Matriculture, Shamanism, and the Authority of Women

Matriculture, Shamanism, and the Authority of Women:

The Powers That Be

Edited by

Linnéa Rowlatt and Angela Sumegi

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Introduction

Considering Women's Power

The power of women in any society depends on the cultural system which defines and supports it. There is nothing preventing women from exercising power except those cultural views according to which they cannot or must not do so, and the social force of those views. This edited volume examines the cultural systems – the matriculture – which form the basis for women's power or the absence of it in seven different societies. What follows is an exploration of two intersecting concepts: power and matriculture.

Setting aside other meanings of the word, in most social contexts the term *power* refers to authority or responsibility. That is, authority as the power to command, judge, or enforce one's will externally on another, and responsibility as the internal exercise of power. The intrinsic relationship of personal will with power is not accidental; agency towards the achievement of a goal is central to the exercise of power both when exercising authority and taking responsibility.

The idiomatic phrase 'the powers that be' generally refers to those who control others or who hold effective power in a system or a situation. In rigidly patriarchal societies, those who hold effective power are usually men, as the strong patricultural cultural systems of such societies empower men to exercise authority while simultaneously disempowering women's authority. This limits the social roles available to both women and men; while women are discouraged or actively prevented from exercising authority, men are often discouraged from nurturing roles and, if in subordinate positions, are actively encouraged to work towards positions of greater authority. Terms such as *woman*, *weak*, and *follower* are understood to be coterminus, as are terms such as *leader*, *strong*, and *man.*

Nevertheless, every society – even the most severely patriarchal – must include a matricultural cultural system, or matriculture for short, because every society must conceptualize motherhood and the means of biological reproduction. Matricultures are a society's cultural system which relates to *women*, *mothers*, *femininity*, and other associated concepts, such as *birth*, *sex*, or *grandmother*. The concept is a development of Clifford Geertz' cultural systems theory; originally applied to religion, arts, and humour,

cultural systems are the networks of ideas, meanings, and relationships which undergird social behaviour and make it meaningful. It's importance in the context of matriculture lies in serving as a source for the conceptualization of women and all that relates to them. Like all cultural systems, matriculture has a model *of* aspect in that it describes and reflects reality. It also has a model *for* aspect, which prescribes and shapes social behaviour.[1]

Societies have weak, strong, developing, or diminishing matricultural cultural systems, just as they have weak, strong, developing, or diminishing religious cultural systems, artistic cultural systems, or any other cultural system. Flourishing matricultural systems have open and inclusive meanings for words such as *woman*, *mother*, *girl*, and other associated terms, which support women living in those societies to fully explore and express their humanity. Meanwhile, stunted matricultures conceptually limit women to their roles in reproduction and childcare, and enforce these limitations with social coercion.

There are societies in the world with flourishing matricultures, where women exert authority equal to or greater than men. This power may be exerted in cooperation with men or alongside them, in different arenas, in support of the social order or against it, temporal or spiritual – in any shape or form women may desire when they have the opportunity. Societies with flourishing matricultures include, among many others, the Kanien'kehà:ka (Mohawk), where Clan Mothers appoint Chiefs, the matrilineal Twa (Pygmy), where personal identity is defined from one's mother or mother's clan, and the Minangkabau of Indonesia, where *adat* traditions place women at the centre of their society.[2]

Can these societies be considered matriarchies, where political and economic power are exercised by women in the same way that they are exercised by men in a patriarchy? No, and it must be recognized that there are and have been no matriarchies in that sense of the term, where men are oppressed because of their sex and gender in the way that some women are oppressed in current patriarchal societies. Moreover, the term *matriarchy* today is developing a new connotation, one where social authority is shared by women and men, where decision-making is collaborative, and where personhood is regularly extended beyond men to women, children, animals,

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[1] Linnéa Rowlatt, 'Blind: the Western gaze at matricultures, historically. Part I,' *Matrix: A Journal for Matricultural Studies*, 1:1 (2020), 17; based on Geertz' famous definition in 'Religion as a Cultural System' in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 123.

[2] See Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Women at the Center: Life in a Modern Matriarchy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

and other elements in the natural environment. In moving away from the hierarchical connotations of the term, contemporary users of *matriarchy* seek not the substitution of women into a hierarchical social order, but the transformation of that social order away from hierarchy and towards egalitarianism.

Matriarchy as described above is considered one marker of a flourishing matriculture. Other markers include matrilineal kinship systems, where identity and descent are established through the mother's lineage or clan; matrifocal households, where the mother functions as the head of the household or family; and matrilocal / uxorilocal residency patterns, where a new couple will establish their household with or near to the woman's mother's family. Markers may include a cosmology where powerful divinities are female, alone or in a couple (paired with a brother or a husband); strong bonds between sisters and brothers of the same mother (culturally sometimes stronger than wife-husband bonds); prominent roles for the mother's brother in raising her children (again, culturally sometimes stronger than the father's role); cross-cousin marriage; or great respect given to post-menopausal women.

In a vibrant matriculture, then, women are culturally-legitimized wielders of power. Women and men may have reserved for them complementary social roles, such as priestesses for goddesses and priests for gods, or may occupy the same role, where shamans of any sexual identity heal people of all genders, as needed. Women may compete openly with men for positions of power, as in the United States corporate world, or step into reserved roles, where the oldest woman of a Haida lineage becomes the matriarch of her clan.

This edited collection investigates women's power in two key areas: spiritual power and political power. The first section follows Nicole-Claude Mathieu's injunction to explore the potential linkage between cultures fostering matrilineages, or their social equivalent, and shamanic practices. Authors discuss the processes at work in the intersection and interactions between matriculture and the cultural systems supporting shamanism, ritual life, and religion among the Dene, Pangcah/Amis, and Basque communities. The second section explores changes in matricultural systems around the world. Their increasing vibrancy or repression may be expressed through, among other things, more varieties or stricter limitations on social roles available for women, multiplying personal or sexual identities condoned or condemned, and newly-accepted or newly-forbidden definitions of womanhood. Chapters feature the Mosuo, Ho-Chunk, Cherokee, and American societies.

