

## Conception and misconception

In 1905 Sir James Frazer announced to the scientific world that he had discovered the origin of totemism.<sup>1</sup> There had been several false starts, and the search had been a long one. In 1886 his colleague and friend William Robertson Smith had invited him to write the entry on totemism for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. In the event he wrote a short book, setting out the available data and suggesting that a totem was a kind of strong-box, external to the body, in which a man deposited his soul for safe-keeping.<sup>2</sup> It was a theory that Frazer modestly, but quite accurately, judged to be of little importance. Then, in 1899, he had acted as midwife to Baldwin Spencer's presentation of central Australian totemism as a system of cooperative magic designed to increase the food supply.<sup>3</sup> Without abandoning these notions as interpretations of later developments, he now believed that the origin of totemism was to be found in ignorance of the role of the father in procreation. This had been reported by Spencer and Gillen in 1899 for the Aranda tribe of central Australia.<sup>4</sup> Conceptual totemism, Frazer told readers of the *Fortnightly Review*, 'furnishes an intelligible starting-point for the evolution of totemism in general. In it, after years of sounding, our plummets seem to touch bottom at last.'<sup>5</sup>

Conceptual totemism was Frazer's designation for the Aranda dogma that women became pregnant when totemic spirits entered their bodies. During the Dreamtime, the ancestors of contemporary natural species wandered the countryside and subsided at last into the ground at particular locations. They took with them their sacred stones, called *churinga*, which continued to generate spiritual power and life essence. Notable features of the landscape (such as rocks and waterholes) represented discrete totemic centres, each of which was associated with a single ancestral form. For instance, Witchetty Grub ancestors deposited stones not far from a picturesque gap in the mountains near Alice Springs, and Witchetty Grub spirits dwelt in various conspicuous rocks and ancient gum-trees in the vicinity. If a woman conceived a child after being in this locality, it was assumed that a Witchetty Grub spirit had gone into her womb. It was immaterial

whether the mother herself was an incarnation of a Witchetty Grub spirit, or of some other totemic form. The father's conceptional totem was likewise irrelevant. For instance, the mother might have been conceived at an Emu site, the child at a Frog site, and the father at a Witchetty Grub site.<sup>6</sup>

As regards knowledge of the physiology of procreation, the facts seemed quite clear. Time after time Spencer and Gillen had questioned their Aranda informants on this point, and always the answer was that pregnancy was not the direct result of sexual intercourse. Sexual cohabitation merely prepared the mother for the reception and birth of an already formed spirit child.<sup>7</sup> Such profound ignorance of natural causation, Frazer supposed, must date from a time immeasurably remote. Accordingly, we may infer that conceptional totemism was antecedent to systems in which totemic affiliation was transmitted matrilineally or patrilineally (i.e. in which the child belonged to the same totem group as its mother or its father). Indeed, it could be safely asserted that central Australian conception beliefs represented totemism in its earliest surviving form.<sup>8</sup>

Andrew Lang saw Frazer's article as he was reading the proofs of his own account of the origins of totemism, due to be published towards the end of 1905.<sup>9</sup> The two theories were irreconcilable. Totemism, according to Lang, began when men bestowed animal and plant names upon discrete human groups in order to differentiate them. As the Scots used to say, 'the name goes before everything'. In time the purely semiotic purpose was forgotten, and beliefs developed about mystical connections between the group and the natural species whose name it bore. Such mythologies inevitably gave rise to assumptions about common descent from a totem ancestor, shared kinship, and the need to prohibit marriage within the group. Initially totemic descent was conceived to be through females, since sexual relations were likely to have been promiscuous and paternity difficult to establish. Patrilineal transmission of the totem was a later development and indicative of evolutionary progress.

Confronted with Frazer's assertion that conceptional totemism predated inherited totemism, Lang immediately drafted a polemic and added it to his book as the final chapter. Much of his discussion concerned the question whether Aranda culture as a whole was more archaic than other Australian cultures where the system of totemism was hereditary rather than conceptional. Appealing to criteria such as sexual arrangements, complexity of kinship organization, religious beliefs and inheritance of office, Lang succeeded in throwing doubt not only on Frazer's evolutionary sequence but on his own as well.<sup>10</sup> The critical difficulty was that in south-eastern tribes with matrilineal descent of the totem, men not only were apparently aware of paternity

but stressed its importance relative to maternity. According to Howitt,<sup>11</sup> they claimed that children originated solely from the male parent and that the mother was merely a nurse. In south-eastern Australia matriliney thus coexisted with knowledge of paternity, whereas in central Australia ignorance of the male role coexisted with patrilineal inheritance of ritual and political office. In order to save his theory, Lang contested the alleged nescience and suggested that the Aranda had merely subordinated their awareness of the facts to an over-riding doctrine of reincarnation of the perpetual souls of Dream-time ancestors, in itself a sign of advanced intellect.

While the futile argument between Lang and Frazer heralded the end of a purely evolutionistic approach to totemism, it marked the beginning of a controversy about conception beliefs in Australia and elsewhere that has yet to be put finally to rest. By 1937 Malinowski had declared the alleged primitive nescience of paternity to be 'the most exciting and controversial issue in the comparative science of Man'.<sup>12</sup> Thirty years later British and American scholars were at war over Malinowski's own contribution to the subject.<sup>13</sup> Twenty years further on, a seminal article on the cultural construction of paternity provided the focus for an entire *Festschrift*.<sup>14</sup> Even if Malinowski's superlatives now seem excessive, there is no doubt that the issue has proved to be one of the agonistic evergreens of twentieth-century anthropology. Why it had so much life in it is still not clearly understood.

