greater social power than women, with matriliny the locus of power (mother's brother) and the channel of descent (mother to daughter) are different.

This should be distinguished from the notion of relationships that are *matrilateral*, a word used in anthropology for relatives through the mother generally, who may or may not also be matrilineal. Thus ego's mother's brother's children are relatives of ego's through ego's mother and therefore matrilateral, but they are not matrilineally related to ego, since, even where matrilineal descent exists, and assuming exogamy of the matriline, they will be in a different matriline or matrilineage. This gives them a different status from that of ego's MB, who is in ego's own matriline with matriliny, i.e. is both a matrilineal and a patrilineal relative. With patrilineal descent, conversely, mother's brother is rather a matrilateral relative of ego's in a different patriline.[3]

Certain other features associated with matriliny might also be mentioned briefly here. First of all, there is a tendency towards geographical clustering, that is, for certain regions of the world to be marked by the existence and even the predominance of societies with matrilineal descent. A major example is central Africa, where there are a large number of such societies (e.g. Ndembu, Bemba, Lele, Plateau Tonga), but other areas include parts of West Africa (Ashanti and other Akan-speakers), the US southwest (e.g. Hopi, Navaho), the northwest coast of the US-Canada continuum (e.g. Tsimshian, Kwakiutl), parts of central Brazil (some Gê-speakers), the state of Meghalaya in northeast India (Khasi, Garo), the

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[3] This is admittedly to take a somewhat 'descent theory' view of the matter. An alliance theorist would stress instead MB's status as ego's father's WB and therefore as ego's affine. This hardly applies to societies with matrilineal descent very much, very few of them being found among alliance theorists' case studies.

south-central Vietnamese Highlands (Cham, Jarai, Rhadé), certain islands in the north-west Pacific (e.g. Truk, Yap, other Micronesia), parts of Indonesia and the adjacent Malay Peninsula (e.g. Minangkabau), and some castes in southern India (e.g., though historically, the Nayar). Thanks to Malinowski, the most famous matrilineal society is probably the Trobriand Islands, which are not part of such a cluster, though the Nayar case runs them a close second.

Secondly, there is the question of change, especially from matrilineal to patrilineal descent. This was originally something of an academic myth dating from the nineteenth century, when matrilineal descent (so-called 'mother right') was seen as prior to patrilineal descent in evolutionary terms and therefore as more primitive. A theory associated, among others, with Lewis Henry Morgan, it was heavily criticized by the Boasians, who thereby forced it into the intellectual undergrowth, where it has tended to remain, though resurfacing on occasion. The main problem with this hypothesis has frequently been a lack of proof, which has led to speculative arguments and pure assertions about change and the supposedly matrilineal pasts of now patrilineal peoples (e.g. Murphy 1967: 69, on the Tuareg of Niger).

Nonetheless it has been tempting to see matrilineal systems as fundamentally unstable and therefore subject to change due to the notion of the matrilineal puzzle, initially associated with Audrey Richards (1950: 246). This draws attention to one of the tensions in matrilineal systems, namely that arising out of the operation of exogamy. In her own words,

> …by the rule of exogamy a woman who has to produce children for her matrikin must marry a man from another group. If she leaves her own group to join that of her husband her matrikin have to contrive … to keep control of the children, who are legally identified with them. […] If, on the other hand, the woman remains with her parents and her husband joins her there, she and her children remain under the control of her family, but her brothers are lost to the group since they marry brides elsewhere and they are separated from the village where they have rights of succession.

Richards does not mention a third possibility, described below in talking about the Nayar, of the family (Nayar *taravad*) being constituted wholly matrilineally, that is, being based on a brother-sister tie, not a husband-wife tie, like both of Richard's examples (which are only distinguished by rule of residence). In the Nayar case, the impregnators of Nayar women, whether they be considered husbands or not, are excluded from residence in the *taravad* and pay these women only brief visits to have intercourse with them.

