

**MENSTRUATION  
AND THE  
ORIGINS OF CULTURE**

A reconsideration  
of Lévi-Strauss's work  
on symbolism and myth

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To my parents,  
Denis and Nora

## **Abstract**

This thesis presents and tests a new theory of human cultural origins. The point of departure is an economic finding: unlike non-human primates when they engage in hunting, human hunters normatively do not eat their own kills. This apparent self-denial, it is argued, is best seen as an expression of a cultural universal, the sexual division of labour, in which women obtain meat which their sexual partners have secured. It is suggested that the female sex may have played a part in the establishment of this arrangement, and – in particular – that menstrual bleeding may have been central to its symbolic underpinnings.

In this context, a model of the “initial situation” for human culture is proposed. In this, menstrual bleeding is (a) socially synchronised and (b) marks a periodic feminine sexual withdrawal (in effect, a “sex-strike”) functioning to motivate and regularize male periodic hunting. On a symbolic level, menstrual blood is identified with the blood of game animals, a generalised avoidance of blood ensuring both a periodic separation of sexual partners (necessary for effective hunting) and the separation of hunters as consumers from their own kills (necessary to ensure economic circulation and exchange of the produce).

The body of the thesis takes the form of an extensive testing of this model. It is shown that it facilitates a much-simplified and internally coherent re-reading of Lévi-Strauss *Mythologiques*, in addition to much other recent writing on traditional mythology, cosmology, ritual and symbolism.



“The philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways: the point is to change it”.

Karl Marx, Theses on Feuerbach: XI (1845).



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I am often told that the basic idea of my thesis is “entirely original”. This is generous but not quite true. My appreciation of menstruation as a potentially-empowering experience derived in part from my reading in 1966-7 of Robert Briffault’s *The Mothers*. Ten years later, Denise Arnold introduced me to a series of papers on the same theme by members of The Matriarchy Study Group. A year or so after that, the poets Peter Redgrove and Penelope Shuttle published *The Wise Wound*, a literary work of extraordinary originality and insight, one of its main themes being the centrality of menstrual power to any cross-cultural understanding of ritual and myth. I had already tentatively reached related conclusions on the basis of rather different lines of evidence, but the germs of many of my ideas may be traced in part to that book. The authors have since given me invaluable friendship, inspiration, contacts and advice.

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Chris Knight. Lewisham. October 1987.



### ***Introduction***

A preliminary overview of the argument of the thesis will here be presented, leaving all documentation to the relevant chapters, notes and appendices.

Although couched as a critique of the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, this thesis is in fact about the origins of human culture. An examination of Lévi-Strauss's theory of cultural origins is used to provide a point of departure in presenting an alternative.

Theories of human origins are nowadays rare in anthropology, and those that do exist suffer from numerous drawbacks. Many are biological (or sociobiological), in which case they tell us nothing about the specifics of traditional myth, ritual or symbolism. Alternatively, they are cultural, reflecting an awareness of the richness and relative autonomy of human cultural symbolism but failing to explain either the logic of cross-cultural variation or the mechanisms through which biological evolution could have produced such a result.

The object of this thesis is to present a methodologically materialist theory which is at once biological and cultural, economic and symbolic, delineating for human culture an "initial situation" in the light of which all subsequent symbolic developments can be understood, and at the same time showing how this itself could have arisen through departure from a starting-point in primate social organisation.

The initial premises are non-controversial: the emergence of human culture involved (among other things) developing the capacity to hunt large game animals. However, palaeoanthropologists usually assume that studies of baboons and chimpanzees – which occasionally kill small animals to eat – are relevant to an understanding of this development. Yet if primate hunting-patterns are any guide to early hominid norms, a serious problem must have arisen. Primate

hunting-behaviour is overwhelmingly male, and the males who kill the animals eat the raw meat themselves. This means that female baboons and chimpanzees, immobilised by their attachment to their offspring, obtain very little meat. A question which has rarely been asked is this: if hominid social life was based upon the “dominance” principles characteristic of apes and baboons, how did early human females ensure for themselves an adequate supply of male-procured meat?

The research-programme underlying this thesis began with this question. It was in pursuing an answer that an account of cultural origins was arrived at which simultaneously solved a number of interrelated problems – in particular, those relating to the genesis of certain recurrent features of traditional ritual and myth.