In 1894, the year that Baldwin Spencer made his first visit to Central Australia, Sidney Hartland published a three-volume treatise on the myth motif of supernatural birth, beginning with the legend of Perseus and ending with the conception of Christ.<sup>15</sup> As a result of his survey, it could now be said that the miraculous birth of superhuman culture-heroes was widely distributed in folklore, and might possibly be universal. No doubt the idea was facilitated by an imperfect knowledge of paternity, but the force of a belief in supernatural birth obviously depended upon a notion of natural or ordinary birth. The importance of the Aranda, as Frazer put it in 1899 when lauding the discoveries of Spencer and Gillen, was that they constituted 'the first case on record of a tribe who believe in immaculate conception as the sole cause of the birth of every human being who comes into the world'.<sup>16</sup>

It was soon evident that the Aranda were not unique. In 1903 Walter Roth, a medical officer in North Queensland, reported that the Tully River Aborigines did not acknowledge sexual intercourse as the cause of conception in humans, although they conceded that it accounted for procreation in animals.<sup>17</sup> In 1904, following an expedition to Central Australian tribes north of Alice Springs, Spencer and Gillen stated that

conception beliefs in all cases were essentially the same as among the Aranda. Indeed, whereas the Aranda were initially credited with the belief that sexual intercourse prepared the way for the entry of a spirit-child into the womb, it now appeared that, along with their northern neighbours, they believed that pregnancy could occur without coition.<sup>18</sup> In 1913 the legendary Daisy Bates informed a meeting of scientists in Sydney that the natives of the Kimberley region of Western Australia insisted that sexual intercourse had nothing to do with procreation. They believed that conception occurred when a baby appeared to its father in a dream and then entered the body of its mother.<sup>19</sup> In 1914 Spencer published results of further fieldwork among tribes in the Top End of the Northern Territory, where once again he found that knowledge of physical paternity was lacking.<sup>20</sup>

As these reports reached the armchairs of Europe, two opposed scholarly positions began to emerge. One, initiated by Frazer, was that the statements of the natives were to be regarded straightforwardly as expressions of genuine ignorance. However, opinions differed as to the appropriate construction to be placed on such a state of affairs. Frazer saw it simply as indicative of an abysmally low level of mental development.<sup>21</sup> By contrast Arnold van Gennep, the eminent French folklorist, considered it to be little different from the ignorance of procreative mechanisms still prevailing among the masses of Europe. In any case, given that Aboriginal girls go to their husbands before reaching puberty, it is a matter of empirical observation among them that sexual intercourse does not necessarily lead to conception. Why should ignorance of physical paternity be a symptom of arrested mental evolution when a proper understanding of fertilization was not achieved by Western science until the nineteenth century?<sup>22</sup>

The opposing position, initiated by Lang, was that native testimony on the subject is not to be taken at face-value; at some level the connection between coition and conception is apprehended, but officially it is denied in favour of a doctrine of spiritual causation. In a book entitled *Sexual Antagonism*, published in 1913, Walter Heape expressed disbelief that such keen observers as the Aborigines would fail to note the gross facts of biological reproduction. Fortunately, Roth had made it clear that in at least one tribe the facts were acknowledged in the case of generation among animals. More importantly, he had explained that they were denied in the case of humans in order to affirm the superiority of man over beasts. But there was likely to be more to it than snobbishness. Could it not be that professed nescience and the doctrine of spirit-conception were female creations enabling adulterous pregnancies to be cloaked behind mystifications? The attribution of conception to chance supernatural causes shielded women from suspicion of extra-marital

natural causes. Simultaneously, it liberated men from the embarrassments of cuckoldry.<sup>23</sup>

In 1918 Carveth Read reviewed the two rival viewpoints, lending his weight to the thesis that the natives possessed real knowledge of paternity but repressed it in favour of religious dogma. Although a psychologist as well as a philosopher,<sup>24</sup> he used the term repression without allusion to its burgeoning psychoanalytic connotation and meant simply the suppression of the truth by indoctrination. A decade later a gift from Princess Marie Bonaparte of Greece enabled a young Hungarian psychoanalyst named Geza Roheim to go to central Australia and study the Aborigines at first hand.<sup>25</sup> With the help of his wife, who worked with the womenfolk, and of his own natural talent as a linguist, he plumbed depths that in 1905 Sir James Frazer would not have dreamed possible.

On 5 August, 1929, Roheim made an entry in his field notebook that subsequently bore much of the weight of his interpretation of Aranda conception theory. That day, while watching children play with some toys he had given them, he observed a boy named Wili-kutu placing a paper trumpet over his penis and then thrusting with it. Later Wili-kutu put a ball into the trumpet and took it out, saying 'This is how semen comes out'. He repeated the process with a toy serpent, saying 'The child comes out of the penis.'<sup>26</sup> Roheim took this as clear evidence that small boys were aware of the connection between copulation and conception, even if grown men disowned it. At some stage the knowledge was banished from consciousness, where its place was taken by a doctrine of mystical conception. How do we account for this retrogression from fact to fantasy? According to Roheim, we are dealing with the repression of the Oedipus complex, in particular the procreative role of the father. To know that children are produced by coitus is to acknowledge not only that my mother (whom I love) has sexual intercourse with my father, but that I am its product. In the case of Aboriginal males, this painful fact was gradually repressed into the unconscious, while the myth of spirit-entry and reincarnation extinguished (or at least diminished) the carnal role of the father and allowed the son to represent himself as the agent of his own conception.<sup>27</sup>

Without doubt the most formidable and tenacious champions of the rival position were Malinowski and his protégé M.F. Ashley-Montagu. In 1913 the former reviewed Australian conception beliefs and concluded that over most of the continent the father's share in procreation was not known.<sup>28</sup> Three years later he reported an equally profound nescience among the natives of the Trobriand Islands,<sup>29</sup> thus forging in world anthropology an enduring link between the Australians and the

Trobrianders as the two prime exemplars of primitive ignorance of paternity. In *The Father in Primitive Psychology* (1927) and *The Sexual Life of Savages* (1929), he insisted that the answer to the question, 'Are the natives really ignorant of physiological fatherhood?', was 'unambiguously and decisively' in the affirmative. According to Trobriand metaphysics, a woman became pregnant when a spirit-child entered her belly. Systematic inquiry had shown conclusively that men sincerely believed sexual intercourse not to be necessary for pregnancy, and semen not to be implicated in the formation of a foetus.<sup>30</sup>