The first section of the book, Women Defining Boundaries Between Worlds: Matrilineal Societies, Matricultures, and Shamanism, focuses on spiritual power attributed to and exercised by women. Marie-Françoise Guédon launches the volume with a chapter culminating her long-term research with Northern Athabaskan speakers in Alaska. Her detailed report and analysis of Dene women's shamanic practices reveals the depth of that society's matriculture, one which usually remains hidden from male ethnographers and anthropologists.

By introducing girls' rites of passage and women's rituals into the ethnographic record, Guédon establishes a more accurate and balanced view of Dene culture, one where fertile women are understood to be closer to the other-than-human world and, therefore, both beings of great potential power and of regular vulnerability. The fertility of women, the body as an alternative or interactive tool for *dreaming*, and women's privileged link with the forest and the game are the basis for Guédon's remarkable exposition of a Dene root principle: that if there are two sides in any Athabaskan context, they do not stand in opposition, but in complementarity.

Pi-chen Liu, in her chapter 'Shamanesses: Their Subjectivity and Healing Power in the Matrilineal Pangcah Society of Taiwan,' explores central questions about the status, power, and value of women shamanesses among the Pangcah/Amis people. A matrilineal and uxorilocal community, Liu's work underscores the pervading power of matricultural cultural systems, from spiritual to lineage to individual. In a case study detailing a shamanic healing ritual where both the practitioner and the client are women, the ritual container is created through the evocation of powerful healing goddesses, and explicit reminders of the client's maternal lineage strengthen and uplift her. The healing occurs in an entirely feminine ritual zone, one where strong shamanic connections with powerful divine and ancestral female spirits physically heal a sick woman.

Turning from shamanic practices to Basque history, Idoia Arana-Beobide introduces the *serora*, a figure whose centuries of prominence in *Euskalerria* lay in her ability to integrate the ancient Basque domestic cult of ancestor veneration with Roman Catholic institutional demands. A syncretic presence both secular and religious, the *serora* was an employee of the diocese who was selected by the community. For centuries, she held religious authority in her community, being empowered, for example, to care for sacred objects, to organize and finance processions for patron saints and the Blessed Virgin Mary, to baptize newborns, and to arrange and bless some marriages. Growing intolerance for regional variation after the Council of Trent combined with absolutist and centralizing governments in

France and Spain to erode the *serora*'s power until she became little more than a maidservant of the church, trimming candlesticks and keeping the linens clean.

Women can access great-than-human powers such as those mentioned above when the matriculture of a society includes the spiritual realm by involving female spirits and divinities in its myths, stories, and legends. This presence in the spiritual realm, whether as matrilineal ancestor spirits, protective totem animals, divine mother goddesses, the Virgin Mary, female naiads and dryads, cosmogenesis from a divine couple, or whatever shape the feminine spiritual force may take, gives women the social authority—the power—to act authoritatively in that realm. Section One explores women wielding power in the spiritual realm, a power which may also include witchcraft, *seiðr*, or other practices not included here.

Section Two, Transitions in Matrilineal and Matricultural Systems: Exploring Changes in Women's Power, focuses on the strengthening and weakening of matricultural systems by investigating political and social changes affecting women. Political and social authority is closest to the definition of *power* used here and these chapters look at how transformations in the term *woman* are reflected in transformation in women's public, domestic, and individual power.

The section begins with Stefania Renda's comparison of the Mosuo and Naxi people of Luoshui and Dazu villages, respectively, in southern China. In the context of distinctly different gender role organizations – the Mosuo are matrilineal, matrilocal, matrifocal, and matriarchal, while the Naxi are patrilineal, patrilocal / virilocal, patrifocal, and patriarchal – Renda investigates the impact of these differing matricultures on community responses to mass tourism. The most significant difference is found in decision-making processes: while among the Naxi of Dazu, the male head of family makes decisions on behalf of family members, represents the family in village meetings, and signs contracts, among the Mosuo of Luoshui, decisions are taken consensually, either sex may represent the family in village meetings, and signatories of contracts may be of either sex depending on interest and ability. Ironically, since it is the flourishing matriculture of the Mosuo which attracts tourists to the area, the Naxi often pretend to be Mosuo for tourists by wearing Mosuo traditional clothing, selling rides in traditional Mosuo fishing canoes, and representing themselves to those seeking accommodations as 'real Mosuo houses.'

The strong Mosuo matriculture is leading to a change of status for Naxi women *qua* women, as they often keep the money earned from tourism, not donating it to household economies, and may generate greater independence for themselves with it. Since Mosuo women already occupy central roles in

their families, including the administration of family assets, tourism activities are not affecting their status in their families or communities. That the status of Naxi women is improving is an encouraging social effect of a nearby strong matriculture; other chapters describe deteriorating or diminishing matricultures.

In contrast to Renda's brief period of study, Patrick Jung's investigation of the Ho-Chunk matriculture assesses a millennium of cultural change. Relying on a combination of archaeological and documentary evidence, oral traditions, and linguistic data, Jung identifies the pre-contact Ho-Chunk as a matrilineal and matrilocal society – people with a strong matricultural cultural system. Following a disastrous war with the Inohka (Illinois Confederacy) and their allies in the mid-seventeenth century, wherein up to ninety-seven percent of the Ho-Chunk population died, Ho-Chunk society slowly rebuilt as patrilineal, even though a strong matricultural cultural system may still be discerned. Jung scrutinizes post-conflict Ho-Chunk society from the seventeenth century to nineteenth centuries and identifies periods where, despite the newly patrilineal kinship system, the political power of women was overt and respected. This translated to economic power in the twentieth century, establishing the foundation for further continuity of the matricultural system.