A consequence of this research has been to restore the human female to a central position in any account of cultural origins. By perceiving a problem in certain “selfish” tendencies of the dominant primate male, we are led to examine hunting-behaviour in a new way – in terms, that is, of its sexual politics. Instead of seeking the roots of development in the behaviour of the male, we look at the activity of the female – activity which lies behind the more visible male activity of the hunt. Interestingly, in traditional cultures, a collective hunting-expedition is typically preceded by a ban on sexual relations lasting for anything from a few days to two weeks or more. Women are centrally involved in enforcing this ban, and may be blamed if the hunt fails. In other ways, too, sex and hunting are intimately intertwined: in almost all hunter-gatherer cultures, women measure male sexual desirability in terms of their hunting-success. A finding of the research is that womankind’s pivotal accomplishment was to assert conscious control over her own sexuality, obtaining meat by refusing sex to all males except those who came to her with provisions. This is the essence of the argument of the thesis.

This female strategy could not have worked on a purely individual basis. Hunting being necessarily a group-activity, the females likewise had to act collectively. The strategy of saying “no” to males when meat was in short supply would have been completely undermined if certain females were willing to engage in sexual relations on any terms. In short, when the male community

was unsuccessful in obtaining meat, the female community as a body had to refuse all sexual favours. This withdrawal is referred to in the thesis as women's periodic "sex-strike". A ban on sexual relations, it is argued, was necessary as the prelude to each successful hunting-expedition; it was the means through which women motivated men not only to hunt but also to concentrate their energies on bringing back the meat.

The value of this hypothesis lies not so much in any immediate plausibility as in the fact that it can be tested. It involves a number of logical consequences which can be formulated as predictions. The thesis examines each prediction in turn, showing not only that each is confirmed but also that the hypothesis as a whole is fruitful in intelligibly reorganizing our perception of the evidence bearing on human evolution, cultural variability and origins.

### **Testing the model: an overview**

An implication of the model is that women should assert themselves periodically as being "on strike", and that this should motivate male hunting and female access to the resultant meat. If human culture really originated on this basis, we might expect to find evidence for the centrality of this sex-strike logic somewhere in the relevant ethnographic record.

Where is there any evidence for a periodic female "sex-strike" of the kind predicted? At first sight, it might seem, there is none. Nowhere in the world today are wives permitted to organize autonomously against their husbands or declare themselves "on strike". However, It is not on an appeal to immediately-obvious "facts" of such a kind that the argument of this thesis rests. The aim, rather, is to present a full, coherent account of the richness and complexity of human cultural symbolic systems, particularly those of hunter-gatherers and other traditionally-organized peoples.

The argument hinges on an analysis of (a) kinship and meat-sharing relations in "bride-service" societies and (b) menstrual taboos. Menstrual avoidances have never satisfactorily been explained. For most interpreters, such taboos are evidence of the oppression of women; menstruation is "unclean" and the woman during her period must be secluded from all contact with society and

public life. What is not explained, however, is the enormous fear of menstruation which is experienced by men in many traditional societies. Extraordinarily destructive supernatural potencies are attributed to the blood, far exceeding the dangers of substances which are simply “unclean”. A further peculiar feature forms the subject-matter of much of this thesis. In Aboriginal Australian and many other traditional cultures, men in the course of initiation-rites must learn to “menstruate” symbolically as their basic means of asserting ritual potency. In this as in much other evidence there is the suggestion that for people to bleed from the genitals may not always be disadvantageous: under certain circumstances, to bleed may be to assert one’s privileged access to a much-valued though feared and seemingly-dangerous form of ritual power. The problem is to unravel the logic through which such power comes to be divided unequally and often paradoxically between women and men.

It has been proposed that women’s earliest and most basic meat-obtaining strategy was to deny men sexual access when meat was in short supply. A prediction of the hypothesis, then, is that in hunter-gatherer cultures, to the extent that they display traces of a common tradition or starting-point, women should periodically go “on strike”. It is hoped to demonstrate that this is borne out by the relevant evidence: in traditional societies, a woman is in effect on “sex strike” every time she menstruates. A further prediction is that there should be a connection between the form taken by this strike and women’s need to secure meat from men. A finding of the research is that this, too, is borne out by the evidence. The link becomes clear when we examine traditional taboos prohibiting the consumption of raw meat; there are often quite explicit associations between blood in raw meat and menstrual blood. Even where such associations are not explicit, “totemic” equations and food-taboos linking human and animal blood or substance may be discerned.