A connected point aspect of the matrilineal puzzle is that societies with matrilineal descent are frequently caught between matrilineal rules of inheritance favouring sister's sons and

fathers' 'natural' desires to benefit their own sons, which has an adverse impact on matriliny by diverting property away from male ego's sister's sons to his own sons. This process has often been supported by modern legal changes in colonial and post-colonial states (e.g. among the Fanti of West Africa; Kronenfeld 2009: 49, 313 ff.) and/or the influence of missionaries and other would-be reformers of native societies (e.g. among the Choctaw and some related Native Americans; Eggan 1937). Similarly, we know for certain that the extremely matrilineal Nayar of south India exchanged their matriliny for a more bilateral mode of descent and inheritance in the British period, encouraged by British legal changes.[4] Moreover, Turner (1967) long ago showed us another source of tension, and therefore another potential source of change, in a society like the Ndembu, who combine matrilineal descent with patrilocal residence. That is, those who are related by descent are residentially dispersed. This approximates to the first of Richards' alternatives in the quote from her paper above.[5]

A corollary of this, hinted at by Mary Douglas some time ago (1969: 121 ff.), is the unlikelihood of any society becoming matrilineal at the present day, as this would not suit our contemporary neoliberal, capitalist, industrialized and globalized societies. Nonetheless, where matriliny exists it can prove surprisingly resilient, as Apte remarks of a refugee camp at Kala in Zambia, home to thousands of 'matrilineal' refugees from the fighting in the neighbouring Congo. Though with difficulty and imperfectly, these refugees have recreated matrilineal forms of family organization in the camp, despite the disruption to their lives caused by the fighting and their flight from it (Apte 2012). One key aspect here for Apte is the continuation of witchcraft accusations in the camp environment, which are premised at least partly on rivalries between matrilineally connected kin, which they also act to perpetuate. Earlier too, Mair (1974, Ch. 7) described the persistence of matrilineal ideas among the Plateau Tonga of Zambia, despite challenges to the system from increased prosperity. Holy too, noting the decline of matriliny among the Toka of Zambia in the operational sense, remarked that it was still surviving as a significant idea (1986). Even when

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[4] For a recent review of the literature on the Nayar, see Parkin 2020: 135-9.

[5] Most of the cases discussed by Richards for central Africa (1950) have this combination in some form, and it is also found among the Ohaffia Ibo in southeast Nigeria, without the author mentioning it as a cause of tension (Nsugbe 1974: 73), though divorce is said to be relatively easy here (ibid.: 82). Goody and Buckley remark that 'most matrilineal societies in Africa do practise virilocal residence; the woman cultivates land to which her children are not entitled' (Goody and Buckley 1973: 118), land that will devolve to her husband's sister's son. This situation was problematized by Murdock (1949) and is an example of Lévi-Strauss's 'disharmonic regime' (1949). See also Kopytoff 1977 for a more positive view of this combination and its sustainability.

the large Nayar *taravad*s were broken up by British legal changes, for a while men attempted to start matrilineages of their own through their sisters or wives.

However, one example of a society becoming increasingly matrilineal in modern times is located on the Miskitu coast in eastern Nicaragua (Herlihy 2007). The main economic activity here is deep-sea lobster-fishing, which the men dominate, while the women remain onshore. Residence is also matrilocal, as is not unusual in fishing communities worldwide, where the women may even own domestic property.[6] In Nicaragua, Herlihy speaks of an intensification in fishing in modern times, as lobster fishing becomes a global industry: 'therefore, matrilocal residence, matrifocal families, and increasingly matrilineal kinship practices co-occur in Kuri to create an intensely female-centred society' (ibid.: 145).

Conversely, Perry speculated (1989: 36) that proto-Athabaskans in North America, though mostly bilateral today, were originally matrilineal and matrilocal (but not duolocal), as men were often away on hunting exhibitions, leaving the women at home in more permanent base camps. This is the 'male absence' argument, which is also another aspect of arguments regarding fishing communities and which we will meet again. Perry himself pointed out later, however (ibid.: 43), that these absences also occur among the Ainu of Hokkaido, who have patrilineal descent groups.

Another suggested reason for a society being or becoming matrilineal that was strongly favoured at one time and that appears to have originated with David Aberle (1961) is that matrilineal societies tend to rely on horticulture as their chief mode of livelihood – that is, working small-scale gardens for food purposes rather than pursuing either larger-scale farming, possibly on several fields, or pastoralism, with its frequent mobility requirements. This hypothesis, which may reflect a bias in the ethnography of North America, is discussed at length by Mary Douglas (1969), partly critically, partly sympathetically. She points out that horticulture is not a very likely generator of significant prosperity and wealth, unlike farming or pastoralism in the right circumstances, both of which tend to occur only with patrilineal or cognatic descent. This therefore associates matriliny with relative poverty, encouraging the old view of it as primitive and backward. This can be linked to Douglas's further observation, already mentioned, that matriliny is unlikely to accompany modern, industrial societies. In fact there is no exact correlation between matriliny and horticulture, as not all matrilineal societies are horticulturalists, while many patrilineal societies – in Papua New Guinea, for example – are (admittedly often pursued by the women in the society). A