While warfare among Native tribes was instrumental to a diminished Ho-Chunk matriculture, Matthew Cerjak introduces gender as a primary contributor to the problematic Cherokee eighteenth-century encounter with white colonial settlers. His hypothesis, that differing views of appropriate gender roles was determinative in the loss of Cherokee women's political and social power and the ensuing erosion of that people's matricultural cultural system, in convincing. Through a close examination of archival records describing a variety of encounters between Cherokees and Euro-American settlers from 1757 to 1831, Cerjak articulates the views of people from both cultures with an emphasis on their different matricultural cultural systems and identifies specific moments of damage to the Cherokee matriculture. Ultimately, writes Cerjak, Cherokee women turned to tactics of survivance, 'a spectrum of actions that fall between resistance and acquiescence,' until the re-emergence of Cherokee women in roles of political power during the late twentieth century. This re-emerging matriculture is understood to be a core component of Cherokee decolonization.

Still looking at the territory of the United States of America, Linnéa Rowlatt compares two matricultural cultural systems competing for hegemonic authority in America. Written before the 2024 federal election, the chapter sees an investigation of the two matricultures: one is understood to be progressive, where women are encouraged to explore the exercise of

power in any arena of human expression, while the other is regressive, where women's authority is limited to conforming with patriarchal values. Rowlatt uses reproductive autonomy as an example threading throughout the chapter, outlining the freedoms afforded by medical advances, how these became instrumental in developments of matricultural cultural systems in American culture, and, finally, the manner in which the contesting matricultures find expression in pro-choice and anti-abortion political positions.

Section Two demonstrates that a strong matricultural system has difficulty flourishing without social and material resources which provide foundations to legitimatize women's exercise of power. This is also true of other cultural systems; religious cultural systems, for example, are considered subaltern or underground if they lack designated spaces such as churches, mosques, or temples for ceremonial activities. The link between material resources and the exercise of political power or authority is very intimate, but this is less true of women's exercise of spiritual power.

How can we explain women's easier access to spiritual rather than political power? Could it be due to the secularization of Western culture after the Enlightenment, when materialism became dominant in the worldview? If many people do not believe in the reality of spirit, perhaps it doesn't matter as much if women claim power in that realm. This is a question worthy of further research. It is notable, though, that the three chapters included here which explore women's spiritual power all feature Indigenous communities (Dene, Pangcah/Amis, Basque). Also noteworthy is the longevity of these traditions; matriculture in these societies is not newly flourishing, but pre-dating patriarchal colonization, strong, and deeply ingrained in the community.

These chapters developed from papers presented at the 2023 joint conference of the American Anthropological Society and the Canadian Anthropology Society/Société canadienne d'anthropologie. Using matricultural cultural systems as a heuristic, the chapters in *Matriculture, Shamanism, and the Authority of Women: The Powers That Be* explore the relationship of women and power, whether spiritual or socio-political. Through this fresh approach, we can detect new aspects to the subject and deepen our understanding of older analyses.

PART I

WOMEN DEFINING BOUNDARIES BETWEEN WORLDS: MATRILINEAL SOCIETIES, MATRICULTURES, AND SHAMANISM

CHAPTER ONE

NORTHERN ATHABASKAN *DREAMING*: A MATRICULTURAL VIEWPOINT

MARIE-FRANÇOISE GUÉDON

In 2017, Nicole-Claude Mathieu presented the results of a long-term international research project she had directed. It focused on an examination of the lives of people in matrilineal and/or uxori/matrilocal societies, where, respectively, people identify as and belong to the social community (clan, lineage, family, etc) of their mother and/or the male spouse leaves his family to go and live in his wife's home or with his wife's lineage. The edited volume was entitled *Une maison sans fille est une maison morte: La personne et le genre en sociétés matrilinéaires et/ou uxorilocales*.[1] In her review of the work, Jeanne Favret-Saada noted that a main goal of this project was to establish a truly balanced and symmetrical description of the subjects *man* and *woman*, which most anthropologists and most societies are incapable of conceiving.[2] Among her concluding recommendations, Mathieu advised researchers to study, among other themes, the shamanic practices in these societies, hoping to throw light on the working of matrilineal systems in their cultural milieu. Taking shamanic practices among the Indigenous peoples of east-central Alaska as a testing ground, and following Mathieu's early advice, I first proposed to bring a balanced, symmetrical description of shamanic practices among men and among

[1] Nicole-Claude Mathieu, ed., *Une maison sans fille est une maison morte : La personne et le genre en sociétés matrilinéaires et/ou uxorilocales* (Paris: Maison des sciences de l'Homme, 2017).

[2] Jeanne Favret-Saada, "Nicole-Claude Mathieu (éd.), *Une maison sans fille est une maison morte : La personne et le genre en sociétés matrilinéaires et/ou uxorilocales*." *Gradhiva*, 8 (2008): 139-140; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/gradhiva 1221; published online 3 December 2010, accessed 10 December 2024; URL: http://journals.openedition.org/gradhiva/1221.

women,[3] and further, to consider the women's perspective on shamanism as the primary ground of study on the basis of what women themselves have to say about the cultural context that fosters what ethnographers call "shamanism," and then, if necessary to bring in the views of men.

Here I bring forward the conclusions of my own long-term ethnographic project, one that began with conversations with a group of Athabaskan-speaking men and women living in the valleys of the Copper River, the basin of the Upper Tanana River, and its affluent the Nabesna River in central-eastern Alaska near the Yukon border. Northern Athabaskan-speaking people call themselves Dene; herein I use the term Athabaskan when referring to the larger, linguistically-defined group and the term Dene when referring to these particular people. These conversations and the subsequent attempts by the older women to teach me the rudiments of what I needed to fit (even minimally) in their communities were led and recorded by Frederica de Laguna, Kitty McLellan and (later) myself between 1954 and 1972. At the time, the ceremonial life of the northern Dene peoples was still remembered, if not always practiced, together with the local Indigenous languages and the matrilineal clans and kinship system; the local economy still depended on hunting and fishing activities, and it continued to inform the traditional worldview. After the 1970s, the recent history of Alaska and Northern Canada modified the way of life, culture, and linguistic heritage of those people. Nevertheless, the Athabaskan worldview is strong and enduring.

