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Trace Hauntings of Matriarchy in Ireland

Thank you for the great privilege of being invited to honour Heide Goettner Abendroth on the occasion of her 80th birthday. Heide's work has taken many forms, but her work on matriarchy, in particular, has given many people around the world the courage and the analytical tools to research the subjugation of female centred forms of social organisation that has had widespread repercussions for the creation of the violent *sacrificial social contracts* that now exert such dominance in the world today.

I wish to pay tribute to Heide by expanding her work into Ireland, exploring the *Irish Trace Hauntings of Matriarchy*.

Ancient writers on Ireland

Ancient writers include Ptolemy, Greek writers, Julius Caesar, and Saint Jerome, testified to matriarchal traces in Ireland. Most of whom were critical and appalled at the *pagan, heathen practices* they found, such as polyandry, and *women painting their skins* in pagan religious rites. The names they gave to Ireland varied: Pretani, Picts, and Cruithin.

Their critiques of ancient arrangements

Caesar tells us that when a marriage was made the husband joined the kin of his wife, whereas in Indo-European society, the wife joined the kin of the husband. Irish writers remark that this provides evidence that early Ireland contained a population that "differed fundamentally from the Celts and the other Indo-Europeans."

Recent Theorists on Matriarchy in Ireland

More recently, late 19th and early 20th century theorists, such as Heinrich Zimmer, Julius Pokorny, Marie Louise-Sjoestedt, [shestd] Eoin Mac Neill, [owen mac kneel] R. A. S Macalister, had no difficulty recognising the ancient matriarchal substrate, but their understanding of *matriarchy* was very limited and their work has been largely ignored. Recently, Tomás Ó Cathasaigh [tomas o catasee] has written of the importance of the *sister's son* in early Irish literature; however, he insists that there is no evidence of matriarchy, or even matrilineality.

Factors affecting the overthrow of matriarchy, marriage and conquest

Some writers also testify to the factors making for the overthrow of Old Irish customs and social structure.

Marie Louise-Sjoestedt has written that *marriage or violence, are two ways man can break down the barrier which separates the two worlds.*

Marriage

...the older Pictish law of succession in the maternal line must have reduced the factor of traditional origin to something merely nominal. It facilitated intermarriage of Pictish women of rank with men of the dominant Gaelic race, and this inevitably led in time to the prevalence of the whole Gaelic tradition among the Picts themselves.

Reasons for Scant Evidence: Literacy in Ireland

Irish written records do not begin until the fifth century C.E. (at the earliest) with the rise of the Irish Christian church and the powerful families. Ambitious and powerful monastic families, who largely controlled the early Irish church, soon superseded the old social arrangements of small independent units. In place of the older petty states, they substituted ascendent dynasties. They also brought about severe social stratification: the old indigenous population was often reduced to slavery.

Controlled the production of written materials

They also controlled the production of written material. Even though their stated aim was to preserve Old Irish culture, in reality, they acted as *hostile witnesses* against the Indigenous culture they were trying to suppress.

The Irish scholar and activist, Eoin Mac Neill, has written: "*We cannot well avoid the conclusion that a common accord was reached among the literati, probably in the second half of the eighth century, to ignore the separate identity of the Irish Cruithin (the matriarchal substrate).*"

Records Distorted

Genealogies, Annals of Ireland, the Lebor Gabála [**lough er ga walla**] and even the Ancient Irish Laws

Dindshenchas (stories of how places got their names),

- Sinann, River Shannon; Boann, River Boyne; Life, River Liffey: all drowned as they gave their names to rivers and lakes.

(Brehon Laws) bear evidence of tampering, and skulduggery.

Cáin Lánamha

One exception: An Old Irish law-tract called *Cáin Lanámna* [**coin lawn ava**] reflects the ancient order. Many types of marriage are recognised, depending on the social status of the wife or husband. Divorce is possible for many reasons, but the most interesting are these:

- Gossiping about what went on in the marriage bed.
- Not giving a childbearing woman the food, she craved during her pregnancy.

- Not keeping a woman's pelvic organs soft and supple, so that her childbirth would be painless.

Propaganda War

In Old Irish written materials, a propaganda war was waged against the old order, even in the saga material that features goddesses, gods and heroes. In the famous *Táin Bó Cualigne* [*toyn bo cooling ne*] (Ireland's equivalent of Siegfried sagas), just as the battle reaches its final point, the goddess Medb [*maeve*], got her period and had to go behind the mountain to relieve herself. Her flow caused several rivers to appear.

