

practised bilateral [or cognatic] kinship as it does today'.² As I will also be arguing, this is indeed a more likely hypothesis, at least as regards inheritance and kin-reckoning, although at the same time it must be acknowledged that the available evidence does not allow us to confirm this absolutely. The main exception is likely to have been that succession to high office was in principle patrilineal, a rule in practice distorted and manipulated by political contingencies. In general, the matrilineal hypothesis in any of these senses is the least sustainable, though it has been remarkably persistent, persuading many of the most eminent scholars of its merits – hence the need for a detailed, definite refutation.

First, however, I should make clear to the reader my own understanding of the concepts involved and their related terms. For me, descent is primarily the membership of descent groups by birth, or of simple kin-reckoning where descent groups proper do not exist. Descent may be unilineal, passing exclusively through male (patrilineal) or female (matrilineal) links, or it may be cognatic or bilateral, passing through male or female links indifferently. Other variants are sometimes suggested, but they are controversial and in any case not at issue here. At all events, descent as defined above should be rigorously distinguished from the transmission of either property (inheritance) or office (succession) from generation to generation, as well as from residence rules, all of which are regularly (and in itself legitimately) given the same or very similar designations.

Confusion in such matters is at least partly behind some of the present difficulties: for instance, the terms "matrilineal" (suggesting a line of descent or a rule of succession or inheritance) and "matriarchal" (suggesting power and authority) have generally been used in a very loose and imprecise way, even interchangeably, often conveying no clear idea as to what is supposed to have been transmitted via women – property, office, power, or whatever. In addition, there has been considerable misconstruing of evidence, which in the present case is quite varied and can be grouped into five broad categories: i) certain syntactic and semantic devices in the language, some of which are connected with the mode of symbolic classification; ii) the relatively high status of women and their ability to succeed and inherit; iii) references in mythology; iv) certain features concerning marriage (especially brideprice and residence); and v) succession to the throne and to other offices of state. I will discuss each of these in turn.

II

1 *Linguistic evidence*

Perhaps the most common factor advanced under this heading is the prior position in

² 1979: 430. Ebihara 1974: 345 n. 54 makes a similar comment.