

Mosuo culture essay



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Even though the roles of women in today's society are prominent and recognized, there is an invisible barrier that prevents women from moving up in the organizational hierarchy. This is known as the glass ceiling (Rue & Byars 2009, p. 10). However, it is a different case for Mosuo, an agrarian ethnic group of approximately 50000 people living in Lugu Lake, high in the Himalaya, Yunnan province of China (Sklaroff 2007, p. 63). This group is known as one of the last matriarchal societies in the world, whereby female plays the leading roles and holds power in almost every aspect of the family's lives (Anitei 2006).

The other thing that makes them unique is the practice of “ walking marriage” in their culture, which will be further discussed in this essay. As with most other communities, religion plays an important role in the daily life of the Mosuo. Tibetan Buddhism and Daba have been practiced for thousands of years. Daba, a native religion with unwritten scripture, was orally handed down from generation to generation (Shih, C. K, 2009).

The priests, who are also called Daba, are believed to communicate with kuchu, the spirit of ancestors, and they exorcise the biechu, spirits of unrelated ghosts which might bring disaster and diseases to the community (Shih, C. K, 2009). Every Mosuo house has a hearth which is the source of light, and also functions as a cooking tool and a place of worship. A small amount of the Mosuo's meals will be given to the ancestors by placing it on a stone called guo zhong behind that hearth. Daba was the main religion practiced until Tibetan Buddhism was brought to the region in 1276 (Shih, C. K, 2009).

However, against the traditional Tibetan Buddhism, Mosuo lamas consume meat. In addition, there is no female lama or daba, therefore a boy who born in a family of more than one male children will be sent to be a lama. Unlike other monks, they live with families and do not practice celibacy. Instead, they practice walking marriages like the rest of the community (Silk Media 2007). The Mosuo are considered the only matriarchal society in the world, and are also known as the “ kingdom of women” (Zou 2000). Mosuo women take a leading role in the family and this tradition has lasted for over 2000 years.

In the Mosuo community, women have traditionally controlled all the features of community life normally controlled by men. According to Hamilton, Hines, Jorgenson (2005), Mosuo women control the family’s finances, inherit the assets and pass the family name to their descendants. They also tend to make business decisions (Muller 2012). The matriarch or the Dabu is the head of the family and the position is held by one of the female elders in the house (Gatusa 2005). Besides this, female do all the housework, and they also raise the crops, feed the livestock, take care of the children and earn money (Hays 2008).

In the Mosuo community, men do not have the responsibility of taking care of their children nor living with them. They only help the females within the family to raise their children (Muller 2012). Mosuo men are mostly traders, and will sometimes leave the home and travel for long distances by caravan to earn a living (Lugu Lake Mosuo Cultural Development Association 2012). The income will be handed to the matriarch to support the family expenses (Sklaroff 2007, p. 63). Males will also take over the heavier tasks which the

women are unable to perform, such as plowing, clearing land, hauling fish nets (Hays 2010).

The Mosuo families tend to trace their lineage through the female side of the family. It is also stated that the father has no responsibilities for the child upbringing since the child is raised by their mother and uncles and have taken on their mother's family name (Chow 2005, p. 298). However, if the father wishes to be involved in the upbringing of his own children and to have a close relationship to them, he will bring gifts to the mother's family. Although this offers the father a sort of official status in that family, it still does not turn him into a member of the family (Lu & Mitchell 2000, p. 9). As the result of matriarchal family, the Mosuo family structure is extremely stable, especially in large extended families, as they live together to provide care for the children (Man and Woman: The Age-Old Struggle 2008). There is less domestic trouble within the Mosuo family, such as conflicts between husband and wife or even the splitting of property, which usually occurs in a patriarchal family. Such a matriarchal family structure enables the Mosuo to enjoy real freedom and independent rights of marriage, romantic relationship and childbirth. (Bolin & Whelehan 2009).

The most unique aspect of Mosuo culture is their marriage custom, or the “walking marriage”. This custom is known among the Mosuo as *axiahun* (Lu & Mitchell 2000, p. 59). The traditional form of marriage does not exist among the Mosuo. Instead of marrying someone, the females take a series of lovers and are not committed to each partner. According to Lugu Lake Mosuo Cultural Development Association (2006), walking marriage is so called

because the men will visit their partner at night but must leave before dawn to avoid being seen by the other relatives living in the house.

Some of the Mosuo women have open relationships and regularly switch partners, but the majority maintains long term relationships with only one sexual partner. However, the man will not live with the women even if the two are in a long term relationship and will instead live with their respective families. Girls mature when they turn thirteen and can then freely associate with the opposite sex. According to Zhongyi (2006, p. 62), these relationships are normally formed between boys and girls who have grown up in the same community. Every culture possesses a different set of values and beliefs.

The Mosuo culture, too, possesses some differences in its values with Malaysia, the most distinct difference being its views of sexuality. Malaysia is a predominantly Islamic country and is known to be traditionally conservative in its ways. As with most Asian countries, free sex or multiple partners are frowned upon, and even illegal under the Syariah law among Muslim communities (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2010). In contrast, the Mosuo, who believe in walking marriages, go through multiple partners throughout their lives without having any negative connotations attached with the idea of free sex.

Even with this sexual freedom, however, the subject of sex is rarely brought up by the Mosuo in public because it is taboo to mention sexual matters in front of a family member of the opposite sex (Walsh 2005, p. 452). This explains why men have to leave a woman's room before sunrise in order to

avoid being seen by other family members. Due to the mass influx of tourism and the resulting introduction of Western beliefs, the amount of Mosuo practicing traditional relationships has dwindled to only about 50% of the total population (Xiong 2010, p. 5). However, this modernisation has greatly improved the education levels and living standards of the Mosuo. The on-going tourism trade has also prompted a growing awareness among the Mosuo to protect and promote their unique culture. Hence, it is important to maintain a delicate balance between modernisation and traditions because only then can the matrilineal Mosuo culture survive as an important cultural heritage for centuries to come.