With the single exception of the Tanaina, situated around the Anchorage region, the northern Dene occupy the inland portion of an immense territory, a vast expanse of subarctic landscapes shaped and bounded by high mountain ranges, large rivers, lowland swamps, and a multitude of lakes. The Dene are established on lands from western Alaska to central Canada, through the Yukon and into the Northwest Territories all the way to Hudson Bay; they leave the coastal areas to Eskimoan speakers (Inuit, Yupik, Aleuts), who used to depend on fishing and the hunting of sea mammals. This huge territory is kept alive by subarctic flora and fauna that is dominated by large herbivores, large and small fur-bearing mammals, and migratory fish and fowl that provided food and the other necessary resources for the survival of the human groups. For all of these Indigenous communities, the relationship between human beings and the land and its non-human inhabitants is a primary concern which penetrates into all aspects of life.

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[3] Marie-Françoise Guédon, *Le rêve et la forêt. Histoires de chamanes nabesnas*, Collection Sociétés, cultures, et santé (Québec: Les presses de l'université Laval, 2005).

While Athabaskan-speaking peoples are known to readily adapt to new modes of subsistence and various geographical environments, they do so by integrating these experiences into a worldview developed in the northern landscape. This worldview initially refused notions of animal domestication, ownership of land, celestial overlords or original sin, yielding only recently and incompletely to processes of urbanisation, industrialisation and Christianisation. Most of the Athabaskan-speaking peoples in the northwestern subarctic regions of North America nurture a similar worldview which perceives game animals and other living beings as non-human people sharing the same mental space.[4]

Like human beings, animals and other forms of life are understood to be persons. They are seen as partners and relatives involved in interpersonal and intimate relations with human beings, male or female; they are also the game, prey, and predators encountered in every foray outside the village or camp. Unlike human beings, they are the first occupants of the world, both the world we know as visible, concrete and natural, and the other side of that world, which many northern Athabaskans know as the *dream*. In the *dream*, all minds, human and inhuman, visible and invisible, meet. In Athabaskan terms, *dreaming* encompasses what ethnographers call "shamanism."

In the older days, human communities were precious, few in number and in need of protection from the incursions of the non-human world. They were also organised to secure and maximize interactions between groups. Early travellers among the Dene in Alaska and northern Canada (Yukon, Northwest Territories, British Columbia, Nunavut) found societies organised according to a matrilineal clan system associated with specific names and a quasi-exogamous moiety system. This situation became controversial among scholars during the 1950s and 60s because matrilineality, according to the then-dominant group of social scientists led by George Peter Murdock, was not supposed to be possible in hunting-gathering societies. Societies depending on hunting and gathering were theoretically assumed to be living in small, isolated nomadic or semi-nomadic bands, led by the strongest hunters, and, therefore, patrilineal. It followed from that supposition that the northern Athabaskan peoples must have "borrowed" their matrilineal clan system from the Northern Northwest Coast people, who were quasi-sedentary communities of fishermen.

[4] See J. Alden Mason, *Notes on the Indians of the Great Slave Lake Area*, Yale University Publications in Anthropology 34 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946).

That theory was decisively refuted by Frederica de Laguna in her 1975 publication "Matrilineal Kin Groups in Northwestern North America."[5] In it, she demonstrated conclusively that the clan and moiety system was an ancient component of northern Athabaskan culture and social life, and that it could be identified, albeit in modified forms, among all the members of the Northern Athabaskan linguistic family and many communities among Southern Athabaskan speakers, including such peoples as the Navaho, the Apache and others. The matrilineal clan and moiety system is strong enough to be remembered and for its practice to be retained, at least in part, in contemporary Northern Athabaskan communities in Alaska, the Yukon, and British Columbia, and several in the Northwest Territories. In the mid-twentieth century, it continued to function among the Ahtna, Upper Tanana, and Nabesna people, kept alive by the potlatch or feasting system, also known in the North as "the feast of the dead," which brought pairs of clans together as hosts and guests.

What several millennia of hunting and gathering could not do, however, two centuries of contact with and colonisation by the English-speaking Euro-American society did achieve: the matrilineal clan organisation weakened and occasionally collapsed in several areas. However, a kinship system does not exist and develop in a vacuum. Like other matrilineal systems, such as those of the Northern Northwest Coast communities, the Athabaskan kinship system is sustained and fed by a worldview, ethos, and ritual practices that remain alive and functional even when the clan system itself weakens. In particular, matrilineality continues to inform basic social orientations in the cultural context wherever the Northern Athabaskan dialects are still spoken. And wherever they are found, matrilineal kinship systems sustain directly and indirectly those aspects of culture that compose the cultural context as lived, understood and constructed by women, that is, its matriculture. The matriculture, in turn and as does every matriculture, contributes to building the general outlook on life, society, and the world in general.

I use the term matriculture to designate that systemic cultural context that relates to mothers and women. Matricultures are found in every single human culture in many different versions; they are sometimes weak and limiting, such as when patrilineal kinship systems and patrilocality prevent women from accessing, communicating, and transmitting their knowledge (which is sometimes the case in patriarchal societies where girls are married

[5] Frederica de Laguna, "Matrilineal Kin Groups in Northwestern North America," in *Proceedings: Northern Athabaskan Conference*, Volume 1, edited by Annette McFadyen Clark, Mercury Collection, Canadian Ethnology Service No. 27 (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1975), 17-145.

away from their natal home). Matricultures can also be rich, vibrant, and strong, such as when a matrilineal or matrilocal system puts women in positions which allow them to build, share, and transmit their cultural heritage. Athabascan matricultural systems are surprisingly strong.