In 1929 Montague Ashley-Montagu, a student at University College, acted on a suggestion by Malinowski that he might present a seminar paper at the London School of Economics on the procreative theories of primitive man. It was the beginning of a lifetime of prodigious scholarly output. Later the same year Ashley-Montagu's paper appeared as an article in *The Realist*; by 1937 it had blossomed into a large book entitled *Coming into Being among the Australian Aborigines*. After reviewing the now-impressive body of data, Ashley-Montagu came to essentially the same conclusion as Malinowski had a quarter of a century earlier: 'From the evidence thus presented the conclusion is clear that in Australia practically universally, according to orthodox belief, pregnancy is regarded as causally unconnected with intercourse.'<sup>31</sup> Malinowski expressed satisfaction with the outcome in a lengthy foreword. It was true that a few dissentient opinions had been expressed, but the author had effectively disposed of them. There could be no doubt that Dr Ashley-Montagu's judgment would remain as the ultimate conclusion of science.<sup>32</sup>

For the purposes of his argument, Ashley-Montagu divided the continent into four broad regions: (1) Central Australia (2) Top End of the Northern Territory (3) North Queensland (4) Western Australia.<sup>33</sup> His review of each region began with a recapitulation of the 'classical' report of nescience viz. Spencer and Gillen for Central Australia; Spencer for the Top End; Roth for North Queensland; and Daisy Bates for Western Australia. This was followed by summaries and discussions of more recent reports, with particular attention to those conflicting with the paradigm. The three major dissenters, as identified by Malinowski in his foreword, were Lloyd Warner, Donald Thomson and Geza Roheim. Let us consider the nature of their dissent and the manner of its disposal.

In an article published in 1931 Warner recounted an anecdote that in the event undermined the ascription of nescience more than any other statement in the entire controversy.<sup>34</sup> During his first field trip to Arnhem Land, he became convinced that the Murngin had no understanding of the physiological nature of conception whatever. Speaking of their own experience as fathers, numerous men told him that their

children had come in the form of spirits during dreams. After seeking directions to their mothers, they entered the latter's vaginas. During his second trip, an occasion arose in which Warner was able to ask several old men to explain the function of semen. They looked at him with incredulity and replied that semen 'was what made babies'. Warner went on to explain that his initial false assumption had been the result of his failure to appreciate his hosts' intellectual priorities. For them, the spiritual origins of the self were much more important and interesting than mundane details like copulation and semen. An intruder from Mars would probably have made a similar error had he arrived among the Puritans of colonial Massachusetts and recorded their belief that babies come from heaven.

The question raised was whether the Murngin were to be put to one side as an isolated case, or whether the assertion of a general procreative nescience among the Aborigines was based on superficial inquiry of the kind that led to Warner's initial false inference. Whereas Warner inclined to the latter view, Ashley-Montagu urged the former. The coastal tribes of Arnhem Land had for centuries been visited by Malay fishermen from Macassar in search of trepang. There was a distinct possibility, therefore, that the beliefs of the region were not strictly indigenous. In Ashley-Montagu's view, the question whether the Aborigines were ignorant of the facts of procreation could be settled only through research on tribes uncontaminated by foreign influences.<sup>35</sup> Malinowski for his part treated the anecdote as inconsequential. Warner's field location was 'on the periphery of Australian culture', and the value of his material was marred in any case by a tendency to confuse orthodox belief with 'random statements of irrelevant opinion'.<sup>36</sup> Presumably the latter included statements by old men on the procreative properties of semen.

Donald Thomson was a Melbourne field biologist who developed an interest in Aborigines in the early 1930s. Unaware that Warner had declared war on the nescience camp from his base in Arnhem Land, he published a similar challenge a few years later from Cape York Peninsula. Among the eastern tribes, men insisted that babies were produced by *tall'all*, the seminal fluid of the father. There were no beliefs in spirit entry or reincarnation, and the mother's role in procreation was regarded as unimportant. Women used certain plants as contraceptives in the conviction that they closed the genital passages and thus prevented semen from entering. Among the Wik Monkan of western Cape York, Thomson was informed that the embryo developed through a build up of seminal fluid in the uterus. A single act of sexual intercourse was deemed insufficient for pregnancy to ensue. Accumulated semen was said to block the flow of menstrual blood, thus allowing pregnancy to begin. The elderly become infertile because

they are unable to copulate frequently enough. Humans die because in ancestral times they spurned the Moon-Man's offer of semen. He drank it himself, and that is why he is able to regenerate himself each month.<sup>37</sup>

In Thomson's opinion these facts showed conclusively that knowledge of physical paternity existed among the coastal peoples of Cape York. On the strength of his observations he therefore threw down the gauntlet to the nescience school and in particular its 'most fervid advocate', Professor Malinowski.<sup>38</sup> Yet in the same passage he adverted to his own earlier demonstrations of substantial cultural diffusion to north Queensland emanating from Papua via the Torres Straits Islands. Not surprisingly, when Ashley-Montagu came to review Cape York he graciously complimented Thomson on the extraordinary interest of his material and simultaneously accepted the offer to regard it as irrelevant.<sup>39</sup>

The case of Roheim required a different treatment. A charge of 'contamination' could be a double-edged weapon, since the Aranda in Spencer's day had already been subject to considerable European influence. Roheim, moreover, claimed that some of his most critical evidence had come from Luritja tribesmen who had never seen white men before. These informants stated that the human embryo passed from a *churinga* into the body of the father, and thence through his penis into the mother's womb.<sup>40</sup> Ashley-Montagu thought it possible that white influences were at work even here. Nevertheless, he conceded that Roheim's report could not easily be dismissed. At the very least it suggested a notion that intercourse was necessary to prepare a woman for spirit entry. As to Roheim's assertion that children know the facts of procreation and subsequently repress them, the simulation of intercourse may merely reflect the adult belief that the penis transmits the spirit-child. It does not necessarily indicate an understanding of the role of semen.<sup>41</sup>

Although Warner, Thomson and Roheim were the main dissenters, they were not the only ones. From Alice Springs, Olive Pink wrote that contrary to accepted anthropological opinion the Aranda understood physical paternity and believed that the spirit entered at the time of 'quickenings' after the body of the baby had been produced conjointly by its mother and father.<sup>42</sup> Ursula McConnel reported that the tribes she had studied in north Queensland 'quite definitely consider sex-contact to be necessary to child-bearing', though they admitted they did not know in what way.<sup>43</sup> In Western Australia Radcliffe-Brown discovered a ritual for increasing sexual desire which was carried out explicitly for the purpose of increasing the population. It was true that in the same area Aborigines also associated conception with spirit entry following gifts of food from a hunter, but inconsistencies of this



kind in folk belief were just as common among uneducated Europeans as among Aborigines and should not surprise us.<sup>44</sup>

