

Review of the book *Women at the center: Life in a modern matriarchy*

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Abstract:

Review of the book *Women at the center: Life in a modern matriarchy* by Peggy Reeves Sanday.

Keywords: Book Review | Matriarchy | Indonesia | Gender Roles | Culture

Article:

Women at the Center: Life in a Modern Matriarchy. Peggy Reeves Sanday. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 2002. 253 pp. ISBN 0-8014-4004-1. \$29.95 (hardcover). ISBN 0-8014-8906-7. \$19.95 (paper).

Written in a clear style, this fascinating book is based on the author's two decades of fieldwork among the matrilineal Minangkabau tribe, one of the largest ethnic groups in Indonesia. This society describes itself as matriarchal, using the European-derived term "matriarchaat" for the purpose. Sanday investigates and analyzes this depiction. She challenges older male-centric theoretical approaches to gender, power, and social organization, which sought to locate female power and authority in mirror images of those of males, consequently rejecting the idea that there could be any meaningfully matriarchal societies in the modern world. Feminist critics of the latter approach label it as androcentric; the reason is that it neglects the social power of dominant maternal meanings because women do not follow masculine paths to power (e.g., politics or public life). Thus, from this perspective, no society could ever meet the definition of "matriarchal" as "it had been defined out of existence from the start"(p. xi).

Sanday contends that "The concept of matriarchy is relevant in societies where maternal symbols are linked to social practices influencing the lives of both sexes and where women play a central role in these practices"(p. xii). Redefining gender relations and concepts of power, she proposes a new definition for the term matriarchy: "cultural symbols and practices associating the maternal with the origin and center of growth processes necessary for social and individual

life”(p. 237). Sanday prefers to use the term matriarchy rather than other proposed terms (e.g., gynany, matrix, matrifocal, matricentric) that link sexes rather than rank them because of the respect accorded to local usage in the Minangkabau society: “adat matriarchaat.” She thus aims to refurbish and retrieve the word.

The book provides evidence for her contentions on key domains of social lives and relationships among the Minangkabau people. Matrilineal descent and inheritance, matrilineal residence, marriage practices, social identities strongly defined through female ancestry, and cultural symbols rooted in the maternal and nurturing aspects of nature all paint a picture of female valuation and sources of symbolic and economic status that contrast starkly with those found in patriarchal societies. Most remarkably, Sanday finds that domestic violence and rape, locally considered abhorrent and evil, are nearly absent in this society.

How does this culture emphasizing matrilineality and female power coexist with Islam, the predominant religion of the area, which is commonly viewed as patriarchal? The Minangkabau world view emphasizes cooperation, not dominion. Therefore, strands of diverse beliefs and practices are strongly intertwined in this culture, so that “adat,” Islam, and the state government are seen as the three strands that form the rope that guides their lives. Rooted in primordial traditional stories and reinforced through ceremonies, social interaction, and myriad daily actions, adat is of core importance in upholding Minangkabau matriarchy. The complementary male and female practices of adat all focus on consensus, coexistence, and compromise. Therefore, genders are interlinked rather than ranked. Islam is practiced in this setting as a religion that ensures female value, emphasizes cooperation, and is defined as a mindset and a way of ordering relationships rather than a rigidly codified and enforced set of beliefs and practices. The role of the state government is viewed as a means of last resort because it depends on exercising power, and conflict as a means of solving disputes is seen as a grave failure. In short, female power and valuation in Minangkabau society are rooted in a worldview that takes cooperation and nurture as a fundamental principle of society rather than seeking control or domination.

The result is a depiction of an apparently idyllic society that seems to be free from the structural inequalities and power struggles that seem ubiquitous elsewhere and are often considered a basic characteristic of human societies. In fact, Sanday asserts that “Mutual agreement is the ultimate sovereign in Minangkabau life, taking precedence over the power of men or women as a group”(p. 174). Thus, although gender roles differ, gender inequality does not automatically follow. The society seems similarly equally free from class distinctions, labor relations, and income inequalities. In fact, the matriarchal adat way appears to have neutralized social structural cleavages altogether in this agrarian society.

Can this exemplary community stand the test of modern pressures, including globalization, consumer culture, mechanization and commodification of agriculture, fundamentalist religion allied to political movements, and so on? In this book and her related web site, *Matriarchy and*

Islam post 9/11: A report from Indonesia (http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~psanday/report_02.html), Sanday asserts that pressures in the past have strengthened adat matriarchaat by more strongly intertwining Islam and adat so that both are strengthened, particularly after 9/11. Minangkabau society is aware of the dangers accompanying Western-style capitalism and anti-Western Islamism, and even more strongly and consciously supports adat matriarchaat as defenses against both.

Sanday's book greatly expands the literature in numerous ways. Although Sanday cautions against viewing this culture as unique or exotic, such a remarkable society stands out in the overwhelmingly problem-focused literature in anthropology, sociology, gender, and culture, which concentrate on power and conflict issues that seem endless and inevitable. Her redefinition of matriarchy will energize current debates on gender, power, and social organization. Anticipating that this view of matriarchy appears to essentialize gender roles and relationships, she upholds her more empowering version in contrast to current essentializations that lead to division. Her review of the prior literature on matriarchy in her final chapter provides a concise and focused summary of the main threads. Several additional theoretical and research questions are sure to be raised by this book. Comparisons between the Minangkabau who espouse adat matriarchaat, and other groups where matriliney has withered and gender relations are increasingly patriarchal, will rise. Other societies will be reexamined in order to recognize the hitherto unrecognized roles of women. In conclusion, this book is an important and welcome addition to the wide literature on gender and power.