These systems live within the linguistic context of the Athabaskan language speakers. For example, Athabaskan languages do not insist on an immediate identification of gender either of the speaker or the subject, and there are no equivalents to the Indo-European pronouns *she* and *he*. The Dene matricultural systems are strengthened by the sharing of hunting and fishing activities between genders, and the economic importance of women's hunting, fishing, and gathering, as well as their control over the production of clothing, footwear, and dwellings. Furthermore, the semi-nomadic way of life allows women to travel by themselves, not only to move camp from one site to another but also to visit other groups. Among other relevant components of the worldview, we find a conception of the person that takes gender as an attribute selected by the unborn baby which can be shed for the next reincarnation.

Part I - From Dene shamanism to Dene *dreamers*

Linguistic context and the resulting worldview

It is easy for ethnologists to trust the English (or French... or Spanish...) translation of Indigenous terms and to forget the vast semantic gap between American Indigenous languages and Indo-European languages. An adequate translation requires ethnographic and linguistic referencing. It is only while working with and from the local expressions and terminology that one discovers the actual nature of Dene ritual life.

To understand the worldview of Athabaskan speakers, it is necessary to avoid the immediately available but misleading projections of Indo-European or Biblical, Middle-Eastern terminology which often have been borrowed by the ethnological literature on shamanism. One will then first notice the absence of specific Indigenous terms for shaman, for shamanism, for animal spirit, spirit helper, guardian spirit, trance, or dream—all terms which, in English, delineate the shamanic realm. One will be confronted with difficulties in translating Indigenous cosmological concepts that structure Athabaskan view of reality; English terms such as “space” or “person” have to be profoundly recontextualized in order to render the worldview and practices from the Athabaskan world into something that we can understand. Facing such a complex task and the vibrant mental world

unfolding together with a precise and rich terminology, I am reminded of a quote from CS Lewis:

> But perhaps the most mysterious thing he (*Ransom*) ever said about it [angelic presence] was this. I was questioning him on the subject—which he doesn't often allow—and had incautiously said, "Of course I realise it's all rather too vague for you to put into words," when he took me up rather sharply, for such a patient man, by saying, "On the contrary, it is words that are vague. The reason why the thing can't be expressed is that it's too definite for language."[6]

Perhaps this type of difficulty explains why northern Athabaskan shamanism, as (inevitably) summarised in early ethnographies, fitted so nicely within the classical Eliade theory of shamanism as a ceremonial complex centred on the person recognised as the shaman and his relations with spirits. Since the 1930s, Athabaskan shamanic practices have been mentioned by every Athabaskanist in the North. With the exception of June Helm[7] and myself, however, these practices have been regularly described as a relatively simple visionary and healing complex linked to animals spirits, based on light trance or dreaming, and mostly occupied by older men endowed with supernatural powers giving them luck in hunting and healing gifts. From the Dene perspective, this description attempts to describe something that, in reality, is much more complex. There are for us at least seven factors to consider when working to understand the Dene approach to reality, as follows.

An intimation of the Dene worldview first starts with an oft-heard remark from bilingual informants: "everyone is little bit a shaman" or, more precisely, "everything that dreams is a shaman" or "everybody is supposed to dream." For the speakers, these comments declare that (what we call) shamanic gifts are scattered among all the members of the community, male or female, young or old, human or not, living persons or mythological heroes. Some persons are more talented, more experienced, or stronger mentally; they are known as *nets'in* (dreamers, someone who can access the other, non-human side of things through dreaming) or *gyenin* ("sleep

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[6] Clive Staples Lewis, *Perelandra (Voyage to Venus)* (London: Pan, 1983), 28. See Rik Pinxten, *Anthropology of Space: Explorations into the Natural Philosdophy and Semantics of Space of the Navajo* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983) for an example of a successful translation of the concept of space from the Navajo (Athabaskan) speakers to the European perspective.

[7] June Helm, *Prophecy and Power among the Dogrib Indians*, Studies in the Anthropology of North American Indians (Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

doctors," derived from the Ahtna term *gye* which designates those aspects of a person engaged in the dreaming process). These persons could sleep for others and might, eventually, be sought from afar or become the stuff of legends, either as heroes and great healers or as killers. A *dreamer* is anyone who can access the other, non-human side of things through *dreaming*.

For all these reasons, then, I do not use again in this chapter the terms "shaman," "shamanism," or "shamanic practices" except in quotation marks in order to remind the reader that these terms are just translations. When possible, I make every attempt to revert to the Dene world by speaking of *dreamer*, *dreaming*, *oneiric practices*, *nets'in* or *gyenin*. I will keep the term "shaman" and its cognates to designate the formal healing/divining/visionary rituals identified as such by ethnologists.[8]

Second, it is important to note that, as a physical process, the term *dream* encompasses night dreaming during sleep, as well as lucid dreaming during sleep (attested in many Dene groups), hallucinations, day-dreaming, and visualisations, as well as impressions, especially bodily sensations, and auditory, visual or kinaesthetic signals. From a larger perspective, dreaming is a mental space or a mental process requiring attention and/or intent. Hence the frequent use of the general term *thinking* to designate the active intervention of the dreamer.

Let us note also that night dreaming was considered to be an act with consequences for the awake side of life and that one was morally responsible for what happened in one's dreams. Coming from and going back to the awake side through the dreaming/dream process, humans join another side of reality that is not really the opposite of this awake side. This other side, for lack of a better frame, cannot be called "supernatural" since it encompasses all of nature. It also contains pre-birth and after death existences; its rules or principles were defined in mythical times.