How are such taboos and equations to be explained? Why should the blood of a hunter’s kill be linked with that of his mother, clan or menstruating wife? The argument, in brief, is as follows.

To assert themselves as being “on strike”, women needed a signal – a means of indicating “we are not available” to men. Genital bleeding was chosen to serve this purpose. Among the considerations responsible for this choice was a

simple fact: the game animals hunted by men also bled. This facilitated a radical simplification of the symbolic codes necessary to ensure social control (involving a degree of feminine control) over both sexual relations and the distribution of meat. One and only one symbol – that of blood – could now serve the two kinds of purposes simultaneously. All that was required was that all forms of blood should be conceptually equated. Then, when a game animal was wounded or killed by men, its bloody flesh rendered it “taboo” to those who had hunted it. By using blood to indicate “we are not available”, women ensured that no game animals could be immediately eaten by the men who had killed them. This was because the meat was “bleeding” – i.e. symbolically “menstruating” – and therefore “taboo” as food. The thesis cites evidence for the widespread avoidance by men of their own kills – and the widespread equation of menstrual with animal blood – in traditional hunter-cultures.

Three further stages of the argument may be noted here. The first concerns fire; the second concerns a possible relationship between hunting and the moon; the third concerns menstrual synchrony.

**Fire.** The emergence of human culture was based not only upon the capacity to hunt big game. Equally important was the conquest of fire. This was useful for many reasons; symbolically, however, a central function was its use as a means of removing visible blood from meat, thereby rendering it culturally edible. Earth-ovens and cooking-fires not being readily portable, to remove the blood-pollution from meat, men had to return home to get it cooked. Together, then, blood-taboos and the consequent need for cooking ensured female access to the meat secured by men.

**The Moon.** It is an unfortunate fact that any mention of the relevance of the moon in human evolution may provoke suspicions of a non-scientific interest in the occult or a belief in mystic influences. It may be necessary to emphasise, therefore, that this thesis aims at providing amongst other things a materialist account of mythology, much of which is indeed far from materialist in its own premises. In this thesis, the genesis of a number of recurrent themes and structures of myth is traced back ultimately to a logic which is not merely that of the mind: it is the logic of a definite mode of production – a pattern of technological, economic and social relationships

shaped by the requirements, under circumstances which will be defined, of a big-game hunting way of life.

Very briefly, the relevance of the moon as a material factor can now be summarised. Collective hunting is a periodic activity. An extended hunting expedition may take several days and nights and requires elaborate preparation. It would not always make sense to embark upon such an expedition at the time of month when there was no moon in the sky, for that might mean having to abandon the trail at nightfall, allowing the prey to escape. Extended hunting expeditions may have tended to occur, then, at monthly intervals, coinciding approximately with each full moon. Actual evidence for this is admittedly scant, but the notion has theoretical significance, for such a tendency would have facilitated an extraordinary possibility: the harmonising of the menstrual cycle with the periodicity of the work-process. At some point or on some level, it is suggested, the various rhythms of body and mind, work and sex, earth and moon harmoniously intertwined. While it is not argued that this should be interpreted in too historically literal or universalistic a manner, it is suggested that the mere glimpsing of such a possibility was a profoundly important factor in the structuring of early human society, ritual and myth.

**Menstrual Synchrony.** Any sex strike presupposed solidarity. The timing of menstruation, however, is a randomised phenomenon, isolating women rather than uniting them. How, then, could this have had anything to do with feminine solidarity or the need to go “on strike”? For menstruation to express solidarity, all menstruating women would have to have bled at the same time – a seemingly-difficult requirement. Moreover, if the model presented here were relevant at all, the moment selected would have needed to be consistent with the requirements of the hunt, and therefore (it is argued) with the presence or absence of nocturnal moonlight. Such a logic could not have been glimpsed, even as a theoretical possibility or ritual ideal, unless human female physiology possessed some mechanism through which menstrual cycles could become phase-locked, both with one another and with the periodicity of the moon. Medical and other evidence for such potentialities, however, is now well-established and is surveyed in Chapter 7. It is argued that at times marked out by the moon’s phases, women used ritual means (e.g. sexual



intercourse and/or dancing) to bring their emotional energies into harmony, this cultural intervention in turn assisting in the realisation of women's physiologically-given potentialities for synchrony. Again, with respect to any specified prehistoric population, it is not argued that we have evidence that this actually happened. But a finding of the theoretical analysis is that such synchrony must have been widely experienced as on some level possible and ideal: it was something which should and would happen if circumstances were sufficiently favourable. Some reasons for underscoring this conclusion will become clear in the course of the cross-cultural analysis of ritual and myth which takes up the bulk of the thesis.