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[6] One other example of this is Brøgger's study of the coastal village of Nazaré, central Portugal (1992).

related point has been made by Lucy Mair (1974: 92), namely that, with matriliny, the wealth a man accumulates in his lifetime will be dispersed among his matrilineal relatives and will not devolve to an agnatic heir as in the case of patrilineal inheritance. In this view, in other words, matrilineal societies are a drag on the accumulation of wealth by particular individuals who might use it to invest further in wealth-creating activities but who with matriliny remain poor. However, Douglas herself discusses examples where matrilineal descent has been associated with, and perhaps even been crucial to, significant wealth creation (1969: 123-4, 131-3), especially Polly Hill's well-known studies of cocoa farmers in southern Ghana (Hill 1963). Douglas also suggests that in central Africa matriliny is a response to labour shortages, as women are used to attract husbands to one's matrilineage to supply the shortage (1969: 130; also the Kalapo and other matrilocal but not necessarily matrilineal groups in the Amazon). There is also the fact that some state systems have been matrilineal historically, including the Cham kingdom of south-central Vietnam – hub of an accretion of matrilineal peoples like the Jarai and Rhadé – the princely state of Negri Sembilan on the Malay peninsula and Sumatra, and Akan-speaking kingdoms in West Africa. Similarly, many of the matrilineal peoples of central Africa described by Richards (1950) have polities with chiefs at the apex. This does not suggest low levels of prosperity as an essential matrilineal feature: seventy years ago, Richards referred to the Cewa and Ila of central Africa as matrilineal cattle-raising populations (Richards 1950: 231, 236).

The question of wealth also appears in a different form in recent perspectives from evolutionary anthropology (e.g. Fortunato 2012; Holden et al. 2003; Mattison 2011). The main focus here is on hypothesizing the evolutionary advantage, adaptation and inclusive fitness of favouring matrikin in inheritance in some circumstances. As in other areas of the study of kinship by evolutionary anthropologists, this approach tends to rely on notions of individual interest rather than social regulation, although that does not necessarily imply that people in these situations act on the basis of conscious choice (Laura Fortunato, personal communication). I will not review the bulk of these hypotheses here, limiting myself instead to noting what some evolutionary anthropologists have identified as incipient matrilineal systems in multigenerational 'female coalitions' combining active, sexually mature women with their mothers. The latter, in this view, are no longer sexually active but act as carers for their grandchildren while their daughters go about their daily work. This 'grandmother' hypothesis relies on the observation that, unlike other primates, human females survive the loss of their fertility through the menopause sufficiently to take on roles like carers in post-menopausal life (Opie and Power 2008). While a reasonable enough hypothesis in itself, it

would be difficult to prove that it existed among prehistoric human populations or that it should be accorded a priority over other forms of descent in evolutionary terms. Did all such populations have this feature, given the likelihood of variation among them? There is also the issue of gender: in contemporary societies grandfathers may well remain at home too while their children are at work and are often charged with looking after their grandchildren just as much as grandmothers. One might even conceive of 'male coalitions' supporting patriliny in these circumstances, in which grandfathers expect to devolve property to their sons after their deaths. There is no particularly obvious reason why this regime of inheritance and property should come later in evolution than the matrilineal form.

**Matrilineal families and marriage**

As already announced above, another main aim of this article is to suggest a new approach to the basic ethos underlying matrilineal descent by focusing on those societies whose use of it extends to a matrilineal form of family organization based not on a husband-wife tie but on the alternative opposite-sex tie in ego's genealogical level, that between brother and sister. Attested but rare, even where matriliny exists in the world, such examples nonetheless offer a different perspective on the reasons for matriliny existing at all, one that sees matrilineal descent as arising from this form of the family, rather than the family being an expression of matrilineal descent, which seems to be the usual assumption. At the same time, there are also indications that in such cases descent is emphasized more than marriage, as the marriage bond in such societies is often reported as being weak and divorce as relatively easy. This can be compared with societies with patrilineal descent, in many of which divorce is disliked and even disallowed, and marriage is expected to entail a life-long commitment to one's spouse (e.g. the Nambudiri Brahmans of Tamilnadu, south India; Gough 1959, and upper and middle castes in India generally).[7] A further corollary of this 'extreme' form of matrilineal descent is the fact that in some cases, first, the men of the society are absent from home for long periods for purposes of trading or warfare, and secondly, the society concerned is surrounded by patrilineal neighbours. In these circumstances, the argument goes, a society divided into matrilineal families comes into being as a way of excluding alien males, such as husbands, from its affairs. This does not explain why matrilineal societies have advantages in this respect over patrilineal ones, nor why only a minority of societies adopt this form of family organization and others do not. At best, the explanation can only be local.