In all the recent material reviewed by Ashley-Montagu, the strongest affirmation of nescience came from W.E.H. Stanner. Among the Murinbata of Port Keats 'sexual intercourse has an erotic significance only'.<sup>45</sup> It was not associated with conception, except inasmuch as defloration was acknowledged to be a precondition. Spirit children existed in various forms and made their presence known to a father by tweaking his hair, whispering in his ear, or setting his muscles twitching. They normally entered a woman's body through her toe nail. Stanner recorded these facts in 1935, within months of the arrival of the first missionaries. He had previously lived among neighbouring tribes whose cultures had been disturbed in various degrees by European intrusion. In some, the mystical theory of conception had been abandoned in favour of confused versions of white statements on the subject, while in others traditional and introduced theories coexisted and could be elicited by framing the same questions differently.<sup>46</sup>

A similar though slightly less unequivocal report of nescience came from Lauriston Sharp. In a letter to Ashley-Montagu written in 1936, he referred to 'a vague recognition of a very general relationship between intercourse and conception'. People admitted that if a woman never had intercourse, she would not find a spirit-child. There was no suggestion, however, that semen played a role, or even that regular sexual relations were necessary. After all, sex was a pleasant and exciting pastime in which all men and women engaged, but not all women had babies. Having lived among the Yir-Yiront for almost three years, Sharp failed to see why their lack of detailed knowledge of reproductive physiology should be treated as evidence of retarded intelligence.<sup>47</sup>

In bringing his survey to an end, Ashley-Montagu declared that its chief purpose was to assemble the classical and recent accounts so that readers might form judgments for themselves. His own conclusion, as we have seen, was that in orthodox Aboriginal belief pregnancy was regarded as causally unconnected with intercourse. We have also seen that the words 'orthodox' and 'causally' were used as devices to protect the proposition against falsification. Whenever the author was faced with beliefs implying awareness of a connection between intercourse and pregnancy, he argued that they were unorthodox (e.g., of alien provenance), or that the connection was not necessary and sufficient (e.g., it lacked a notion of fertilization). The outcome was, on the one hand, an artificial uniformity and, on the other, a criterion of knowledge that if applied consistently throughout the world would deprive the Aborigines of the special place reserved for them in the gallery of procreative nescience.<sup>48</sup>

In the thirty years' peace that followed the publication of Ashley-Montagu's book, fresh evidence confirmed his survey of previous material in one notable respect: conception beliefs in one area were not necessarily the same as in another. Some fieldworkers reported ignorance, others reported knowledge. In 1939 Phyllis Kaberry maintained that, despite contact with Europeans over several generations, the people of the East Kimberley 'still had no idea of the true relation between sexual intercourse and conception'.<sup>49</sup> Coitus was an erotic pastime whose only relevance for reproduction was that it prepared the way for the entry of a spirit-child 'found' by the father. Women were adamant that semen had nothing to do with the formation of a child, though several thought the embryo might float on it like a water-lily. Professor Elkin, drawing on his own extensive experience, endorsed these observations in his foreword. A year earlier in another context he had warned against upsetting the Aborigines' spiritual view of nature, including notions of pre-existence and spirit-conception. Nevertheless, he thought that if men were instructed in the biological facts of fatherhood they might be induced to give up certain customs objectionable to us, such as wife-lending and ceremonial licence.<sup>50</sup>

Not long after the publication of Kaberry's book two of Elkin's pupils set out for Ooldea, a siding on the Transcontinental Railway in South Australia. In their preliminary field report Ronald and Catherine Berndt expressed the opinion that Aborigines would only discuss intimate matters when a complete intimacy existed between fieldworker and informant, a fact that helped to explain why so many previous observers had failed to realise that spiritual belief existed side by side with a more or less accurate knowledge of paternity. The Aboriginal people of Ooldea were a case in point. They said that semen built up in the uterus following a number of ejaculations until it stopped the flow of menstrual blood. The latter mixed with the semen and formed the foetus, which was then animated by a spirit entering through the women's vagina.<sup>51</sup> A few years later Mr and Mrs Berndt discovered basically the same theory of procreation two thousand miles to the north in western Arnhem Land, with the interesting elaboration that the husband ejaculated the spirit-child into an 'egg' formed by a coagulation of menses and semen.<sup>52</sup>

By the time Mervyn Meggitt published his monograph on the Walbiri of Central Australia in 1962, it was apparent that there might be subjective and contextual factors operating in the investigative process itself. Answers to questions on sexual topics might reflect not only cultural differences among Aborigines but sub-cultural and individual differences among the investigators. Perhaps it was significant that Professor Elkin found nescience wherever he worked, whereas the Berndts mostly found knowledge. There was also the

possibility, so far not taken seriously, of a considerable variety of opinion within a single community. For instance, all the older men with whom Meggitt discussed conception maintained that, while copulation was a necessary preliminary to spirit entry, the latter was more important because it animated the foetus and determined the personality. One man volunteered that the foetus was a mixture of semen and menses. Another claimed that semen transmitted the father's clan-spirit into the child. Walbiri women, on the other hand, told Mrs Meggitt that copulation and menstrual blood were the important factors and that spirit entry merely gave the child an identity. Meggitt concluded that responses to inquiries about procreation depended on who was asked and in what circumstances.<sup>53</sup>

