



Changing Views of Women-Centered Families: An Example from South America

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The family as an institution reflects important patterns of social control, which are to a high degree anchored in a society's gender ideology. When a culture finds itself suddenly confronted with a different set of gender concepts and values, altered forms of exercising social control will emerge and family dynamics change. This paper discusses such a case of change in a society in South America that begins with the Conquista in the 15th century and reaches a critical stage due to massive urban migration in the 20th century. It presents an example of a women-centered family paradigm, that of the matrilineal Guajiro who live as pastoralists in Colombia and Venezuela where they represent the largest ethnic minority. Centuries of contact with the Western world did not change the women-centered character of Guajiro families, even as they began to move in ever-larger numbers to the urban centers during the last six decades. But, as we will see, while the women-centered family has survived among urban Guajiro, it has changed some of its features and the meaning of women-centeredness itself. The discussion is based on fieldwork spanning a period of nearly 25 years (1964-1987), the ethnographic literature, and also includes relevant comparative material from Native North American cultures.

Women-centeredness as discussed here refers to a situation in which the woman as mother rather than the man as father is the central socio-economic force who makes basic decisions and is essentially responsible for the well-being of the family. This might be a formal, i.e., publicly acknowledged or an informal arrangement. In contemporary Western society women-centeredness has remained largely unexamined or sorely misunderstood. If and when women-centeredness is discussed at all, it is customary to warily make reference to «matriarchal situations», thus approaching women-centeredness as a mythic, ahistorical event, rather than as the social reality it has been in many cultures, including our own. Overall, the

tone has been negative, the prevailing opinion being that such structures are believed not to exist, or if they do, they are viewed as unstable social units. Instead of researching potential strengths, the focus has been one-sidedly directed towards problems, imagined and real, leaving the discussion imbalanced, and highly fragmented¹.

In small-scale societies matriliney, matrilocality and matrifocality are probably the most common and effective structural mechanisms to create women-centeredness. Here this phenomenon constitutes a normative aspect that determines the structure of society *as a whole*. Obviously, matrilineal descent, matrilocal residence or matrifocality will lead to different types and degrees of women-centeredness, with matrilineal descent creating the paramount women-centered social structure and worldview as James (1978) has pointed out in her discussion of the *matrifocus*. However, matriliney like women-centeredness in general has been widely perceived as problematic "precisely because it concern[s] social arrangements which call into question the male-female relations expected by Western discourse" (Stevens 1996:11).

In contemporary Western² society the women-centered family is perceived as being outside the norm because it is assumed that «the family has a *natural* configuration, based ... on a formalized sexual tie between a man and woman, reinforced by the later biological event of parenthood» (Fineman 1995:150f., emphasis added), and it is this «nuclear family [which] remains the only form universally protected and promoted by our legal institutions» (Fineman 1995:146). According to this stereotypical view of the Western family, the spousal bond between a dependent mother and an authoritarian father serves as the most important social link (cf. Chodorow 1978). The reality, of course, is different and women-centeredness is quite common in contemporary Western society. It appears foremost in female-headed families that are created through various situations and choices, such as separation, abandonment, divorce and death, or a lesbian or single life-style. Here, however, women-centeredness is not normative but meets usually societal disapproval, regardless of whether it occurs by circumstances or by choice. In society's eyes it represents a reactive, spontaneous phenomenon which reflects the unstructured or rebellious life styles of its participants. A special case are women-centered families of noble or

¹ An exception is the Family Lifestyles (FLS) Project conducted by Thomas S. Weisner and his colleagues at UCLA which found that families headed by single-unmarried women have been very successful according to Western standards. For further information on this project see Weisner 1999.

² One needs to keep in mind, of course, that "Western society" is not monolithic either but represents a range of variations. The views presented here probably fit best the stereotypes typical of mainstream US society.

royal rank where a woman becomes the leading figure by default for want of a male successor. Here women-centeredness is also not structurally grounded, as it would be in a matrilineal situation, for example. It does not create autonomy or independence for women as a group since the patriarchal structure remains intact, placing a female in a male status until this can be rectified by the birth of the «right» heir. This type of women-centeredness only reconfirms its incongruous nature according to Western standards. The Victorian era is a telling example.