### **Women's rule – the conspiracy of the flows**

Having presented the model of origins outlined above, along with an overview of suggested methods for testing it, the thesis goes on to use the model as an analytical tool in approaching ethnographic studies of traditional cultures. Among hunter-gatherer societies, those in which sexual relations are relatively egalitarian and in which female solidarity clearly exists (in Africa the Mbuti, !Kung, Nharo and similar "pygmy" or "Bushman" cultures provide examples) present less obvious difficulties for the hypothesis than certain others which can be thought of. Perhaps the greatest problems for the hypothesis are posed by those hunter-gatherers among whom women are forcefully excluded from ritual power by men. The focus is therefore on the latter category – in particular on Australian Aboriginal and other traditional societies in which men, through secret initiation rites, claim a monopoly on the exercise of ritual power.

It is in fact an apparent difficulty for the hypothesis that in most cultures known to anthropology, ritual power is monopolised largely by men. On this basis, the hypothesis may seem to be disproved. However, a deeper analysis produces an important finding: in precisely those traditional simple cultures in which ritual power is most emphatically said to be monopolised by men, the language of ritual action seems peculiarly inappropriate to the male sex. In order to demonstrate their masculine ritual potency, men must "menstruate" and "give birth". The ordinary, unaltered penis is insufficient for such purposes: men must be circumcised, subincised or otherwise mutilated in order to bleed.

Male “menstruation” is in fact central to initiation-rites throughout much of the world. Over wide areas of Aboriginal Australia, men achieve ritual status by collectively subincising their penises; the operation enables men to bleed like women. They also dig pits (artificial “wombs”) in the ground; from these, youths are “reborn”. In other areas, nose-bleeding, arm-cutting and other methods of producing blood accompany male acts of “childbirth”. The accompanying myths assert that for men to exercise such power is neither natural nor self-evident; women were the original custodians of all blood and therefore the original ritual rulers, losing power to men only in a sexual-political revolution in the course of which women’s blood was stolen and nature overturned.

If our hypothesis were correct, every culture in which men monopolised ritual power should show signs of sexual-political inversion: it should be discernible that present-day gender-arrangements are in logical terms upside-down, men having usurped a language of ritual potency which can only be thought of as intrinsically and for physiological reasons feminine. In chapters 6 – 10, the thesis presents evidence confirming this prediction.

In common with most other interpretations, it is argued that the peculiarly and elaborately male-dominated cultures examined in these chapters do not present us with a picture of human culture in anything resembling its pristine state. It is here suggested that these are cultures in which women’s menstrual synchrony and ritual potency are no longer to be glimpsed as possibilities, owing to climatic and ecological changes, Pleistocene extinctions, the decline of large game hunting and the impossibility any longer of synchronising the menstrual cycle with the rhythms of the work-process. With the collapse of all possibility of menstrual synchrony and solidarity, male sexual-political power comes to prevail. But such has been the centrality of menstruation to the language of ritual potency that when men do gain the ascendancy, no alternative language is available to them in which to express their power. Consequently, ritually-potent men must prove themselves guardians of the sacred blood. They must abstain from sex and “menstruate” in synchrony with one another, turning the traditional menstrual sex-strike against women themselves. At this point, female menstruation no longer has the force of a collective sex-strike; men keep control over their wives even during their

periods. Marriage is no longer a periodic union or reunion but a permanent bond. Under these circumstances, the fact that women nevertheless continue to bleed constitutes a residual problem to be dealt with on male terms. With their blood still perceived by men as supernaturally dangerous and as a potential source of female ritual collectivity, women as blood-makers are deliberately and artificially isolated from one another. The result is that women experience their reproductive organs and processes no longer as sources of their power but as reasons for their exclusion from it. In short, threatened with rape, murder and other violent sanctions, women are ritually expropriated. They are forced to menstruate and give birth in isolation and seclusion, the potentiality for menstrual synchrony being suppressed and the collectivity and symbolic value initially associated with it being meanwhile appropriated by men. Political power, in its incipient form as male sexual-political violence, takes over, cloaking itself however in its very antithesis – the non-violent, self-bleeding language of women's ritual rule. This, it is argued, is perhaps the paradox of all paradoxes which anthropology has needed to unravel as the precondition for an understanding of how human gender-relationships cross-culturally have evolved.