While ethnographers in Australia were doing their best to clarify the problem at an empirical level, war broke out again among theoreticians in the northern hemisphere. The provocation was allegedly the result of an example taken at random. In 1961 Edmund Leach, Fellow of King's College, Cambridge and subsequently a knight of the realm, published an essay designed to prove that J.G. Frazer, erstwhile Fellow of Trinity College and author of the best-selling paperback *The Golden Bough*, was in fact a pedestrian, unoriginal scholar who happened to have powerful friends and an ambitious French wife. To make matters worse, Sir James was an unabashed racist who, in the name of literary elegance, distorted the statements of observers upon whose writings his own almost entirely depended. To illustrate some of these points, Dr Leach invited his readers to compare Frazer's paraphrase of Roth's report of conception beliefs among the Tully River Aborigines with the original in Bulletin No. 5 of *North Queensland Ethnography*. It was evident that the intention of Frazer's additions and modifications was to magnify the 'childlike ignorance' of the natives. Admittedly, Roth himself said the latter were ignorant of the connection between copulation and pregnancy, but there was nothing in his text to warrant such an inference. The modern interpretation would be that in this society 'the relationship between the woman's child and the clansmen of the woman's husband stems from public recognition of the bonds of marriage rather than from the fact of cohabitation, which is a very normal state of affairs'.<sup>54</sup>

Given that (a) much better exemplifications of the racist assumptions underlying Frazer's conception theory of totemism were available, (b) the 'modern interpretation', as presented, was somewhat less than self-evident, and (c) the assertions appeared in the journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (a publication not normally read by anthropologists), Leach's contribution to the conception debate might easily have passed without notice. Such was not to be the case. Two years later Melford Spiro from the University of Washington held it up

to an audience on Dr Leach's home ground as an example of the peculiar notion advanced by some structuralists that, regardless of their ostensible meaning, 'religious explanations are concerned almost exclusively with phenomena of social structure'.<sup>55</sup> After dissecting Leach's 'modern interpretation' in a lengthy paragraph, he discarded it as being of no value. The vernacular statements quoted by Roth were, in Professor Spiro's view, not symbolic expressions of structural relationships but literal attempts to explain a biological phenomenon whose true cause the Tully River Aborigines did not know.

Spiro's sally into British social anthropology was met by the full force of the 1966 Henry Myers Lecture at the Royal Anthropological Institute.<sup>56</sup> By this time Leach had read Ashley-Montagu and was able to inform his adversary that their respective positions on the issue were already of some antiquity. Spiro was a latter-day apostle of the Frazerian view that the savages were truly ignorant, whereas Leach belonged to the Lang tradition of assuming that their formulations expressed the priority of religious dogma over prosaic knowledge. Adherents of the nescience school were, as Leach put it, 'positively eager' to attribute stupidity to native people in order to affirm their own superiority. Nearly all the recent evidence on the Aborigines led to the conclusion that 'the formally expressed ignorance of physiological paternity is a kind of religious fiction'.<sup>57</sup> The reports of Stanner and Kaberry were anomalous and hopelessly biased.

The title of Leach's lecture was 'Virgin Birth'. For Professor Spiro's enlightenment, he traced the 'modern interpretation' of Tully River conception beliefs through sixteen centuries of Christianity to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. There the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was set down side by side with a pedigree placing Jesus in a direct line of patrilineal descent from David *through Joseph*. Likewise the Aboriginal dogma of spirit entry coexisted with filiation through the mother's husband. Neither dogma entailed ignorance of the facts of physiological paternity. By defining God or the Totemic Ancestor as the genitor, both dogmas affirmed that for jural purposes descent was to be traced through the child's legal father, regardless who happened to be its natural father.

Spiro was not impressed. In a reply published in *Man* in 1968,<sup>58</sup> he argued that Dr Leach's interpretation of the Virgin Birth as a charter for patrification was at the very least eccentric. For the generality of Christian worshippers, the doctrine of Incarnation meant that, through the agency of the Holy Ghost, God impregnated a human female named Mary and thus begat his only son Jesus. Its central message was that God became flesh for the salvation of the world. According to Judaic prophecy, however, the deliverer of the Jews would be a patrilineal descendant of David. The pedigree of Christ was therefore

included in the Gospels in order to advance his credentials as the Messiah. This solved one problem only to create another: how could Jesus simultaneously be the son of God and the son of man? According to Spiro, of all the attempted resolutions of this dilemma in Christian theology, only one had proposed that the Davidic pedigree was justified on the ground that Joseph was the sociological (as distinct from biological) father of Jesus. It was therefore perverse to argue that the dogma of the Virgin Birth was a cultural validation of the principle of filiation through males. It would be nearer the truth to say that it undermined the genealogical basis of patrilineality by rendering the paternal status of the mother's husband highly equivocal. As Leach himself had noted, medieval Christians regarded Joseph as a cuckold.

Spiro offered refutations on two subsidiary points. First, Leach's reading of the recent evidence from Australia was tendentious and misleading. Second, his reiterated attributions of a racist ideology to his opponents were gratuitous, obsessive and false. It was not the case that assertions of ignorance necessarily imply irrationality, childishness or stupidity. Numerous scholars had insisted that, although the Aborigines were ignorant of physical paternity, their alternative theory of reproduction was entirely rational and in no sense reflected a low level of intelligence. The shining example of this tradition was Ashley-Montagu himself, and for Leach to include him in his denigrations was nothing short of extraordinary. Within a few years of stating his conclusions on Aboriginal conception beliefs he had written his most famous and influential book – *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*.<sup>59</sup>

Spiro ended his paper by comparing two rival interpretations of Australian conception beliefs: the cognitive-explanatory view espoused by Malinowski and Ashley-Montagu, and the psychoanalytic view advanced by Roheim.<sup>60</sup> Both made better sense of the data than the so-called 'modern interpretation' advanced by Leach. In a letter to the editor in the following number of the journal, Leach admitted that the 'true relation' between sexual intercourse and conception was just as mysterious to him as it was to the Aborigines of Australia. He acknowledged that Professor Spiro had raised various questions for him to answer, but unfortunately their contents evaporated on being reduced to basic English. For the most part he was happy to let readers compare the two essays point by point, checking back to the original evidence. In a two-line rejoinder conceding nothing, Spiro bowed out on the same note.