The situation is very different when women-centeredness is normative and becomes *the rule*. Here it represents part of the peoples' cognitive map and with it a central part of their gender ideology. If we view women-centeredness as the norm, this not only changes women's position throughout the whole society, it also changes society's perceptions of women's potential (cf. Schlegel 1972:142; James 1978:149). In the following we will look at an example of such normative women-centeredness among the Guajiro and how it changes and comes to be perceived differently with Westernization. While people in traditional Guajiro society live in extended families that involve a wide range of kinship-based relationships also including the patrilineal line (cf. Goulet 1981; Saler 1988), this discussion will focus on those cross-sex dyads that are most affected by Westernization, i.e., the spousal and the cross-sex sibling bond.

Tribal Guajiro

The homeland of the Guajiro is the windswept Guajira-Peninsula that today is part of Colombia and Venezuela. The region is mainly a semi-desert with very few oases that allow for some agriculture. They speak an Arawak-language and thus belong to one of the largest linguistic groups of indigenous South America. Originally they lived from gathering, hunting and fishing. But this changed with the arrival of the Spaniards who brought cattle and other animals to the region, which the Guajiro adopted. As time went on they developed pastoralism and a hierarchical socio-political system based on cattle as property. For centuries now, the «traditional» Guajiro have been known as pastoralists. But outside of the acceptance of cattle the Guajiro were obviously not very interested in European culture and borrowed only sparingly. They have kept their social structure with its women-centered features alive and they adhere to their own language.

These people live in what can be called family nuclei units which superficially resemble the Western nuclear family, because husband, wife and the children live together. But the peoples' daily interactions and obligations do not reflect Western concepts and standards

regarding «the family». For one, frequently this basic unit evolves into an extended family when sisters or mothers and daughters reside together. Furthermore, the matrilocal residence rule encourages the forming of a female core with the husband entering the family as an outsider. This more distant position of the husband within the unit is very apparent during the initial period of the marriage when as a visiting guest in his wife's home, he arrives late in the evening after supper and leaves early at dawn. Once the husband becomes a father he will still not be able to establish a pattern of paternal dominance, because his wife and her brothers have jural authority over the children. These extended units of co-resident women, however, comprise the constituent elements of the Guajiro matrilineage, a larger, more diffuse kinship structure whose identity is periodically activated for economic, political and ritual purposes, involving joint decision-making by women and men.

It is well to highlight the high position of women as decisionmakers. Women can hold important and prestigious offices, such as that of the palabrera or shaman. The position of palabrera/o, described by Guajiro as that of lawyer or diplomat in Western terms, is open to both sexes. The fact that their services are necessary to negotiate conflicts involving members from different lineages indicates that women's authority reaches beyond their own household and matrilineage to encompass interlineage relations in society. Clearly the Guajiro have confidence in women's abilities and judgement in critical areas. Likewise, the shaman, who is a religious and medical expert, represents an office that can be held by both men and women. While the literature usually refers only to male shamans, informants pointed out on many occasions that women are often better prepared for this task since they «have more control over themselves». Shamans among the Guajiro are considered to be extremely powerful and influential individuals due to their amazing abilities and their profound knowledge. They are the only humans believed to be capable of entering «the other world», that is the world of the spirits and the dead (Watson-Franke 1975). This demonstrates that Guajiro culture has the expectation and confidence that women have an essential part to play in maintaining society at all significant levels of action and that they can do it with great skill. It is not uncommon for Guajiro now living in the urban centers to still seek out the services of a shaman rather than a Western medical doctor.

In spite of the impact of Spanish culture with its different institutions and patterns of social control, the Guajiro have managed to keep their own culture functioning. This, however, has begun to change with mass migration to the urban centers in the South. The main cause for these movements have been the worsening climatic conditions in the Guajira and the tenuousness of the traditional pastoral economy.

Guajiro interaction with Spaniards began around 1500, to be followed by encounters with other Europeans and North Americans in the centuries to follow. Before mass urban migration, which began in the 30s of this century, there were two potentially significant external factors to reckon with in Guajiro culture that are significant to our discussion: the establishment of Catholic missions in the Guajira-Peninsula, and marriages between Guajiro women and Western men. Contact with the Catholic church goes back to the very beginnings of the conquest; the first bishop of Tierra Firme, for example, was appointed as early as 1529 (Fuchs 1962:585). At first glance, the missionaries seemed to succeed, as, for example, in their attempts to persuade the Guajiro of the good of baptism. From a Guajiro perspective, baptism was an acceptable ritual since it provided an opportunity for family celebrations with the accumulations of gifts and the reconfirmation of social links through the choice of god-parents (Turrado Moreno 1950:71; Weston 1937:44f.). Furthermore, as desert dwellers, the Guajiro had a basic appreciation for the baptismal water and interpreted it as an agent to fight the *Yolaha*, evil spirits who all Guajiro must face in the course of their lives (Goulet 1981:307f.). As long as these new customs could be integrated within their own belief system, the Guajiro were willing to adopt imports. But they were not interested in the Church's spiritual message and its implied values and they kept watching the missionaries with suspicion. While baptism was fine, Guajiro adults rejected indoctrination of their young in mission schools, an attitude that has essentially remained unchanged through the centuries.