### **Menstruation and mythology**

An objection to the thesis might be that there is, in fact, very little evidence for menstrual synchrony in traditional cultures. Even the few reported instances are questionable; it is by no means established that synchrony in any given culture is or has been more than a mythological ideal. From one standpoint, then, it looks as if an elaborate theoretical edifice has been built upon at most one or two questionable cases of menstrual synchrony in the ethnographic record.

In fact, however, the hypothesis was developed before any cases of traditional menstrual synchrony had been reported in the ethnographic literature. The hypothesis is not based on any extant cases of menstrual synchrony at all. Rather, a model has been constructed for the purpose of solving certain very general theoretical problems arising from the need to reconcile and harmonise as many as possible of the acknowledged types and levels of anthropological evidence with any bearing on human origins. Once constructed, this model by

its internal logic involves the formulation of certain predictions. One of these is that menstrual synchrony needs to occur for the model in its “pure” form to work. But nowhere among the model’s implications is there the prediction that menstrual synchrony should be observable on the behavioural level in the twentieth-century ethnographic record. The question to be asked is a different one. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that menstrual synchrony of the kind outlined in the model were central to human culture’s “initial situation”, but had long since disappeared. Then would all trace of the earlier synchrony have vanished from all levels of human culture by now? Or would the earlier logic of synchrony have remained on various levels apparent within and through subsequent developments, even in the forms taken by the most profound of transformations and negations of that logic?

It is argued that the second alternative is more likely. The divergent forms taken by an evolving, self-transforming planetary web of human cultures may well be determined in their divergences by differing ecological, techno-environmental, demographic and economic factors; indeed, this Marxist, materialist understanding is an underpinning of this thesis. Nonetheless, it is argued that in all such divergences and transformations, something of the common starting-point is always likely to be preserved in some form. Furthermore, precisely because it is accepted that the impetus for social change comes not from the superstructure of religious or mythical relationships but from the infrastructure of technological and economic factors, it is argued that it is within the forms taken by superstructural relationships that one should look for evidence of such a shared pan-human starting-point. Nothing can be proved by pointing to a case of menstrual synchrony here, or a case of women going on sex-strike there. Counter-cases can always be cited. But if we could discern something universal within ritual and mythology which pointed unmistakably to menstrual synchrony as its source, then matters might be different. It is with this possibility in mind that we turn to the analysis of traditional ritual and associated magical myths.

In the thesis it is accepted – in common with numerous specialists – that magical myths and fairy tales are systematically related to magical traditions of ritualism. An implication of the hypothesis is that ritual power begins as

the menstrual solidarity and power – the “sex-strike” – of women. A prediction would be, then, that magical myths, along with their associated rituals, ought to show signs of this menstrual derivation.

In chapters 6 to 15 – which deal with myths and fairy tales – it is argued that these indeed show signs of having originated from a common tradition of menstrual spell-casting. It is an implication of chapters 4 to 6 that to the extent that its ideals were realised, human society in its hypothesised “initial” state possessed a periodic structure. It alternated between two phases: a phase of sexual relations and feasting; and a phase of generalised menstrual sex-strike preceding each collective hunt. It is an exciting and surprising finding of the research that the magical fairy tales and myths of humankind faithfully reflect this in their structure. It is possible to stipulate with some precision which kinds of events and images will combine with which, and which combinations simply cannot occur. Essentially, the characteristics of “menstrual sex-strike” (“incestuous” intimacy, the experience of being “swallowed up” by blood-links, the shedding of animal or feminine blood, hunger, darkness etc. etc.) are always grouped together, and are never merged with the characteristics of marital availability (marital union, emergence from blood-union or pollution, feasting, light etc. etc.). Just as in traditional cultures a menstruating cook is unthinkable, so in magical myths and fairy tales, no-one marries when they have begun to bleed. Bleeding of any kind (as in the case of the European tale of *The Sleeping Beauty*) means movement away from marriage. The same applies to “swallowing” myths in relation to hunger or eating: being “swallowed” by a monster refers to menstrual seclusion; feasting under such circumstances is unthinkable, and the “swallowed” victim in a fairy tale will be hungry or unable to eat. Along such lines, the thesis shows that certain combinations of events or attributes (specified in Chapter 13) simply cannot occur, while others occur regularly. It is hoped to show that this is a falsifiable, testable finding, involving concrete specifications rather than an unspecified “universal structure” of world mythology to which anything conceivable could be made to seem to conform.