The joust between Spiro and Leach generated a certain amount of comment. One of the contributors to the correspondence pages of *Man* was R.M.W. Dixon, a linguist from University College, London, who

had recently documented the Dyirbal language of the Tully River region. Whereas Roth had recorded conception beliefs only at a mystical level, Dixon had encountered them at a more basic level as well, where the role of copulation was acknowledged to be exactly the same in human as in animal conception. Awareness of this fact was encoded in the Dyirbal verb *bulmbinyu*, which meant 'to be the male progenitor of' and which had clear reference to the particular act of copulation that induced a conception.<sup>61</sup>

A decade later Harold Scheffler of Yale University published an extensive analysis of Australian kinship systems, in which he sought to confirm that the basis of Aboriginal kin classification was genealogy (rather than, say, group membership).<sup>62</sup> To clear the ground, he briefly outlined the rival positions on conception beliefs and claimed that two recent statements had settled the issue beyond reasonable doubt in favour of those who affirmed the coexistence of secular knowledge and religious dogma. One was Dixon's letter, the other was an account of Aranda conception theology by T.G.H. Strehlow. Together they constituted an empirical refutation of the nescience view at its twin points of origin. It was now apparent that the Aborigines of central Australia and north Queensland traditionally held two complementary theories on procreation. One was about biological reproduction, the other about the implantation of immortal souls in ephemeral bodies. The naturalistic theory maintained that sexual intercourse was necessary for conception; that semen, either alone or in combination with uterine blood, contributed to the formation of the foetus; and that, therefore, the link between father and offspring was in part physical. The metaphysical theory explained how a foetus came to life and how an individual acquired an inalienable identity.

In my view the two refutations are not as straightforward as Scheffler supposed. Let us take the Tully River linguistic evidence first. Twenty years after the 'Virgin Birth' controversy, Dixon published a description of the Dyirbal kinship system in which he gave some additional information about the verb *bulmbinyu*. Although the word normally had 'father' as its subject and 'child' as its object, other subjects were possible viz. father's brother or father's sister. The full meaning of the verb should therefore be rendered as 'beget as a father does, either directly or through a brother'.<sup>63</sup> This raises some problems. First, what construction are we meant to put upon the notion of begetting 'through a brother'? Perhaps it is a euphemism for fraternal cuckoldry. Second, if the verb (a) means 'to beget', (b) has clear reference to the particular act of copulation that induced a conception, and (c) is clinching evidence of knowledge of physical paternity, what are we supposed to make of the fact that it may be used with a female subject?

In 1967 I encountered a similar concept in the Gidjingali language of northern Arnhem Land.<sup>64</sup> The verb *-bokama-*, which I initially glossed as 'to beget', could be used with either father or father's sister as singular subjects. It could also be used with father and father's sister as joint subjects. For example:

nguna-anya nguji-bapa nguna-birrin-bokama-rra  
 my F my FZ me they ? past tense

If we translate *-bokama-* as 'to beget' (thus, 'my father and my paternal aunt begat me'), we imply that the speaker was begotten incestuously by his father and father's sister (OED *beget*, procreate, usu. of father, sometimes of father and mother). This is not the intention of the utterance, since it is used conventionally to indicate a normal state of affairs, not a reprehensible one. The translation would be both misleading and offensive.

In his article on Dyirbal kinship Dixon included another 'verb of begetting', viz. *gulngga-*, meaning (a) 'to breastfeed', (b) 'to give birth to'. In the latter sense, the subject was normally the baby's mother but again 'extensions' were possible, viz. mother's sister, mother's brother. Dixon's expanded gloss was 'to give birth to as a mother does, either directly or through a sister'.<sup>65</sup> Once again problems arise. What is indirect parturition? How does a maternal uncle give birth?

The Gidjingali verb *-ngichi-* (*-yichi-* when preceded by *n*) means (a) 'to tip out', (b) 'to give birth to'. From an early point in my genealogical research I used it to establish mother/child relationships. Subsequently (as with *-bokama-*) I discovered that it could also be used with a joint brother-sister subject. For example:

nguj-ama nguna-gula nguna-birrin-yichi-nga  
 my M my MB me they ? past tense

Obviously we cannot appropriately translate this utterance as 'my mother and my maternal uncle gave birth to me'. How, then, do we translate it?

In order to fathom the meaning of these expressions, we need to take into account a fundamental characteristic of Aboriginal systems of kin classification, viz. that siblings of both sexes act as a unit in applying kinship terms, not only to relatives in ascending generations (as in English) but in descending generations as well.<sup>66</sup> Commonly, the terms used by a father for his children differ from those used by their mother. The father's siblings use the same terms as the father, and the mother's siblings use the same terms as the mother. For example, if I am a Dyirbal male I address my son as *galbin*, and my brothers and sisters also address him as *galbin*. My wife, however, addresses him as *daman*, and so do her brothers and sisters. In the Dyirbal and Gidjingali cases

it would seem that the conceptualization of the relationships between siblings and their offspring is homologous with the conceptualization of procreation. In both cases kin-term usage expresses simultaneously the unity of siblings in regard to their respective offspring and a disjunction between paternal and maternal sibling sets. The same can be said of the 'verbs of begetting'. A single principle is being expressed in two different, though related, modes.

Suppose, then, that there exists in Dyrbal and Gidjingali culture a model postulating (a) that members of a sibling set share a vital essence; and (b) that individuals derive part of their essence from their fathers and part from their mothers. On that basis the 'verbs of begetting' might mean respectively, 'to transmit the patrilineal essence' and 'to transmit the matrilineal essence'. The transmission might be thought of concretely or metaphorically, individually or collectively. In that case we could say that the vernacular conceptualization is more akin to genetics than physiology.

Let us now turn to Strehlow's account of conception theory among the Aranda. Whereas it has been common for one ethnographer to be in conflict with another, Strehlow in this instance is in conflict with himself. In *Aranda Traditions* (1947), he reported that pregnancy was normally attributed to the entry into a woman of a totemic ancestor or some object associated with him, such as a bull-roarer. The Southern Aranda believed that the spirit-child was fully formed before it found its way into its mother's body. Strehlow made no reference to sexual intercourse as a contributing factor, and his description of circumstances associated with conception strongly suggested that spirit entry was regarded as both necessary and sufficient.<sup>67</sup> However, in *Songs of Central Australia* (1971), he maintained on a number of grounds that the Western Aranda traditionally had knowledge of physical paternity. First, people often remarked on physical and mental similarities between fathers and their sons. Second, they translated the verb *tenama* (used only with a male subject) as 'to make a child'. Third, all old men had full knowledge of the causal connection between intercourse and conception, even though they expounded only the doctrine of spirit reincarnation for general consumption. Fourth, the embryo begotten by its father was regarded in exactly the same way as the young plant that had burst forth from the seed cast by the wind upon a sacred site. It was only after the embryo formed that a spirit made its entry.

