

The sacrifice of Iphigenia

Matricide as a symbol for the loss of connection in our societies



I would like to start with a story from the Sami people. The Sami are the indigenous people of Northern Scandinavia, they still live their traditional life in close contact with nature.

The story goes as follows: “Two fisherman are standing on the coast, looking out over the waters. One looks at the other and says: “Today they caught the biggest fish of them all.”” There was a short silence. The fishermen both know the fish in these coastal waters. “The shoal is disoriented now. It doesn’t know what to do.” They both nod. He concludes: “The Modo is gone”. Together the fishermen stand there, both grieving the loss.”

The Sami know. They know what is going on in our world and they do by carefully watching and acute listening. The Sami say “the Modo is gone”. Modo means ‘ancestor’ in Sami. Losing the Modo means something like: ‘The base structure, the root work of life is lost’ or ‘That which has preceded, or that which knows the way by experience, is gone’. The biggest fish live longest and have most experience, and it is in them that the shoal puts its trust for guidance.

This is the subject of my current research: What does it mean both psychologically and for society that the *Modo* is gone? I am interested in signs and symbols in stories, myths and dreams about this loss of the ancestor, this loss of our connection with what is bigger than us. I focus on Western dreams and symbols and on those coming from indigenous sources. Exploring these is needed to understand more about what factors contribute to the current disbalance, psychologically and socially. More importantly, in terms of psychological wellbeing, exploring these deep unconscious but collective images is necessary 'to really be with things on a feeling or the emotional level'. It is about being with the story.

This being with the story requires a very feminine, rightbrain hemispheric, broader, intuitive approach. To not *do* anything with it, not use it in any way, nor to try to understand it analytically, but to simply be with it in order to 'be replenished with intuitive knowing'. But, and this is important for my argument, we should not limit ourselves to the intuitive. In fact, we always automatically switch: between left and right, feminine and masculine, in and out, emotional and rational. And this is what we should do. This switching is actually the act of balancing and it is what I believe is most important in our quest for reconnecting.

Today I will briefly discuss with you the Greek myth of Agamemnon and his wife Clytemnestra. I will discuss how this myth symbolically points to a disbalance, both in ourselves and in our world today; and I will discuss how it sheds a light on the subject of the 19th International Seminar by AP-GC: Between patriarchy and matriarchy.

To briefly summarise the myth:

“Agamemnon is the king of Mycene, he is married to Clytemnestra. His brother is Menelaos, who is preparing for a war with Troy, since the prince of Troy, Paris, had abducted Menelaos' wife Helena. Agamemnon agrees to assume leadership of the Greek warriors; not just out of love for his brother, but mainly by his love for war and its spoils. The Greek warriors are ready to set sail, but the winds lay still over the land. Agamemnon is told to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia if he wants to continue the endeavour. Which is what he does. Clytemnestra is devastated. Ten years later, returning home after the victory over Troy, Agamemnon is murdered by Clytemnestra, who is revengeful for her husband's sacrificing their daughter. For this act their son, Orestes, in turn, feels obliged by a sacred law to avenge his father and kill his mother. However, to do this, Orestes will have to breach another sacred law which prohibits matricide. The Furies, the Greek Goddesses of justice, start haunting him and

command him to stand trial for his crime. After a long trial, Orestes is neatly absolved by the Goddess Athena, on psychological grounds. He is free to go, feeling tortured but unpunished. After this the Furies are now called, with an euphemism, Eumenides – the gracious ones.”

I believe that the myth of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra is a useful symbol for the general loss, especially in the Western world, of a connection with the maternal and the “feminine”. I will focus on matricide– ‘The murder of one’s mother’. To some, this is the gravest form of homicide. As human beings, issuing from our mother’s womb, we tend to feel shocked by the image of matricide. Psychologically, murdering one’s mother can be associated with severing oneself from ‘the maternal bond’ which represents the very root of our existence. It represents the destruction of basic nurturance and empathy. It is a loss of our capability to care for what is needed on a basic level, a loss of our ‘love for what is’, gratuitously, without a need for compensation. Basically, matricide means that one is no longer in touch with the maternal holding, care and nurturance that roots us in ‘being balanced’, both internally and with the world around us. In fact, psychological matricide is related to the loss of feminine qualities like: being, creativity, empathy, sensitivity, receiving, accepting, openness to experience, love and beauty. This put in the words of psychoanalyst Erich Fromm:

“Mother’s love is bliss, is peace, it need not be acquired, it need not be deserved. If it is there, it is like a blessing; if it is not there it is as if all the beauty had gone out of life.”