It is argued that myths are analysable on two levels. To the extent that a myth functions politically, it almost always reflects male power on the level

of its ideological message or content. In this capacity, almost every myth constitutes male sexist political ideology, in which women's menstrual potency is cast in negative terms (the menstrually-potent woman is a "witch", a "toad", a "child-eater" etc.). To the extent that a myth communicates an awareness of the nature of ritual power, however, it is necessarily menstrual and lunar in its structure in the manner suggested above, depicting a perpetual oscillation of human life between full moon phases or roles and dark moon ones – between (in other words) the celebration of marital sex and of menstrual magic. On this "syntactical" level, all of the world's myths reduce to what is in essence "one myth only" in something like the sense in which this expression is used by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his *Mythologiques*.

Finally, it is argued that each local manifestation of this global "supermyth" is a package in which, at the most fundamental level, two opposite messages are combined. One message – the obvious one which is transmitted ideologically – communicates an awareness of the dominance of male power and its associated values. The other message is a concealed one, expressed only through the internal formal logic or syntax of mythology; this communicates an awareness of the ultimate roots of ritual power – its basis in the suppressed potencies of women. An aim of the thesis is to decipher this second message as a step towards inverting the sexual-political functions of myths and fairy tales with which we are all familiar.

### **The two Wawilak Sisters**

In testing the predictions of the model, we turn first to Aboriginal Australia, and to the ethnography of a region of this continent whose traditions were least disturbed by European contact until very recent times. The story of the Two Wawilak Sisters is a creation-myth recorded in numerous different versions in north east Arnhem Land. It is a good example of a myth whose ritual attachments have survived and been recorded in some depth. The Wawilak myth is not just a disembodied tale: almost every ritual performance or ritually significant event is seen in native eyes as explicable only in terms of the story it tells.

The story concerns two women who both menstruate simultaneously (or who menstruate and give birth together), the result being that they are carried to the sky, turning into an immense snake which is also a rainbow. When men later gain possession of the women's blood, they gain the right and the power to be swallowed by the rainbow-snake in women's place, learning how to "menstruate" as the sisters had done. In such terms, the myth explains the origins of male ritual power.

Two further prominent features of the myth in almost all versions are the following:

(1) Names are given to the world by the two Wawilak Sisters, who by their blood-making activities set up the alternations between wet season and dry, birth and death and also polarities such as that between male and female.

(2) The two sisters, while both shedding blood, try to cook some game animals. The raw animals jump back to life, escape from the fire and dive into the watery pool of the Rainbow Snake, which then also swallows the blood-polluted sisters and their offspring.

In the thesis, both of these motifs are interpreted in the light of the model of menstrual synchrony discussed earlier. (1) To give the world names is to invent language or symbolism. The myth explicitly links this with the symbolic potency of menstrual blood, attributing naming power to two synchronously bleeding women. Moreover, just as names conceptually distinguish earth from sky, dry season from wet, male from female or any one thing from its opposite, so – the myth states – the two sisters, by setting up the contrast between menstruation and marital availability, established the entire system of conceptualised polarities and contrasts which make up the symbolised universe. (2) The model predicts that cooking should occur at the conclusion of women's sex-strike, not at its beginning. Cooking removes all visible blood from meat and marks women's transition from pollution to marital availability. It marks, therefore, the disappearance of the power of blood-unity (interpreted in Aboriginal terms as the "Rainbow Snake"), and is consequently impossible when menstrual synchrony begins. The myth makes this point by showing cooking thrown into reverse by the power of blood. As they both begin to bleed, the

two sisters' game animals come alive, jump from the fire and dive into the opposite element – the bloody waters of the Rainbow Snake's pool. The moral would seem to be simple: namely, that menstrual bleeding is incompatible with cooking.

