

Patriarchy and the Colonial American Family

HST/WMS 286
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Professor Lavender



Mrs. Elizabeth Freake with Baby Mary ca. 1674

Key Terms in Women's History

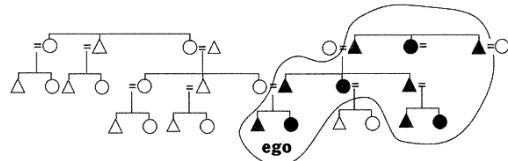
- Patriarchy
- Patrilineality
- Matriarchy
- Matrilineality

Patriarchy



- Maternity is certain; paternity is uncertain.

A patrilineal system



In a unilineal descent system, such as this, people are related according to the gender of connecting relatives. In a patrilineal system anyone connected to ego through a male is a relative. The boundaries of the lineage are the same for all members. Therefore it is a corporate group.

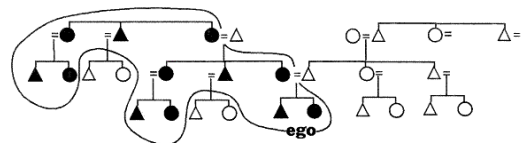
Matriarchy

- If maternity is certain... then mothers are the only "safe conduit" for family power, inheritance, and identity.



Rwandan matriarchy, post-genocide of fathers and males.

A matrilineal system



In a unilineal descent system, such as this, people are related according to the gender of connecting relatives. In a matrilineal system anyone connected to ego through a female is a relative. The boundaries of the lineage are the same for all members. Therefore it is a corporate group.

Pre-Colonial History

- Matrilineal Tribes in the New World
- Possible Matriarchies (disputed)
- Native American women took active role in governance and, after contact, in negotiation with the Europeans

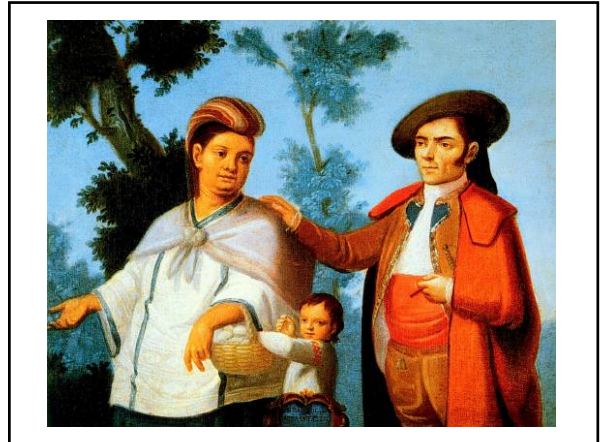


Colonial Women's Rights

- English, French, and Spanish women, with different legal systems
- ENGLISH legal system will be the one that gets incorporated as the AMERICAN legal tradition
- But briefly...something about the Spanish system

Spanish Colonial Women

- Spanish law, partially derived from Moorish (Islamic) law
- Women had full legal personhood as father's co-heirs (economic and political)
- Women had equal rights to their offspring
- Look at Spanish naming traditions:
 - Ana Castillo Benitez (single)
 - Ana Castillo Benitez de Leon (married to Francisco Leon)
 - Jose Leon Castillo (her child)



Rights of English Colonial Women

- Differentiate between Massachusetts Bay (Puritan) and Chesapeake Bay (Virginia Company) societies
- Single women
- Married women
 - "common law doctrine of coverture"
- Indentured Women
- Widows



Marriage for English Colonists

- Marriage an economic and a social institution
- Marriage the ESSENTIAL social institution
 - What holds society together
 - Orderly families = Orderly society
- As such it was a matter of concern to family and to the town
 - Not a love-match, but a "business merger" that benefited both families.

Single-hood

- Being single is not orderly, not natural
- Unmarried women called "spinsters" and (more dangerously) "thornbacks"



The dangers of single women!

- “An old (or Superannuated) Maid, in Boston, is thought such a curse as nothing can exceed it, and look'd on as a dismal Spectacle.” -- John Dunton, bookseller, 1686



Overview, North versus South

- North = Massachusetts Bay Colony, Pennsylvania, Maine, etc.
 - Families
 - Intentional Communities (utopian goals)
- South = Chesapeake Bay Colony, etc.
 - Single (wealthy) males
 - Indentured (poor) females and males
 - Slaves
 - Settlement companies; business concerns; emulation of English feudal system

Massachusetts Bay Puritans

- Harmony, authority, and order
 - Everyone with a specific purpose and place



Puritans and Women's Souls

- Patriarchal authority through the church (St. Paul's edict: "Let the women keep silent in the churches." -- 1 Corinthians 14:34)
 - Anne Hutchinson told: "You have stepped out of your place, you have rather been a husband than a wife, and a preacher than a hearer."
- Puritan belief: "the soul consists of two portions, inferior and superior; the superior is masculine and eternal; the feminine inferior and mortal."