Scheffler based his judgment largely on Strehlow's later account. In comparing the assertions made in *Songs of Central Australia* with those in *Aranda Traditions*, two points should be borne in mind. First, the assumption attributed to the Western Aranda of a natural formation of the foetus as a pre-condition of spirit entry seems to be an inference on Strehlow's part rather than direct testimony. The mother experiences



symptoms of pregnancy; it would 'therefore seem to be a natural assumption that the soul or spirit of the ancestor entered into an embryo or foetus that had already come into existence by the natural means of procreation'.<sup>68</sup> But, given the belief system reported previously in *Aranda Traditions*, why should the mother not assume that she has been entered by an ancestor, his bull-roarer, or a fully formed child? Second, Strehlow stated in *Songs of Central Australia* that mature Western Aranda men rejected the notion of biological paternity only in the presence of women, children, younger men and inquisitive white observers. Why Aboriginal elders should conceal the part of their theory of conception consistent with Western biology was not clarified. Nor did Strehlow explain why they denied their physical contribution to procreation when speaking to the uninitiated. What initiated men typically conceal is their contribution to the metaphysical sources of reproduction.

In the same year that Scheffler found in favour of the co-existence of complementary levels, Robert Tonkinson published an account of an episode in his fieldwork that would have consoled Ashley-Montagu.<sup>69</sup> Trained by Ronald and Catherine Berndt at the University of Western Australia, Tonkinson commenced a research project at Jigalong on the fringe of the Gibson Desert in 1963. His initial inquiries on the subject of procreation were addressed to several English-speaking adults, whose answers were similar to those recorded by the Berndts at Ooldea twenty years earlier. However, when he raised the matter with an older and more traditional man who was teaching him the language, he was told in no uncertain terms that semen and menstrual blood were not fit topics for conversation. During a field trip seven years later, Tonkinson was in the middle of a conversation about conception with one of his initial informants and a younger man when his erstwhile language teacher walked in. The old man soon left, and an hour later Tonkinson and his two informants were summoned to appear before a large meeting of senior men away from the general camp. After some accusations and explanations, they were admonished for discussing a dangerous and forbidden topic and warned not to do it again. Tonkinson's mentor told him in front of the gathering that, according to Aboriginal law, the *only* thing relevant to the topic of procreation is spirit-children. Men did not know about such things as semen and menses and did not want to hear the words mentioned. Tonkinson apologized for his solecism and offered to provide a ritual feast by way of atonement. The offer was accepted.

Tonkinson went on to document spirit-child beliefs in admirable detail. Reflecting on the events later, he concluded that his early data on procreation had probably been influenced by contact with

Europeans and that traditional explanations of reproduction were quite unconcerned with physiology. Senior men attributed the proliferation of plant and animal species to spirits left behind by the ancestors; they were firm in their belief that pollination and insemination had nothing to do with it. Although rain-making ceremonies were replete with body metaphors (blood, sweat = rain, penis = snake = lightning, testicles = hail, female loins = lightning), reference to semen was conspicuous by its total absence. All the same he was reluctant to rule out knowledge of the role of semen altogether. One of his informants who had been rebuked at the public meeting expressed the opinion that the traditionalists were lying in order to cover up their embarrassment. But, given their normal lack of prudishness in sexual matters, not to speak of their active opposition to Christian missionaries, what were they upset about? Tonkinson speculated that his inquiries caused discomfort because they juxtaposed competing explanations on a matter of great ontological importance. By posing semen/menses as an alternative to spirit-children, the investigation threatened to undermine a critical link with the life-giving forces of the Dreaming. Jigalong culture, especially since colonization, had a proven capacity for accommodating incompatible beliefs by keeping them in separate compartments. The anthropologist in this case was forcing them into the open and putting them at loggerheads.

Although Tonkinson's hypothesis was not entirely new, it was advanced at a time when anthropology was facing an epistemological crisis of its own. The conceptual apparatus we use to interpret non-Western cultures, it was argued, is itself a cultural product whose claim to be a method of discovering objective and universal truths is not only ethnocentric but imperialistic to boot. Rational discourse is a Western invention posited on the view that  $p$  and  $not-p$  cannot simultaneously be true. By adopting and applying the scientific paradigm, anthropology has consistently approached native thought as its own antithesis. Such an attitude is no longer defensible, either intellectually, morally or historically. The lesson of anthropology, confuting its own founding dogma, is that truth is culturally conditioned and hence relative. Anthropologists must henceforth abandon all vestiges of their traditional role as collectors of the superstitions and fetishes of savage races for the benefit of an amused cognoscenti. Instead, all cultures should be approached respectfully as systems of shared meanings, each valid in its own right. The anthropological project is to interpret these systems so as to make them universally intelligible, not to analyse and evaluate them in terms of the categories of Western science.

A few years after the appearance of Tonkinson's paper, Francesca Merlan published an essay in *Man* called 'Australian Conception

Beliefs Revisited'.<sup>70</sup> While not disowning the positivist past, it sought to relocate and extend the debate within a postmodernist framework. In Merlan's view the controversy had been largely fruitless because, unable to free themselves of their own folk-categories, anthropologists had worked with a conceptual distinction between physiology and religion which had no counterpart in the belief systems under investigation. The question whether the two modes of reproduction (physiological and spiritual) were perceived by Aborigines as being in a relationship of contradiction, complementarity or disjunction was thus totally misplaced. Disjunction occurred not between the spiritual and the non-spiritual (as Tonkinson had argued), but between sex and reproduction. Once this was acknowledged, we could begin to make sense of Aboriginal conception ideology on the basis not of its negative relation to Western science but its active role within indigenous social formations.