This myth is embedded in a matrix from which stem numerous other Aboriginal magical tales concerning women, rainbows, water, blood and snakes. An important finding is that the image of the "Rainbow Snake" which is central to Aboriginal Australian mythology throughout the continent refers to a ritual phenomenon – it is, in fact, none other than the image of women's menstrual sex-strike itself. Similar image-constellations recur in mythology throughout the world, But why should women's sex-strike be conceptualised as a great rainbow-like "Snake"? If our hypothesis were correct, everything which can be said about menstrual synchrony should also be applicable to the Rainbow Snake. It is shown that this is, in fact, the case. Menstrual synchrony is associated with fertility and the making of babies; it is a form of periodicity and therefore "like" seasonal change; its associations are with blood, wetness and darkness rather than with sexual fire or cooking; the women involved in menstrual synchrony do not form a hierarchy but are functionally equivalent (like the parts of a snake); the bonds involved are intimate, genital and physical, yet non-marital; finally, menstrual synchrony is a ritual experience of alternation between opposite phases conceptualisable as different "worlds". These features exactly match native descriptions of the Rainbow Snake. The Rainbow Snake is said to be:

- (a) connected with fertility and the making of babies;
- (b) connected with seasonality and other forms of periodicity and cyclicity
- (c) associated with blood, wetness and darkness; antithetical to cooking and fire;
- (d) made up of functionally equivalent parts which form a continuous ("snakelike") chain;
- (e) involved in intimacies which are always incestuous, never marital;
- (1) carries humans from realm to realm, world to world (as a rainbow seems to move between earth and sky, sunshine and rain).

The hypothesis that "the Snake" is an image of menstrual synchrony seems consistent with the evidence. Women who ritually conjoin their blood-flows form, in effect, a continuous, blood-devouring whole – "like" an immense



rainbow or snake with the attributes listed above. It seems no accident, then, that in Aboriginal Australia – a continent in which, for the most part, there is a claimed male monopoly on ritual power – men have no way of conjuring up the power of this “Snake” except by synchronously “menstruating” themselves.

### **The Sleeping Beauty and other tales**

A surprising finding of the thesis is that almost all magical fairy tales – particularly those associated with initiation ritual – can be analysed as versions of the Wawilak Sisters myth. Such myths are about “this world”, “the world beyond” and the movement between the two. Entry into the “world beyond” may be ideologically coded in negative terms – as the experience of being “swallowed alive” by a bloodthirsty “monster”. To be in the wolf’s, giant’s or monster’s belly – it is suggested – is functionally equivalent to being inside the Rainbow Snake of the Wawilak myth. It corresponds to the state of menstrual seclusion, which in the “initial situation” was entered into (during women’s monthly sex-strike) by the whole of society. During women’s sex strike, as blood began to flow, all marital life and all cooking and feasting came to a temporary halt, men, too, being thereby “swallowed up” into “another realm” of fasting and abstinence preceding the hunt.

In this context, four of the fairy tales best-known to English-speakers are discussed. The Sleeping Beauty is a particularly transparent tale, with its emphasis on the magical consequences following upon a girl’s pubertal bleeding. Little Red Riding Hood, an early version of Jack-and-the-Beanstalk and Cinderella are likewise shown to depict a blood-flow as the trigger switching people from one phase or “world” to the next.

### **Lévi-Strauss and the fairy-tales of the American Indians**

If the above arguments were correct, we might expect the structural unity of traditional myths to be a finding confirmed in the work of other scholars. To show the extent to which this is so, the thesis turns to the most widely-celebrated of all modern explorations of traditional mythology – Claude Lévi- Strauss’s four-volume *Mythologiques*.

Lévi-Strauss begins and ends his work with an American Indian tale about a bird-nester who climbs up a tree to another world, where he is nearly eaten alive. *Mythologiques* interprets the whole of American Indian mythology as constituting “one myth only” – all the myths are treated as no more than so many variations on the “bird-nester” theme. Treating “Jack-and-the-Beanstalk” as an English version of the “bird-nester” tale, the thesis (in Chapter 13) links Lévi-Strauss’s key myth in turn with the European fairy tales which were discussed in Chapter 12.