Third, the notion of spirit must be completely revised. There were no "spirits" involved in healing and hunting processes. The closest and simplest translation we have to Dene expressions designating what or whom was helping the dreamers are "the animal that is dreamt" or "the animal he/she knows," that is, a real animal who dreams about and encounters its human counterpart dreaming (or thinking) about it. One did not meet a "spirit," one encountered a mind, and the meeting was always interpersonal. The animals and other entities that one meets in dreams—or in the flesh and in the woods—were not perceived as symbols or archetypes, even as mythic heroes or characters. They were living and sentient beings.

[8] Guédon, *Le rêve et la forêt*, 81-82.

In his memoirs, Samuel Hearne relates how the Dene people he followed during his travels brought very young children near the den of a wolf or onto a beaver dam in order for the babies to become accustomed to these others. The resulting relationship was long-lasting, as described by Hearne:

> I have frequently seen the Indians go to their [wolf] den and take out the young ones and play with them. I never knew a Northern Indian to hurt one of them: On the contrary, they always put them carefully into the den again; and I have sometimes seen them paint the faces of the young wolves with vermilion or ochre.[9]

The Nabesna people advised those who were seeking a dream to help a moose cow or a caribou mother in birthing their young, or to spend time on a a beaver dam or with an animal to whom they felt attracted. Most adults—men and women—did encounter and entertain a special relationship with one or several animal or other non-human entities that granted them specific and unique powers. These entities intervened in human lives while enhancing corresponding abilities which are designated in English as "power" but are better translated as "knowledge." Such relationships were kept private. But they may be revealed when secrecy is no longer needed. For instance, Old Eva from Tetlin "knew" wolves, which explained why wolves surrounded the village during the night of her death.[10]

Fourth, the notion of "shamanic power" or "shamanic gifts," familiar to all "shamanists," is inflected by Athabaskan speakers toward the concept of knowledge and connotes an intimate mental connection with specific objects or person. What the Ahtna call *k'ize* and the Canadian Athabaskan call *ink'on* or *inkonze*, that is, the transition from the human space to the non-human space, may be signified by an object, a place, a song. Whatever it may be, it was kept private because, paradoxically, it embodied one's greatest accomplishment and inspired the greatest awe, if not terror.

This signifier of "knowing" may have been left by the animal, or may have been given in a dream, or simply found along the path in the form of an object or unusual experience. It did not have to have any symbolic connection with the giver; for example, someone found a rusted knife that attracted his attention on the trail and which led him to heal cuts by *thinking* of the knife. A seagull gave a feather to a woman who became a healer using the feather (or a mental image of the feather) as a tool to cleanse the throat of her patients. Often, though, the animal one dreamt about simply granted

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[9] Samuel Hearne, *A Journey from Prince of Wales Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean* (Edmonton: Hurting, 1971; original London 1795), 338-339.
[10] Marie-Françoise Guédon, *Fieldnotes Tetlin, 1980*, part 3.

the power to perceive the world from their point of view. Animals were not ranked in terms of the amount of power they could bring: a chickadee could import a gift as remarkable as an eagle and a mouse was as important as a grizzly, especially since both were in direct contact with the earth and sleep (therefore dreams) in their den during hibernation.

Dene conceptions of power may carry confusing intimations of mental acuity, force, influence, a capacity to act or to obtain results, of strength and, therefore, of being stronger than others. Among the Dene people, some gifts were extraordinary, others less remarkable; some could be used openly and often, others only once, and some may be engaged when in competition with others. In the Dene world, some animals, such as hares or rabbits, did not exhibit great power; herbivores were not as powerful as fur-bearing carnivores. The land and especially the underground, whether the hole of a mouse or the den of a bear, was a source of great power, for hibernating animals as well as low-lying plants such as blueberry bushes.

Fifth, the idea of wilderness is to be replaced by a distinction akin to human versus non-human spaces. The village or camp was a human and relatively safe space. A shelter of brushes, a skin or cloth tent, or the walls of a wooden cabin would keep a space secure, especially with the added protection of a fire or light. Forests, mountains, lakes, and rivers were occupied by non-human beings: primarily the plants and animals but also invisible beings and, before all, the land itself, who was a most powerful and knowledgeable being, in contact with many entities.[11]

Any relations with the non-human space were approached with caution and often ritualised, not only because there may have been ghosts or invisible beings lurking around, but because any entity living there was endowed with a mind in touch with other minds and listening to human thoughts. From this understanding came the advice given to me by the older women in Tetlin: “Marie, when you come with us in the woods, think good thoughts.” At the same time, this non-human space was the source of all sustenance, of food and everything else needed to survive. The Dene knew that human beings are neither the dominant beings nor the owners; domestication was unthinkable because humans were simply one of the many kinds of people surviving on the land. Men and women knew themselves as predatory cousins to the wolves, bears, and other carnivorous animals, but myths reminded them they once were prey, and they may be again.

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[11] Frederica de Laguna, “The Atna of the Copper River, Alaska: The worlds of Men and Animals,” *Folk* 11/12 (1969-70): 17-26.

Sixth, hunting, as well as fishing and collecting, was the primary opportunity to meet animals. Dreaming was necessary to obtain good fortune in hunting, if only to locate the game and to obtain the good will of the animal. Animals became angry when not treated properly and may retaliate by making people sick, so hunters often consulted the best dreamers of the community. The inclusion of hunting in that sphere we would call "shamanistic" has been widely accepted, especially since Eveline Lot-Falck published her 1953 volume *Les rites de chasse des peuples sibériens*. Her conclusions were forcefully reiterated by Roberte Hamayon in her epoch-making study *La chasse à l'âme*, along with her subsequent publications on the Tungus and on the links she describes between play, luck, and hunting in Siberian shamanic traditions.