Furthermore, and perhaps even more important, the missionaries did not succeed in convincing the Guajiro as a culture to accept the Catholic wedding rite and its implications. Catholic weddings between Guajiras and Civilizados were exceptions and essentially involved upper-class Guajiro women. But even in such cases it would be quite common for the couple to be married according to Catholic *and* Guajiro rules. This combination usually guaranteed the woman's high status and close links to her own family (Gutiérrez de Pineda 1950:91f.). In general, foreigners who married Guajiro women in the tribal region did so following Guajiro laws, and their lives as well as those of their wives and children were regulated by Guajiro rules which provided a central role for the woman and a marginal role for the husband and father, an arrangement that obviously suited both parties for different reasons. The wife's family appreciated the high bride price a foreigner could afford; the wife had the marginal support of a husband and father of her children as was customary in her culture, and, in addition, she enjoyed the support and frequent presence of her brother/s. The husband as outsider would not bring additional social resources to the

relationship but for the same reason he was not responsible for the care of any nieces and nephews.

The survival of the women-centered Guajiro family in the tribal region is one strong indicator of the failure of the mission-system among these native Americans. It is remarkable that the Church did not succeed in destroying matrilineal values among the Guajiro when we consider the fervor with which it generally sought to establish the patriarchal family model in the Americas (cf. Weibel-Orlando 1991:175). The success of the Church in doing so among the matrilineal Huron serves as a telling example (Anderson 1991)³.

The Guajiro in their attempts to avert ideological attacks were most likely helped by their marginal, semi-desert habitat which was not easily accessible and of little interest to land-hungry outsiders. There are no accounts of divisiveness between Guajiro women and men with regard to the Christian message as compared to the Hurons. Guajiro, as a group, had continual contacts with Westerners, but they chose what was of interest and acceptable to them. The androcentric gender dynamics of Westerners were obviously not among those traits, which the Guajiro found to be desirable. They kept living with their women-centered social arrangements and followed their matrilineal cognitive orientation that gave women centrality as social creators, as lawgivers, as people with knowledge and as political intermediaries. This meant, among other things, that the mother kept naming the children, which made her the center of cognitive orientation for girls as well as boys. The mother's social authority was backed up by her economic role, since it was she and not her husband who was responsible for the daily economic security of the household (Gutiérrez de Pineda 1950). Tribal women's economic power was remarkable by Western standards. They had equal access to and control over cattle and other animals and usually owned most of the jewelry. Since jewelry often represented an important part of compensation payments women could have a powerful voice when it came to settling conflicts (Watson 1968; Watson-Franke 1987).

³ Among these people Jesuit missionaries in the 17th century succeeded in changing gender dynamics and with it family paradigms by pressuring people into baptism and Catholic weddings. Huron matrons who «considered conversion to Christianity to be unconscionable behavior» were called «shrews» and «hellish megeras» by the priests (Anderson 1991:117, 188), while men who had converted to Christianity but whose wives refused to follow their example, earned the Jesuits' sympathy (Anderson 1991:118). The priests could succeed by winning over Huron men and overriding the resentment and protests of the women. How was this possible? According to Anderson, the Hurons endured during this period of extreme ideological pressure, followed by social disintegration, other great hardships, like epidemics, genocidal warfare and famine, which killed thousands of them. The Jesuits meanwhile succeeded in changing the Huron's way of expressing aggression (Anderson 1991:210): «Once displaced and directed towards traditional enemies who were tortured and eaten or acted out through ritual ceremonies, [aggression] now was turned towards the self and towards women.» Women became the scapegoat associated with sin and evil.

Women's economic strength formed their mothering. Guajiro mothers could be formidable beings, using economic threats, if necessary, to keep the children in line. Knowing that the mother could withhold gifts in livestock or deny an inheritance, children of both sexes learned early that women were authoritarian figures who could effectively shape their destiny. At the same time, the mother together with her brother taught the children to become economically responsible and independent. The mother was emotionally and economically strong enough to accept this separation from her children with impending adulthood. However, this separation was never so absolute as in the West, and the newly emerging mother-child relationship represented a realignment rather than the repudiation of the original bond (cf. Roscoe 1991:134).