Quaker Women (contrast)

- More equality for women than in any other English-speaking community in the world



Puritan Settlement

- Increase and Success
 - Until conflict with Indians (King Phillip's War)



Marriage in Puritan Society

- Closely regulated by society
- Violence forbidden in the home
- Both men and women punished for “marital sins,” but women were punished much more severely.
 - 16% of convicted men whipped, 53% of convicted women whipped



Conjugal Rights in Puritan Marriage

- Marital sex is the key to a happy home: religious morality, social order, and economic stability
- Fornication (sex outside of marriage) destroyed society and social harmony
- But Adultery (sex between married people not married to each other) was the ultimate destructive force.

Adultery

- Male and female adulterers punished differently
 - Which illustrates different role of women
- Male adulterers had wronged their partner’s husband
- Female adulterers had wronged their own husband AND the wife, children, and relations of their partner.

Divorce

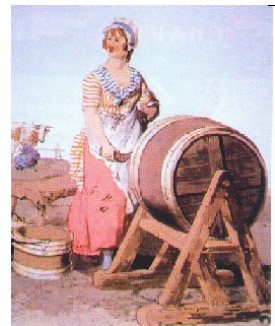
- Divorce virtually impossible in England until 1857 Reform Law
- Southern colonies kept the English practices
- Puritans and Quakers saw divorce as necessary to public harmony
- Marriage contract could be broken by men or women with given cause

Divorce, cont.

- Men’s grounds for divorce were mostly wife committing adultery
- Women’s grounds were
 - bigamy (44%)
 - impotence (9%)
 - desertion (61%)
 - (note overlapping multiple claims!)
- What do you notice about these reasons?

Women in the Chesapeake

- Chesapeake mainly settled by one fragment of English society
 - young, mobile lower-class males
 - young, lower-class **indentured** females



*Just ARRIVED, at LEEDS Town,
the Ship JUSTITIA, with about one
Hundred healthy*

S E R V A N T S,

Men, Women, and Boys, among which are many Tradesmen, *viz.* Blacksmiths, Shoemakers, Tailors, House Carpenters and Joiners,, a Cooper, a Bricklayer and Plasterer, a Painter, a Watchmaker and Glazier, several Silversmiths, Weavers, a Jeweller, and many others.

The Sale will commence on *Tuesday* the 2d of *April*, at *Leeds Town*, on *Rappahannock* River. A reasonable Credit will be allowed, giving Bond, with approved Security, to

THOMAS HODGE.
I have an assorted Cargo of GOODS from *London*, suitable for the *Scafon* (about two Thousand Pounds Sterling worth) which I will lump off, on reasonable Terms, at a Credit with good Security.

Family in the Chesapeake

- Families fragile for biological reasons (malaria, etc.)
 - life expectancy only 43 years
 - most marriages lasted only 7 years
 - men outnumber women 3 to 1
 - pregnant women especially vulnerable to malaria
 - few children reach adulthood with both parents living (and almost no grandparents)
 - widows prized (inheritance); remarried quickly

Marriage in Chesapeake

- Institution of marriage shaped by sparse settlement and lack of community control as existed in New England
- As result, many early marriages were informal, “common-law”
- But with fragile families, inheritance becomes an issue
 - As result, pressure to form more rigid and solemnized marriages

Chesapeake Marriage Manuals

- Loose unions a source of concern
- South during colonial period witnessed proliferation of marriage manuals
 - emphasizing importance of marriage
 - defining duties of husbands and wives
 - husband's role:
 - to guide
 - to defend
 - to provide for wife and family
 - wife's role was to
 - “serve in subjection to her husband's will”
 - “to be modest in speech and dress”
 - “to be a frugal and good housewife”

Advice to Chesapeake Wives

- “Never dispute with your husband whatever be the occasion. . . And if any altercations or jars happen, don't separate the bed, whereby the Animosity will increase. . . by no means disclose his imperfections, or let the most intimate Friend know your Grievances; otherways you expose yourself to be laughed at. . . Read often the Matrimonial Service, and overlook not the important word OBEY.”