Although Aborigines usually acknowledged a relationship between copulation and impregnation, they did not regard the latter as the main purpose of the former. Sex was seen both as an end in itself and as an instrument for manipulating social relationships. Marriage for females began when they were ready for sex, which was typically earlier than their readiness for reproduction. In discussions with anthropologists, women tended to identify sexual desire as the reason for marriage rather than the desire for children. Men's interventions, both physical and ritual, were intended to develop and enhance the sexuality of women, which in turn was deployed in the service of men's political and ritual interests (ceremonial wife-exchanges, wife-lending as an act of hospitality to trading partners, granting sexual access to a wife in expiation of an injury to another man, and so on). Although such practices did not in themselves account for the emergence of a belief in spirit conception, ideological disjunction of sex and reproduction undoubtedly created a space in which the doctrine was able to take root and flourish.

In the course of reviewing literature on conception ideology and relationships between the sexes, Merlan mentioned several reports suggesting that child-spirit notions were of greater concern to men than women. I would put it this way: men steeped in Aboriginal traditions prefer to talk about the metaphysical dimension of conception, whereas in appropriate circumstances (e.g. when discussing the matter with a female anthropologist) women are prone to express matter-of-fact observations on physical aspects. Why should this be so? To say that men have pre-empted the spiritual domain begs the question, since Aboriginal religion is conspicuously concerned with fertility and procreation. Perhaps the doctrine of spirit conception was institutionalized under male authority precisely because men's

physical role seemed so nebulous. By proclaiming as all-important a spiritual aetiology of human generation, and simultaneously assuming instrumental responsibility for it, men overtook by cultural means the procreative head-start conferred on women by nature.<sup>71</sup>

In some tribes men affirmed their significance in the reproductive process by attributing intra-uterine growth to food supplied by the father directly to the foetus via the mother.<sup>72</sup> Semen itself was regarded as nourishment.<sup>73</sup> Fathers thus 'found' spirit-children through the agency of dreaming, then gave them substance by 'feeding' them; the mothers in these circumstances were mere conduits through which, by the good offices of men, beings from the invisible world materialized as humans.<sup>74</sup> But there may be more to it than collective male pride in a context of epistemological uncertainty. In 1971 Jane Goodale described how the Tiwi appealed to physical resemblance between offspring and mother's sexual partner (husband or lover) as clinching evidence of physical paternity. At the same time they declared that for conception to occur, the woman's husband must 'find' the spirit of his child in a dream. Tiwi doctrine thus entailed that while any individual must be procreated spiritually by his father, he might be procreated physically by some other male. Goodale included in her account the case of a man who saw his unborn son in a dream just before departing for Darwin without his wife.<sup>75</sup> Given the high levels of infidelity prevailing under the traditional marriage system, we may say that Tiwi conception ideology conferred on husbands a guaranteed transcendental role in circumstances where their carnal role was notoriously precarious.<sup>76</sup>

There were undoubtedly variations on this theme. For instance, Warren Shapiro has argued that in north-eastern Arnhem Land spirit-child ideology promoted clan solidarity (specifically, among men related as 'brothers') by affirming the common transcendental affinities of members and masking potentially divisive concern with unique physical relations between genitor and offspring (as aroused, for instance, by perceived physical resemblances and the gossip of women).<sup>77</sup> From this perspective, the doctrine appears less as a female subterfuge for dealing with adulterous pregnancies (as Walter Heape suggested) than as a male mystification insulating brotherhood against the corroding effects of sexual jealousy and cuckoldry anxiety.<sup>78</sup>

For those who like their facts cut-and-dried ('were the Aborigines ignorant of the connection between sex and reproduction?, answer yes or no'), the outcome of a hundred years of research must seem singularly disappointing. Unless we find good grounds for discrediting some of the published evidence, generalization is impossible. The best we can do is set out a collection of particulars in obverse relation and

diminishing spatio-temporal reference, e.g., some tribes said there was a connection, others denied it; some individuals said there was a connection, others within the same tribe denied it; some individuals sometimes said there was a connection and sometimes denied it; and so on. Assuming the anthropological record gives at least a rough idea of the reality, the question is why there should have been so much variability from one place to another, from one person to another, and even from one time to another in the same person. A full answer would be difficult and no doubt tedious. Nevertheless, it seems worth trying to identify some of the main factors.

As numerous commentators have remarked, the empirical difficulties in arriving at the 'facts of life' were of no mean order. Only after the invention of the microscope was it possible to confirm that the necessary and sufficient condition for conception was the coalescence of two tiny parcels of genetic material, one produced and located inside a mature female, the other ejaculated into the female by a mature male. It was not, of course, necessary to wait that long in order to infer a relationship between sex and reproduction. But what sort of relationship? The natural occurrence of infertility in both males and females must have made it obvious that sexual intercourse was not sufficient for conception. Inferring its necessity from gross observation might be simple where female celibacy was practised ('females who do not have sexual intercourse do not become pregnant'), but such a state was unknown among Aborigines. The temporal relationship between copulation and pregnancy was haphazard, while the spatial correlation between entry of the penis and exit of the infant, though suggestive, was hardly decisive.

In the absence of compelling evidence, the subject was therefore wide open for conjecture. Although spirit-entry was by far the most popular theory, there were places where it was apparently not taken seriously (viz. in Cape York Peninsula). Sexual intercourse was often thought to facilitate spirit-entry, but credence was also given to the possibility of conception as an autonomous mystical event. Materialist speculations implicating semen and menses gained wide currency (usually in conjunction with animistic assumptions), but in some places they were severely discountenanced by the custodians of sacred lore. In modern times the diffusion of European notions added a new dimension, generating distinctions between the enlightened and the benighted both within tribes and between them.

It is a fair inference from archaeological data that news of discoveries with important adaptive consequences tends to travel quickly over long distances. Probably the best example in prehistoric Australia is the relatively sudden appearance of microliths throughout the continent about 5000 years ago. It is a moot point whether biological

knowledge about conception, even of a rudimentary kind, was ever adaptively significant in the prehistoric past. Men did not need to understand the role of semen in order to copulate frequently; nor was male sexual jealousy dependent upon a knowledge of fertilization. The attraction of a mystical theory of conception, as compared with materialist conjectures about semen and menses, was its amenability to serve as an ideology ascribing to men reproductive powers in excess of those evident to ordinary observation. Once harnessed to powerful sectional interests within the traditional Aboriginal polity, it either eliminated rival theories or maintained them in a state of subordination where they languished until the arrival of the first anthropologists.<sup>79</sup>