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[7] For a graphic account of the fate of widows in such castes, see Lamb 1999.

All these features were found historically in the case of the Nayar of south India, one of the most famous matrilineal societies in anthropology, one which in addition raises the question of just who occupied the status of 'husband' among the Nayar, and by extension whether they really had marriage at all. As Louis Dumont showed (1983), although they seem to be a radical exception to pan-Indian marriage norms, in fact they can be aligned with those norms without difficulty, not least because some of their supposedly exceptional features have precedents elsewhere in India (see Parkin 1997).

The Nayar case has frequently been described in the anthropological literature, not least by myself (Parkin 2001: 132-4, 207-9; Parkin 2020: 135-9; also Gough 1959, 1961a, 1961b; Fuller 1976; Moore 1985), so I will just keep to the essentials here. Based on matrilineal extended families called *taravad*s, with memberships ranging from several dozen to a handful, until relatively recently the Nayar were a matrilineal caste surrounded by patrilineal neighbours. Before pacification of the area by the British there was frequent warfare here, necessitating the absence of Nayar men for long periods of time – hence the argument that the matrilineal arrangements were designed to give the *taravad* greater protection from male outsiders, especially affines. The *taravad*s were under the control of the senior male or *karanavan*, who was related, at least in principle, to all the members of the *taravad* matrilineally as the senior maternal uncle of the junior males. Husbands in the conventional sense were therefore absent, but the problem for the anthropologist has been identifying them at all. Young girls and women went through a ceremony with a high-caste male Nambudiri Brahman which gave them the status of married women, but which the Brahmans, out of fear for their own status within their caste, rejected as marriage for themselves, the Nayar being of lower status to them within the caste system.[8] However, this ceremony freed the Nayar woman to have sexual relations with both Nayar men from different matrilineages and younger Nambudiri males, who, unlike the eldest brothers in their families, were not permitted to marry. These subsequent relations were known as *sambandham*. It is difficult to see them as marriages, though they were not at all casual but had their own rituals, both to set them up in the first place and to acknowledge the paternity of any child born of them (by paying the midwife) – an important issue even in this predominantly matrilineal environment, as Moore makes clear (1985). Indeed, it was through these so-called *sambandham* relationships that the Nayar physically reproduced themselves and their castes, although the

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[8] In any case, those Brahmans who performed this service *ipso facto* lost status in the eyes of their fellow Brahmans.

relationships were not expected to be permanent, and a woman might have many of them simultaneously. They were also, of course, a variant on the 'visiting husband' phenomenon, with the difference that the male lover-cum-husbands did not spend the night with the woman but simply placed their swords outside her door to signal to her other lovers that she was currently busy and then left again after the visit was over. As far as is known, this particular arrangement is unique, even in matrilineal societies, as it reduces the institution of marriage to its bedrock fundamentals.

As already noted, the situation just described is now historical, as the Nayar system of descent became bilateral during the period of British rule partly because of legal changes allowing individual property ownership, which tended to break up the *taravad*s, and partly because of campaigns of moral regeneration by Nayar activists to end what the latter saw as the sexual exploitation of Nayar women by Brahman men.[9]

Broadly similar are the Mosuo of Yunnan in southern China (Nongbri 2010), a matrilineal population neighbouring the patrilineal Naxi, of which the Mosuo are considered a subgroup in the official Chinese classification, as well as by other patrilineal populations, including immigrant Chinese Han. Despite the misleading official classification, the Mosuo are characterized by what Nongbri calls 'large sibling-based households' (presumably matrilineal families based on opposite-sex sibling ties) and 'walking marriage' (*se se* or *axia*, 'lover'), a form of the visiting husband phenomenon (ibid.: 158). As for marriage, Nongbri says that this is 'a tenuous affair' that 'has little to do with the family' and 'neither binds the couple in rights and obligations nor confers any responsibility on the progenitor (father) towards the offspring' (ibid.: 160). The child's matrikin are solely responsible for its care and upbringing, and the place of the father in reproduction is minimized. Nongbri also emphasizes that, despite the centrality of women to the descent system and their freedom in matters of sex and marriage, they are no freer from domestic duties than women in patrilineal societies and that the men of the lineage have far greater freedom and power (ibid.: 162 ff.). In addition, it is male activities that are accorded high status, whether expressed in 'religious devotion and service [specifically Buddhist Lamaism] … horsemanship or simply … socialising' (ibid.: 171), and traditional political leadership was entirely in the hands of men. Nonetheless, women are important and central to the domestic sphere, which the men of the family hardly engage in. Indeed, as with the Nayar, historically men were often absent, here