Iphigenia is being sacrificed to achieve ‘good winds to set sail for war’. The young feminine has to do with being sensitive for what is, connected with the emotional level, trusting, open, receiving, a mirror of love and beauty. In fact, this brings to mind the way many indigenous and tribal societies function. By sacrificing this part of ourselves, we lose contact with its qualities. Agamemnon, then, could be seen as a symbol for a destructive ‘patriarchal’ system in which many Western societies find their base structure: they are hierarchical, focused on economical growth, competitive, utility-based, rational, and logical. Patriarchal societies have since long been disconnected from a healthy relationship with the feminine and the maternal. This destructive, ‘Agamemnonic’ force becomes manifest in the world around us: we have exploited the earth and its resources for our proper use and we have done so without recognizing the loss of harmony with what is around us, or as indigenous wisdom would name it, we lost contact with ‘all our relations’. When western societies aimed for ‘the spoils of war’, they got disconnected from that feminine quality of being into close relationship with nature and accordingly lost the art of balance and harmony. David Attenborough puts it like this: “We have

successfully made the earth into a world governed by human beings, for human beings.” But this world is about to be exhausted.

As earlier said, the Sami refer to the disconnection we face as: We lost the *Modo*. It means: we lost the connection with the ancestors, the ground we live on, the earth we live from, and it is because we followed a one-sided masculine way of moving through life, ‘catching the biggest fish without thinking of the consequences for the herd, or ecosystem’. It is a way of acting without the connecting, nurturing and embracing quality of the feminine. On the other side: The *balanced* human being is unable to exploit a place, for they know not to take too much, not be one-sided, but to always keep the two in mind: (1) rationality based on empathy, (2) goal orientation based on harmony with the surroundings. They simply know: take care of the earth, and she will take care of you. Professor in matriarchal studies Heide Gottner-Abendroth says: ‘Matriarchies are mother-centered societies, they are based on maternal values: care-taking, nurturing, motherliness, and it holds for everybody: for mothers and those who are not mothers, for women and men alike.’ⁱ Our problem, I believe, is not patriarchy as such, our problem is a patriarchy that was based on matricide instead of being embedded in a nurturing groundwork of femininity. Patriarchy as we know it lost the holding structure of ‘The mothers of the beginning’, which, according to Gottner-Abendroth, is another definition of matriarchyⁱⁱ.

In a way, we all lost Iphigenia. By offering her, Agamemnon was not able to keep in touch with his emotions, sensitivity, his eye for harmony and beauty, his spiritual knowing that all is connected. By this his mind became detached from his hearth, and his quench for war treasure got destructive. We could say our Western quench for resources and economical growth is just that: cut off from the felt connection with the environment which delivers those resources. Iphigenia was sacrificed for the promise of power, gain, bigger profit and ongoing growth. Next to that, Orestes killed his mother to avenge his father. We could say he sacrificed his maternal ground, to be able to keep his connection with the ‘World of the Father’ or the patriarchate. He was not punished for it accordingly. In psychological language we could say, this act of ‘matricide’ has gone by without the full recognition of what it actually led to. By letting Orestes walk free, it was not fully recognized and acknowledged what the devastating effect was on Orestes, nor on ‘the whole ecosystem’ of society. Athena, a strong image of the logical mind and a somewhat masculine female image, decides on psychological grounds Orestes is not to be sentenced to death. It reminds me of a psychological need for the paternal force, maybe to be able to keep standing his ground in a ever more masculinization of society. The Furies protest, but they do not get their way and subsequently they are being named ‘Eumenides’, which means ‘The gracious ones’. This evokes an image of rightful anger being subdued. Is this something we recognise in our society I ask myself? Where is the anger about what we have done to our natural

surroundings? True feelings of anger can lead us towards the precise pain of what we have lost, or to where our boundaries were trespassed. Real transformation cannot happen without the conscious feeling of anger for what has been done or 'what has been destroyed', nor can it go without real and deep grieving over what has been lost. For me, the Furies being renamed, evokes an image and a feeling of what might play a part in our enduring disconnection with nature. Do we really feel the anger over what we lost? Over what we *really* lost? Or are we, as Orestes is, quite shocked and haunted still over what we have done. Quite paralyzed. Not being able to feel what it does to a society where 'the mothers of the beginning' are murdered for the paternal force towards growth and gain. Anger should not get subdued, for then it transforms in shadowy entities as 'being haunted' and by that, feeling powerless in oneself. Anger goes within so to speak. When anger is really felt, it opens the psyche for grieve and subsequently for a clear view of what is needed to restore balance. What needs to be grieved and buried, and what needs to be build anew.

So, where is the light in this? How to bring back the Modo? The end of the myth could offer some clues.