Seventh, communal healing sessions used to be common enough to find themselves described in the early literature, for that aspect of "shamanic practices" was the one that attracted the most attention. They were centred on the ritualist dancing and singing, with the participation of the audience. The main function of such rituals was to protect the community from malignant forces or from a bad "shaman." It could also be held to attract game or fish in times of food scarcity, to placate bad storms, to restore health, and to protect the living on the occasion of a death. Attempts to recover a lost soul/mind sometimes meant a journey on the trail leading to the dead. In all these scenarios, rituals often merged with theatre, as the ritualist narrated the action and because the entertainment of such sessions could be socially as important as the demonstration of skills and powers.

Hunting and *Dreaming*

The assumption of tight links between hunting and dreaming has to be reconsidered in the light of contributions by women to hunting activities. These were often ignored by early athabaskanists, leading to a further assumption that "shamanic practices" must, therefore, be exclusively in the hands of men. But Dene women did (and likely still do) hunt, trap, and fish, and older women hunted big game as well. The world they met outside the home was the same as that met by men; women entered that world on their own terms, often alone, and not only for game.

If men concentrated their effort on hunting big game, women often provided the bulk of the food needed by their families. Although they might focus on small game such as fowl and fish until menopause, afterwards they went freely and often alone or with a single partner to hunt the bigger herbivores. In Tanacross, for instance, in pre-Christian times, a composite family (polygamous and polyandrous) of three wives and two husbands

divided the work load as follows: one man and one woman became the main providers and hunted as a team; one women was often pregnant and took care of the babies, the third woman managed the household, and the second man was a craftsperson who was also responsible for heavy work.

In the time before settlement and urbanization, while women cut, prepared, and dried or smoked the flesh of game, fish, and fowls, and cut and prepared their skins for sewing clothes, footwear, and tent coverings, they also took care of the dwelling itself. But their lives were not domestic lives. In addition to hunting small game, fishing, and gathering roots and berries, women "packed" (brought home) meat and skins of big game, packed and transported dwellings, camping material, babies, children, dogs, and puppies from site to site–often alone. They roamed the woods for firewood and other necessities such as birch bark, red ochre, and stones for tool making (skin scrapers and knives) which, all together, gave them an intimate and precise knowledge of the territory occupied by their families and related bands. Their wilderness was sometimes friendly, sometimes terrifying, especially at night, but it was a familiar space.

Who is *dreaming*?

In a context where everyone dreams, the field which ethnographers traditionally refer to as "shamanic" extends, for the Dene, much further than the communal healing sessions and formal rituals mentioned in the literature. It encompasses nightly dreams discussed between women or within the family, small gestures of friendship with animals, cleaning the camp, keeping the fire burning, and, during my times there, keeping the curtains closed at night, protecting children with amulets, taking care of wounds and injuries, as well as birthing and dying, learning and composing songs, paying attention to changes in the sky, teaching traditional stories, and so on... Much of this was being shared with men when they return from their hunting expeditions, but the bulk of these responsibilities fell on women.

One result of this shift of focus on "shamanic practices" from men to women is that, as an ethnographer, one finds oneself dealing with the habitual, daily, and mundane aspects of life. And while the spectacular communal rituals disappeared due to pressure from missionaries, schools, and administrators, the *dreaming* continued throughout one's daily life—at least, as long as one could speak one's mother's tongue and cope with modernisation and the urbanisation of one's living community.

Part 2 - Matriculture as deployed before full colonisation by Euro-American Southerners

Intimate relations between women and the land

To a Cree ritualist who spoke of praying to Mother Earth, I once heard a Dene elder responding cautiously in English, "Yes," he said, "we respect our Parent Earth." This delicate shift in emphasis acknowledged the earth, *nen,* as a kind of person without having to impose a gender upon it. It also kept intact the Athabaskan understanding of *nen* as both the land and the process of one's relationship with the sentient environment that contains all non-human and non-human minds (*ni* or *ini*). For the Dene, the land is not a mother figure and is not a nurturing one; it can be and often is harsh, even lethal. However, human beings live in that environment, protected only when they surround themselves with the walls of their tent or cabin and a fire, or by the open grass around the village. These human spaces are small islands of humanity surrounded by a vast sea of sacredness. In the older Dene way of life, the sacred did not have to be protected like the temples of the gods and heroes in ancient Greece; rather, humanity had to be defended from the sacred. That is, from nature. And yet the land was also known to be a homeland for many species. Human beings were one of them, but not the dominant life form nor the dominant intelligence. But they endured.

Males hunters were not the only humans to enter this sacred environment. Neither wilderness nor alien space, the land was as open to women as it was to men, to young people as well as elders; both boys and girls were taken along by older relatives. Women moved daily into the woods for all kinds of reasons, sometimes on short distances and sometimes on long trips taking several days, sometimes looking for the big herbivores or fishing on creeks and lakes. In winter, they would go fishing on the ice, trap small animals (marmots or ground squirrels, for example) in the mountains, or trap muskrats in the marshes of lowlands. They may have taken all their children trapping hare, baiting porcupines, or snaring duck, picking blueberries or raspberries, or digging muskrat roots (*Acorus calamus)*, among multiple other sources of food. All the while, they were telling stories and showing the young ones what to collect and how, how to build traps, cross creeks, build shelters, identify the dangers and the places haunted by bad spirits, how to avoid some and to make friends with others. And always, it was women who packed the tents and the children and walked the trails to move the camp from one site to another by themselves, while the men went away hunting (they would rendezvous later at the agreed site). In the end, women spent as much time in the great outdoors as the

men, but they acquired a very diversified and extended knowledge of the geography of the land and of its resources, as well as its non-human inhabitants. And they may have developed strong affective ties with their non-human counterparts.