Story of Cessair

In another story, Noah had refused to allow his granddaughter, Cessair [*kess air*], into the Ark which was full. Cessair built an Ark of her own that contained three men and fifty women. On arrival in Ireland, she divided the women up between the men, but the first two men were exhausted at meeting the women's needs. The third dashed up a mountain to escape, but he lived to tell the tale much later. The story warns of the dangers of polyandry, and implicitly of patriarchy.

Challenges for the study of patriarchy in Ireland

Written manuscripts, therefore, present major challenges for those seeking to study patriarchy in Ireland. We must:

- Identify *hostile witnesses*.
- Note the *hypervigilant* disclaimers of evidence: i.e. *what Saint Brigit did not do*.
- Seek *trace hauntings* from the Living Traditions, i.e. ritual practices.
- Identify remaining traces of *patriarchy* in local areas less affected by colonisation.
- Analyse *material artefacts*, often used in ritual, such as Brigit's cloak, *crios* [*kriss*], her belt, and cross, and compare with international artefacts.
- Study stories such as those relating to *ultimogeniture versus primogeniture*, where the youngest child (often a daughter) rather than the oldest (usually a son) inherits succession, as is typical in many patriarchal societies.
- Identify the implications of *patriarchal social structures*, and their distorted implications outcomes for women, children, and the development of toxic masculinities.
- Analyse how *relationality* is cultivated or distorted by configurations of sexual politics, power struggles

Violence or Peace

In the Old Irish patriarchal system, social links established by maternal networks and linkages through maternal genealogies often prevented violence and wars, since people were forbidden to fight against their maternal kin, to the seventh degree of succession. Female leaders such as midwives, poets and shamans were responsible for Peaceweaving. The Abbesses of Kildare up to the twelfth century were responsible for Turning Back the Stream of War, until the authority of their offices was overthrown by the 11th and 12th century church synods.

Ties of Milk: Fosterage

Another strategy in early society was to establish links with other groups by sending children for fosterage. These ties of milk were as important as ties of maternal blood since foster children could not fight each other. The fact that groups held each other's children prevented them from going to war against their own kin.

Blood shed in warfare or patriarchal sacrifice

The blood shed in interminable wars establishes new genealogies, rituals and symbols supporting toxic masculinity with devastating consequences for women, children, and also for men.

Overthrow Maternal Networks

Maternal networks and fosterage have been superseded by the rise of so-called heroic cultures. Women's blood, shed in menstruation and childbirth, has been trumped by the blood shed in sacrifice of the founders of the main monotheistic religions.

The Work of Heide Goettner Abendroth

The work of Heide Goettner-Abendroth is crucial when facing the challenge of recuperating Irish evidence for a matri-centred social order, or even a dialectic relationship between the sexes.

The book **Societies of Peace**: My first encounter with Heide was at the *First World Conference on Matriarchal Studies* held in Luxembourg in 2003. That conference, and the subsequent one in Austin, Texas, resulted in the book *Societies of Peace*, which I use extensively in my teaching in Trinity College Dublin, on "Gender and the Cultures of Violence".

For over thirty-five years, Ireland has experienced a devastating civil war between opposing sides, Republican and Loyalist. Heide's energy in organising these events and subsequent publications became an enormous source of personal inspiration, courage and strength to my work in Ireland.

The book **Matriarchal Societies**: Heide's subsequent work (to speak of only two of her books), *Matriarchal Societies*, is an invaluable resource to those of us trying, with great difficulty, to excavate alternative ways of being in the world faced with the perpetual wars, the threat of wars, military and economic, we now experience. I have also used that book in my courses, and international students who have never been aware of their ancient matriarchal past have responded with great excitement.

The book is an indispensable guide to such excavation, an invaluable tool that will be used by students for many generations to come

Heide's 80th Birthday

On the occasion to celebrate Heide's 80th birthday, I can only extend my heartfelt gratitude for the lifetime of dedication, courage, integrity and hard work that Heide has offered to us all (and especially to us in Ireland) in recuperating our ancient past with a view to revitalising

and renewing the violent patriarchal culture, under which we now live and which has devastating implications for our planet.

Thank you, Heide.

I will close with an Irish Blessing

May the road rise with you

May the wind be always at your bank

May the sun shine warmly on your fields

May the rain fall softly at your feet

Until we meet again

May She hold you

In the hollow of her hand.