Thus the mother, together with her brother/s represented the disciplinarian authority in the child's life, while the father played an emotionally strong but structurally marginal role without the right to control the child. This situation has been documented for other matrilineal cultures as well, as, for example, the Hopi (cf. Simmons 1942), the Navaho (Dyk and Dyk 1980), and the Minangkabau (Tanner and Thomas 1985). Still, a Guajiro man played an important role as a husband since it was his task to give children to his wife's lineage, but accomplishing this gave him no control over this new life. On the contrary, the right of sexual access to his wife posed a certain dilemma for him when it resulted in pregnancy, because, in earlier times, he had to make a payment to his wife's lineage on the occasion of a birth in compensation for the inconvenience the pregnancy had caused the wife, the pains she had suffered and the blood she had lost during delivery (Gutiérrez de Pineda 1950). The man as procreator had no control over his creation. Only as the mother's brother, and acting together with her, was a Guajiro male in charge of new offspring, that is, his sisters' children.

In the rare Catholic unions children received the father's name and were now socially and economically incorporated into *his* family. Such arrangements reduced the significance of the maternal role but also that of the man as brother and uncle. The Catholic model elevated the male roles of husband and father by giving the man control over wife and children, basing his authority in his sexual persona, a concept that challenged Guajiro views of cross-sex responsibilities and interaction because it was in direct opposition to Guajiro gender philosophy. The Catholic marriage introduces the Western model of family with its emphasis on this sexual persona of husband and father and thus creates «the sexual family» as Fineman (1995:143) calls it.

In traditional culture Guajiro women's position was strengthened by the general rule of matrilocal residence. While the society would also

accommodate avunculocal relationships, we have seen already that the majority of Westerners married to Guajiras followed the matrilocal pattern that encouraged the adherence to traditional women-centered routines and beliefs. Occasional avunculocal marriages occurred, but usually in connection with internal Guajiro politics, as, for example, in the case of the marriage of a chief's sororal nephew who has been groomed to succeed him. The average Guajiro woman or man tended to follow the traditional matrilocal pattern, which, in combination with their matrilineal descent system created a strong female core that was at the heart of strong and life-long bonds between mothers and children as well as between siblings.

Guajiro and Urban Migration

Massive urban migration, beginning in the earlier decades of this century and reaching its highest levels within the last thirty years, has probably had a stronger effect on Guajiro gender dynamics than all the earlier centuries of contact with the Western world. But did it change the women-centered paradigm of these people?

Entering the national Venezuelan culture with its androcentric focus has not automatically created a male-centered viewpoint or situation among Guajiro migrants. Lack of economic opportunities in the new environment actually marginalizes the male Guajiro population. Men's resources are usually too limited for them to play successfully the traditional role of brother and uncle; likewise this fact prevents the male from becoming the controlling, authoritarian husband and father the Catholic/national model prescribes. Thus the mother remains for all practical purposes the center of the family unit, but she, too, has been weakened in her economic position and is not able to succeed in her traditional role as economic leader of the household. The resulting women-centeredness appears to arise by default due to high male absenteeism or male marginality rather than because it reflects female autonomy. This woman-centered Guajiro family emerging in the urban centers customarily faces great obstacles due to economic hardships *and* the rejection of women-centered paradigms in androcentric contemporary society. The latter point has not found much recognition in the discussion of female-headed families but it is a crucial issue when it comes to assess the contributions of such families in contemporary society.

What do women do to cope in this new world where they find themselves again at the center of their families but with seriously limited social and economic assets? Employment opportunities are scarce and meager family resources or age prevent Guajiro women from training for occupational success. The domestic sector as the largest

employer of unskilled female labor in Latin America is not a viable alternative in this case, since tribal women abhor working as domestics, while nationals, given their ethnic prejudice, do not like to employ Guajira servants. This situation is all the more difficult for Guajiro women, who were used to owning their own cattle and controlling their own and their children's lives.

It would seem that when Guajiro women reach this critical social and economic point, social aid in the kinship sphere becomes the key to survival. Young Guajiro women might have a succession of partners, who give them assistance and leave them with children. But with advancing age and an increasing number of children to support, these same women will most likely have difficulties finding partners. This usually means that they will have to rely on help from members of their own kin group. No statistics are available with respect to assistance given among siblings, an important issue when we consider that the siblings bond overrides in significance the spousal link in the tribal culture. Occasional comments by informants, as well as participant observation, suggest that in cases of spousal abandonment women depend on help from their older children and somewhat less so from their brothers, although both sources are significant.