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[9] For an alternative interpretation of the Nayar *taravad*, emphasizing it as a residential rather than a strictly matrilineal institution, see Moore 1985. This author also speculates that the Nayar only became matrilineal in the tenth century AD, on the basis of dynastic histories and other contemporary documents (ibid.: 526).

because of their participation in trading caravans. The major source of outside wealth today, however, is tourism, through which Mosuo women have acquired the reputation of being sexually easy and available, and the Mosuo as an ethnic group have been endowed with romanticism and exoticism for their unusual social arrangements. The Mosuo have also faced official opposition from the Communist Party, especially in the Maoist era, and must frequently compromise their living arrangements due to specific circumstances, but despite these factors the picture Nongbri gives us is one of the resilience of the traditional matrilineal arrangements in this case.[10]

Other societies reported as having matrilineal descent and ease of divorce and/or weak marriage ties, though not the visiting husband phenomenon, include the island of Yap in Micronesia (Schneider 1953: 218; possibly contradicted by Labby 1976: 38-44), the Pende of Kasai province, Congo (de Souseberge 1955), and the Trobriand Islands (Malinowski, in Young 1979: 133, 142). In fact, the first and last of these cases are examples of the combination of matrilineal descent and patrilocal residence mentioned earlier. Among the Hopi, Eggan describes their matrilineal descent, norm of uxorilocal residence (though without the visiting husband phenomenon) and ease of both divorce and remarriage, although he also says that the risk of divorce diminishes in a marriage over time (1950: 30, 56, 113-14). Eggan attributes matrilineal descent here to what he calls 'a strong lineage principle', an idea reflective of Radcliffe-Brown's doctrine of lineage solidarity, and he adds that among the Hopi 'wives usually side with their house or lineage mates in disputes involving their husbands' (ibid.: 113). This may mean no more than that in domestic disputes wives resort to their own lineages for support. Fischer's account of the Minangkabau of Sumatra (1964) depicts them too as having frequent divorce (1964: 102) and uxorilocal residence without the visiting husband phenomenon. He disputes the existence of the latter here with earlier writers, in opposition to de Josselin de Jong (1952, 1975). A more recent author comfirms that Minangkabau society still has a strong social system of matrilineal descent with uxorilocal marriage in modern bungalows as well as in the remaining traditional dwellings and that this system is managing to survive pressures to become patrilineal from Islam in particular (Stark 2013: 2), though he makes no mention of ease of divorce. The Huron of North America also

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[10] Nongbri's article compares the Mosuo case with that of the Khasi of Meghalaya, north-east India, a matrilineal society where residence is normatively uxorilocal, i.e. the husband lives with his wife in her own house day and night, not at night alone. As many examples from the Amazon especially show, uxorilocal or matrilocal residence can exist regularly with bilateral descent, and even with patrilineal descent, though in the latter case usually as a low-status, exceptional arrangement followed by poor men.

combine matrilineal descent with ease of divorce but without duolocal residence (Dannin 1982: 104), as do the Marshallese (Spoehr 1949: 111) and Ndembu (Chock 1967: 74).

Although dealt with in passing in numerous ethnographies, divorce has rarely been problematized or made the focus of a specific study of its causes and consequences. One early example is a paper by Gluckman (1950) connecting the ease of divorce with low bridewealth payments among the Lozi and Zulu of southern Africa, and arguing that divorce seems to be rarer where there are higher payments and/or patrilineal descent: this led to a series of exchanges with Leach, who was typically more sceptical of these correlations (see Leach 1961: Ch. 5). More recently, Simpson (e.g. 1998 and references therein) has examined divorce and remarriage specifically in the UK, which at least in part presumably reflects the ease of divorce legally speaking and the modern, post-Victorian decline in seeing anything particularly sacred, and therefore sacrosanct, about the institution of marriage, especially from the 1960s. The strength of descent ties with matrilineal descent is matched by the strength descent in many patrilineal societies. However, the residential arrangements and inheritance provisions of matrilineal systems, as well as the frequent strength of opposite-sex sibling ties, have a greater potential for undermining the marriage bond due to what both informants and their ethnographers regard as matriliny's inherent contradictions. This is therefore another context in which divorce might be studied more extensively cross-culturally.

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