Respectful rituals were performed, the environment was always carefully cleansed, and the meat and bones treated appropriately, so as to maintain a good working relationship with the game and other resources. I remember, for instance, being instructed to place a piece of a calico scarf in the burrow of a muskrat from which we had taken a provision of edible bulbs, to compensate it for its loss and allow it to keep warm.

> There, she said, this is to pay what we owe the rat that feeds us. You can't take without leaving something in return. This rat will be sad at loosing its provisions. Now, it will be happy. ... Rats are like us. They like calico. It helps them to make their nest.[12]

The bones of a white fish that was caught, cooked, and eaten near a creek were placed back in the creek. We made sure all the remains of the porcupine killed for our meal were kept away from the dogs and burnt in a fire before we left.

Men would behave in the same manner, to be sure, but one particular ritual dimension of the hunt differed between men and women. For men, game animals, especially big game, could be metaphorically spoken of as a woman to be seduced. For instance, a man's dream about sex predicted a successful hunt, while an unsuccessful hunter or a man who missed a shot may have attempted to blame his wife for his bad luck(which was believed to have arisen because she moved around too much; if she had remained quiet or by herself, the animal would have been similarly quiet). Women did not use that language and preferred talking to the animal itself, even dialoguing with it.

Hunters, male or female, regularly used nicknames or kin terms for animals, avoiding their real names, particularly when talking about the great predators and, especially, bears. These animals are mentioned in stories which relate mythical times where animals and humans could talk to each other and when animals sometimes married human beings. These animals became, as we will see below, perilously close to women; using their real names would attract their unwelcome attention.

But if the non-human world was a dangerous place and a frightening one, a locus of death where animals and humans still hunted each other, the forest was also a place of encounter with other beings, source of food and

[12] Guédon, *Le rêve et la forêt*, 212.

sustenance, a place of beauty, and a place of learning. Though men may refrain occasionally from killing an animal too beautiful or too impressive, I met several women who identified with the animal to the point of refusing, for instance, to kill a cow moose in front of her calf or a calf in front of its mother. Yet, both men and women fully and comfortably assumed their status as predators.

Women became very attached to the landscape of the land where they travelled and lived, and which was, in effect, their home. The Euro-American mind may find it most difficult to understand that the land which gave and gives their identity to the Dene groups in Alaska is not defined by any official border or physical boundary. In the old views carried by the Athabaskan languages, land—whether hunting territory or homeland—is defined by its centre, by the village, or the site of one's birth, and by how far one has been travelling away from and back to it. Land is sentient and dynamic. And it cannot be owned.

Womanhood and Childbearing

Women and men basically share the same world, the same cultural context, and a large part of their activities. But women differ from men in one very important respect: they bring babies into the world. The Dene understood that this placed women in their fertile years in direct contact with the non-human world. Between puberty and menopause, then, women were circumscribed in their activities by ritual proscriptions and taboos that affected them specifically during their times of menstruation, pregnancy and nursing, as well as when they were in close contact with young children. The non-observance of these proscriptions was believed to result in harm (nightmares, sickness, or death) to children living and future. Before puberty, girls were free to come and go, and might go hunting with their fathers. When they reached menarche, though, they would go through a demanding, harsh period of transition where they learned to manage their new connection with the life-bringing, death-provoking, all-powerful non-human space. The girls were *tiniy'a* (retired, outside, or removed) and *enjji* (dangerous, powerful); women would regain the same status for a few days every month during menstruation. After menopause, older women could let go of all ritual proscriptions and behave like men; in several Nabesna and Upper Tanana settlements, some older women were known as the best hunters of the community.

The defining signs of a girl's first menstruation signalled the beginning of the most important and dramatic ritual process of her life. Mothers and grandmothers related to me how they tried to postpone the puberty of their

daughter or granddaughter, which, indeed, occurred relatively late (toward seventeen or eighteen years old). Immediately after the onset of menarche, the girls were to be totally isolated for several weeks, usually three months and up to a year if the family could afford it. Secluded inside a small hut in the woods, or, during the cold season, in a small dark room at the back of the family dwelling, they first fasted, then were given little to eat or drink, only dry meat or old fish or dried berries—only things that had been dead for a long time—and tepid water. Nothing too cold or too hot.[13]

They were not supposed to stretch out but would have to keep their knees flexed. Red strings were tied around their wrists, knees, fingers joints and other articulations (ochre and the colour red being considered a protection against evil influences).

Leaving behind the dolls and toys of their childhood and visited only by older women, the young women received instruction in sewing moccasins and clothes. However, most of the tasks assigned were to keep the young women busy and their hands occupied: picking the needles off spruce branches one by one or sewing and unsewing a shirt. During their seclusion, the young women were forbidden from touching the fire and looking at the sun; they could walk outside only at night or with a heavy, fringed hood hiding their face. They should not smile, as their mouth would become too big, nor talk. Most importantly, the young women should not touch themselves in any way; they were given sticks or pebbles to scratch themselves and to comb their hair without touching it. The same constraints, although briefer, were accepted by adult women during their menstruation, a period for which they kept their own bowls and spoons and during which they lived by themselves in a small hut which they built in the woods. "Vacation time!" said one woman.[14]

Several principles are at work in these instructions. The idea that women are impure because of their menstrual blood was propagated by early white missionaries and travellers, and it is still recalled today. However, this notion is totally misleading: Athabaskan terms designating girls during their puberty and menstruating women do not connote impurity or dirt. Instead they connote danger, power, and potency. Menstrual blood, both potent and dangerous, is not a substance that is intrinsically dangerous; it becomes dangerous when brought into contact with itself or related substances, like the blood of game animals or, by extension, the clothes of human hunters. This corresponds to a general principle explored by the French

[13] Marie-Françoise Guédon, *People of Tetlin. Why are you singing?* Mercury Collection, Canadian Ethnology Service No. 29 (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1974), 178-185.
[14] Guédon, *Field notes, Tetlin and Tanacross 1969-72*, 1970.