'After the trial Orestes roams about, haunted by the ghost of his mother. To be freed of this, he is ordered by Apollo to reclaim the statue of Artemis 'which fell down from the heavens'' and return it to Athens. On this quest he is rejoined with his sister Iphigenia, who was saved from the altar by Artemis and whisked away to serve as her priestess in the temple of Tauris. Together they return the statue to and finally come home to Mycene.'

Orestes is a haunted image, cut off from his maternal base and having 'no ground to stand on'. His quest is to 'return the statue of Artemis', the goddess of fierce maidenhood and the unspoiled connection with nature. Could it point to what the cut off masculine, or the cut-off patriarchal system, has to restore in himself to be able to heal? In neuropsychological research today it is commonly agreed that a balanced human being needs to establish solid emotion regulation skills in order to be able to cope with with the demands of everyday live. Secure attachment is strongly correlated to solid emotion regulation. The base of secure attachment is as follows: the caretaker is able to accept and attend to the basic needs and emotional states of the child, as well as to his or her own needs and states.ⁱⁱⁱ This is a maternal quality, inspite of the caretaker being male or female. A keypoint here, is that this is a balancing act. To be able to recognise the needs and emotional states of the other, as well as those of ourselves asks for a back and forth in oneself and the other. We need to be able to place ourselves in 'the shoes of the other person'. It is about being able to stay present in ourselves, and

consciously experience what things do to us or in us, as well as what it does to the other, or to the surrounding.

Being able to regulate emotions leads to stronger coping skills, which leads to lower stress levels.^{iv} Emotion regulation involves the process of regulating emotional arousal and emotional expressions flexibly according to environmental demands. It is crucial for adaptive functioning across the life span.^v Stress coping refers to ‘constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised taxing or exceeding the resources of the person’^{vi}. In high levels of stress the brain, and thus the body, go into ‘survival mode’. This activates the survival regions in the brain and decreases activity in limbic, or emotional regions and also in some of frontal lobes, or cognitive regions of the brain. In other words, being able to regulate emotions and cope with stress leads to more solid and balanced functioning. It enables us human beings to ‘live daily life’ in stead of ‘survive daily life’. We could summarize: of key importance for a balanced adult is to learn how to regulate stress, so the system can return to a balanced state of being. To be able to cope with everyday demands, we need to be ‘at home’ with our emotions. We could say that to reach this, experiences first need to be bathed in intuitive, warm, nurturing, accepting and attending feminine waters: emotion regulation. Then, and only then, can there be a just development of the rational, clear, goal-oriented masculine view of things. Femininity first, followed by masculinity. Again and again.

Based on this, my preliminary conclusion would be as follows: To bring the *Modo* back is to recognise that the Matriarchal waters are the start of everything, the birthing waters. Only then can healthy, sound and balanced cognitive functioning grow. Logical and clear masculinity will have to be embedded in a caring and wise femininity. If this root of all roots is cut down, the result is a cold, destructive focus on gaining and a haunted way of moving through life. For a balanced psyche, and a balanced society in addition, Agamemnon should be reconnected with and hold Iphigenia, Orestes should be reconnected with and held by Clytemnestra.

I leave you and myself with this question: If we assume that matriarchal holding is the base of psychological wellbeing and the fertile ground of healthy emotional and cognitive functioning, shouldn't it also be the base of our society? And, assuming it should, how can we give space to the feelings that rise with the realization of the loss of this matriarchal holding? For in order to be able to bring the *Modo* back, we have to acknowledge and grieve what this loss has cost us. This will free us from any ghost haunting us and we will be able to re-connect and built anew. Let us then put the statue of Artemis, that fell from the heavens, back in her rightful place: in the temple of our natural being.

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Want to know more?

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ⁱ <https://www.hagia.de/en/matriarchy/>

ⁱⁱ Goettner-Abendroth, H. (2004). *Matriarchal Society: Definition and Theory*. Published in: *The Gift, A Feminist Analysis*. Athanor Book, Meltemi editore, Roma.

ⁱⁱⁱ Waters, S. F., Virmani, E. A., Thompson, R. A., Meyer, S., Raikes, H. A., & Jochem, R. (2010). Emotion Regulation and Attachment: Unpacking Two Constructs and Their Association. *Journal of psychopathology and behavioral assessment*, 32(1), 37–47. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10862-009-9163-z>

^{iv} Wang, M., & Saudino, K. J. (2011). Emotion regulation and stress. *Journal of Adult Development*, 18(2), 95-103.

^v Calkins, S. D. (1994). Origins and outcomes of individual differences in emotion regulation. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 59, 53–72.

^{vi} Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. New York: Springer.