In discussing the mother's dependency on her children we must be cognizant that Guajiro mothers are accustomed to be central figures, but that this now takes on a different meaning because the urban mother's central position is not matched by social and economic power as it was in the tribal culture. And furthermore, in the new environment her role as socializer and educator has been challenged and undermined by the Western school system (cf. Mosonyi et al. 1975). The result is a changed mother-child relationship. How complicated and fragile these new mother-child-bonds actually often are has been documented by an in-depth life history study of a female-headed urban Guajiro family (Watson 1982).

María, the mother, long since abandoned by her husband, lives with her two daughters, one son and two grandchildren in a barrio in Maracaibo. She receives some help from a brother, though most of her financial assistance comes from a grown son who lives in another barrio. The daughters have limited means for their own support, let alone enough for María. The city promises economic opportunity through education, but this has not happened for María's daughters due to María's socialization strategies as well as the dire circumstances in which the family lives. María wanted to put both girls through the traditional seclusion ritual at puberty, the *encierro*, to guarantee their success as women. But in the city this is ineffective and only diminishes the chances for academic and ultimately vocational success (Watson-Franke and Watson 1986). The *encierro* not only fails because

the urban environment and economic structure require literacy and different skills, but because desert and city have different gender ideologies. In the traditional setting, the young female is secluded and various procedures believed to hold magic, are used to prepare her for adulthood, such as cutting her «childhood» hair, subjecting her to a very specific diet, and various other regimens. She learns how to weave and how to prepare and use contraceptive medicines. She also learns that she must take responsibility for herself and her family. The centerpiece of instruction is that women are important, autonomous beings. Upon reaching menstruation, a Guajiro girl is reminded to strive for success, to be hardworking and to be in control of her own body. While she is also prepared to be a good wife, this does not mean that she is expected to live in a husband-dominant household. The family she is being prepared to create and sustain is women-centered; it is not the «sexual family» of the Western world. Thus the teachings of the encierro are not only in opposition to urban gender ideology, but the years of seclusion take her away from her Western lessons in the city schools. Girls who undergo the ritual face ridicule from other students when they return with shortly cropped hair and are unprepared for the coursework because they have missed so much. It is little wonder that young girls rebel against the custom.

Thus, after María's older daughter underwent a somewhat abridged version of the ritual, the younger daughter refused outright to follow the mother's request, clearly a sign of failing maternal authority. As the mother's economic resourcefulness dwindled, she tried to keep the children, especially the daughters, emotionally dependent on her. By not sending them to school and keeping them close to her, women like María, as this study suggests, create a short-lived, illusory reassurance that they are still in control. However, with time, the children become aware of the powerlessness of their mother in an environment that teaches them to trivialize and reject positive aspects of women-centeredness. Such views are learned from peers, the media and in school. One second-grade reading book used in Venezuelan schools [in the 1970s], for example, told its young readers that «Mother is the martyr and slave of the house», a dramatic departure from tribal Guajiro maternal imagery.

There are some Guajiro women who are successful in the city, and they are mainly those who engage in trade. Trading always gives women a measure of autonomy and independence as they operate in public space, earn their own income and interact with strangers. But these women seem to be the exception, and trading, after all, is tenuous and risky. There is the difficulty of getting the contraband merchandise across the border from Colombia, which is an often frustrating and dangerous undertaking. Then there is the issue of policies regulating

traffic along the Venezuelan/Colombian border. Over the years politicians have not always been supportive of these open markets, sending the Guajira traders into a flurry at election time. No systematic study has been done of the familial roles of these women traders, though one might assume that thanks to their stronger economic position, these women's maternal styles would differ from those employed by women who are extremely dependent, like Maria.

Pertinent to this discussion are data from urbanized Navaho in the United States. The Guajiro share a number of important features with the Navaho in terms of their traditional life styles as well as some of their attitudes towards their urban environment. Both are traditionally pastoralists who embrace a women-centered social paradigm as expressed through their matrilineal descent system and the matrilineal residence rule. Both have experienced steep increases in migration rates in recent decades, which in the Navaho case, however, have been externally manipulated in the mid-1950s by the US Bureau of Indian Affairs' «Program of subsidized urbanization», known to the Navaho as «relocation» (Metcalf 1982). Both Guajiro and Navaho have a tendency to keep to themselves focusing on their kin. Weibel-Orlando (1991:123f.) mentions the «continuing power of the matriclan» among the Navaho. Her work among Navaho in Los Angeles convinced her that «the power of kinship ties to regulate behavior does not appear to be as vulnerable to external... forces as one might expect» (1991:123). This observation somewhat contradicts Gough's claim that matrilineal structures face disintegration and are being replaced by the «elementary family» (1961:631). Navaho, for example, will frequently travel fifty or sixty miles to visit one another rather than interact with their Black and Chicano neighbors (Metcalf 1982:76). Many Guajiro likewise have strained or scarcely functioning relationships with their non-Guajiro neighbors and prefer closer relationships with people of their own ethnic background, and preferably kin.

