

ABSTRACT, "The Matrixial Foundation of Maternal Cultural Meanings in Myth and Ritual"

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In my long term study of and stay with the matrilineal Minangkabau of West Sumatra, Indonesia—off and on between the years 1981 and 2007—I found that women have a social value and structural importance in the historical continuity of Minangkabau culture that is observable today in their individual autonomy and collective identity. The same is true of adult men, who reside with their wives while carrying out life-long social responsibilities to their maternal family. This matrilineal society tends toward gender equality rather than gender (including male) dominance. The question I raise in this presentation is: What encourages the relative stability of this and other matrilineal egalitarian socio-cultural systems?

I address this question by reference to the symbolic similarities in the origin stories of selected matrilineal societies including the Minangkabau and the matrilineal Mosuo of China, whom I visited briefly at the end of 2016. In doing so I introduce a new term, developed by the Israeli scholar Bracha Ettinger, which has yet to be adopted by anthropologists, but which goes a long way to explaining the focus on child bearing and mother-oriented “matrilocal” households found in many matrilineal societies.

Bracha Ettinger is a French/Israeli philosopher, psychiatrist, and artist. In the late 20th century she coined the term “**matrixial**” to represent a stage in psycho-sexual development emanating from the womb experience. Ettinger does not deny the power of the phallic in some cases nor do I. Indeed in a cross-cultural study of 186 societies, I found that the majority were male dominated. However, the claim for male dominance follows from

a Freudian point of view that sees the “phallic” as a universal phase in psycho-social development. If this were the case, all societies should be male dominant, but as I have shown elsewhere they are not. Although not an anthropologist, in proposing that the **matrixial** is a stage in human pre- and I would argue post-natal development, Ettinger’s ideas are relevant for understanding the tremendous variation in human socio-cultural systems along with environment, history, food source and other factors, which I have shown have an impact on the nature of human social organization and world view cross-culturally (see Sanday 1981.)