

Religious Diversity Colloquium

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“When Men Get No Share: Matrilineal Muslims and Sharia of Succession”



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In the matrilineal societies women had more status, power and property than men who were considered to be outsiders without a control over the workings of the family. Most scholars of Islam, whether internal or external to Islam, believe that matrilineal cultures are against the ethos of the religion, which are more patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal. But, millions of Muslims across the Indian Ocean littoral (such as in Minangkabau in Indonesia, Negeri Sembilan in Malaysia, Coromandel Coast, Karnataka, Lakshadweep and Malabar in India, Akkaraipattu and Batticaloa in Sri Lanka, Angoche and Mozambique Islands in Mozambique, and Comoros) have been following matrilineal system for several centuries. It was one

of the most convenient ways for Indian Ocean trade too: men could come and go on voyage as traders, sailors and itinerants while women stayed on land with the property and controlled the household and social spheres. This economic and social stability gave women an upper hand in economic and personal choices, and within marriages- they could and did move freely. The matrilineal system connected maritime Muslims, but it also raised serious questions at the Islamic jurisprudential tradition that evolved in the Middle East through its peculiar practices of property ownership, kinship relations and marital norms. From the late eighteenth century onwards, there have been significant internal and external criticisms against the system, especially targeted at such matrilineal inheritance customs where men do not get any share in the property. Some of these criticisms surmounted to bloody massacres and violent movements against clan matriarchs and hereditary power centres. With a special focus on the debates surrounding inheritance laws, this paper explores the ways in which matrilineal followers defended the system within Islamic legal epistemologies and maritime social systems.