An earlier study of urban Navaho women in Flagstaff, AZ, which focused on reciprocal relationships, also supports the notion that women will seek out kin. In terms of reciprocal behavior the bonds were especially strong among female kin:

It is interesting that aid was received in 46 instances from female relatives as compared to 22 instances from male relatives, and that exactly half the help received from men was from blood relatives, the other half being from men related by marriage. In contrast, help was received from 35 female blood relatives, and 9 women to whom they were related by marriage. Two women reported aid received from their foster-mothers (Griffen 1982:101).

The Navaho data suggest that women-centeredness works in the urban environment in that the matriclan keeps functioning in many

ways and women feel comfortable giving and receiving help from women.

The Guajiro data available have a more negative tone than the Navaho material presented here. This is a complex issue and many reasons might be cited as responsible for this difference, but one of them can probably be found in the hard and demanding nature of Guajiro tribal culture in general. The Guajiro are used to facing and enduring hardship, for life in the desert is difficult, indeed, but both sexes have the necessary resources to prevail in the tribal setting. For Guajiro who have come to the city, the discrepancy between former control and present helplessness is unsettling in the extreme. As Guajiro women experience the loss of their authority and with that their control over resources and people, they often feel helpless and unable to function. Even the limited kinship support is often not sufficient to counteract these negative self-images.

Economic support and opportunity for urban Guajiro women are necessary, but it cannot be the only focus for bringing about constructive change in their lives. Ideological changes must also occur in the area of gender concepts by creating positive views of women-centeredness. This is especially urgent since the older Guajiro women do not have an opportunity in the male-oriented climate of the city to demonstrate how beneficial their own women-centered world is to family life. Guajiro children and teenagers who reside in the urban environment generally do not travel back to the desert, and if they do so, the stay is usually too short to allow them to grasp the full implications of this lifestyle.

Therefore the national culture must be called upon to become aware of and knowledgeable about these women-centered concepts in the tribal setting and the constructive human potential these can have for urban families in the contemporary world. For one, the educational institutions and the mass media could play an effective role in such an effort. By learning about the women-centered heritage of the Guajiro, children of all ethnic backgrounds can attain from early on an appreciation for the constructive features of women-centeredness. On the other hand, the Guajiro of the desert are a living presence in contemporary Venezuela and not a nebulous mythic matriarchy. Here it is still possible to talk to women and men who understand how a living matrilineal philosophy works.

But women-centeredness need not eclipse male presence and influence. Women's centrality according to the matrilineal model allows for the voices of both sexes to be heard. Here, however, since patriarchal authority has been mitigated and the siblings bond is structurally strong, women's autonomy is intact. Women and men share in the exercise of social control.

Abstract

The women-centered family structure of the Guajiro who constitute the largest ethnic minority in both Colombia and Venezuela survived for centuries during colonial and national rule but began to change in meaning and effectiveness during the last six decades when these matrilineal pastoralists started to move from their traditional desert environment to the city where they are faced with different concepts of gender and the devaluation of women-centeredness. This occurs at the same time that female-headed families are dramatically on the increase worldwide. We suggest that Western female-headed families can benefit from the application of women-centered principles that have been an integral part of the Guajiro matrilineal ideology for centuries.

Resumen

La estructura social guajira centrada en la mujer ha sobrevivido durante siglos a la época de la colonia y de los Estados nacionales. Pero esta estructura empieza a sufrir cambios de sentido y de efectividad después que estos pastores matrilineales empezaron a mudarse de su hábitat tradicional desértico a la ciudad, donde se enfrentan a otros conceptos acerca de los géneros y a una disminución de la importancia de la mujer como centro de la familia. Esto sucede mientras en todo el mundo crece dramáticamente el número de familias dirigidas por mujeres. Sugerimos que estas familias del mundo occidental pueden beneficiarse de la aplicación de los principios centrados en la mujer que han sido durante siglos parte integrante de la ideología guajira.

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