### **The Wives of the Sun and Moon**

Chapter 14 provides an in-depth analysis of one myth – the key myth of the third volume of *Mythologiques*. The story concerns Sun and Moon and their two wives, “toad-woman” (also called “water-woman”) and “human woman” (also called “resurrected woman”). Partners are exchanged in a plot which involves alternating movements between earth and sky. It is shown that the myth concerns the choice between menstrual solidarity and marital bonds. The “toad wife” or “water-wife” is womankind in her menstrual aspect as sister or kinswoman, whereas the “human” or “resurrected” wife is womankind when she has emerged from menstrual seclusion and is available sexually (“resurrected”) once more. The story comes from the Arapaho Indians of North America, whose myths express the dilemmas involved in transferring from periodic marital unions (honeymoons interrupted by menstruation) to marriage in its modern, non periodic form in which menstruation has come to seem little more than a nuisance.

### **Between earth and sky**

In the course of research for this thesis, an Australian Aboriginal myth was unearthed which turned out to be identical with the North American (Klamath) “bird-nester” myth (the story of Aishish) with which Lévi-Strauss begins the fourth volume of *Mythologiques*. Some idea of the stunning concordance between myths in far-flung corners of the globe may be seen if the Aishish story and the “bird-nester” story from the Djuana tribe (Arnhem Land) are compared. The tale of Aishish is about two kinsmen, one old and the other young, who quarrel over a woman. The older man gets rid of his rival by sending him up a magically-growing tree in search of a supposed eagle’s nest; he then cohabits

with one of his opponent's wives. Up in the sky, the legitimate husband nearly dies of hunger, turning to skin and bones, but he is eventually rescued, comes down to earth, kills his enemy (who rises from the dead) and recovers his wife. In the Australian version, the quarrel between kin over a woman, the contrast between youth and age, death and new life, the search for eagles nesting in a tall tree, the magical growing of the tree as a means of eliminating a sexual rival, the marooning of the unfortunate bird-nester, his reduction to skin and bones, the return to earthly life, the recovery of the stolen wife and the ultimate revenge – all these elements are present as in the Klamath myth.

The final chapter of the thesis uses this comparison as a means of underscoring Lévi-Strauss's demonstration of the ultimate structural unity of traditional mythology. However, Lévi-Strauss's finding is given a new twist, since it can be shown that the Djuan bird-nester myth is closely related to the Wawilak story and to other Aboriginal Rainbow Serpent myths. This means that the magically-growing tree of the "bird-nester" stories is functionally equivalent to the Rainbow Snake as a means of moving from one world to the next. It is shown that the "quarrel" between "rivals" again reflects a lunar logic of alternation between opposite sexual and social roles; menstruation, in precluding marital sex, in effect "robs" legitimate husbands of their wives, returning these wives to their own "blood" (their kinsfolk). During this period, husbands are as if marooned, sexually expropriated and hungry, in the sky; the cyclical logic involved, however, soon returns them back to earth: menstrual pollution ends, husbands and wives re-unite, and the original situation is restored. Chapter 15, in demonstrating all this, furnishes further evidence that the magical myths of humanity are indeed reducible to a single structure corresponding to the model of culture's "initial situation" from which the thesis sets out.



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*Part I: The origins of culture*

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***Chapter 1: Lévi -Strauss in retrospect***

Advances and discoveries, in anthropology as in other sciences, have always been of two kinds. First, the accurate recording of fresh data by workers in the field. Second, the discovery of new ways of perceiving the results already obtained. In anthropology as in all scientific development, the most spectacular and significant advances have been those of the second kind. The achievements of Claude Lévi-Strauss, author of *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté* and of the four-volume *Mythologiques*, can hardly be said to fall into the first category at all.

Two decades have passed since the heady apogee of Lévi-Straussian structuralism in the mid-1960s, and it is now uncommon for research to be conducted under the guidance of its methods and aims. “The messianic overtones associated with that intellectual movement”, comments Willis (1982: vii), “which the sibylline pronouncements of Lévi-Strauss himself did much to maintain and promote, are to a considerable extent responsible for the neglect and even obloquy into which structuralism has fallen in more recent years, now that the Promised Land of total human self-understanding seems as far away as ever.”

Fashions change. “Neglect” and “obloquy”, however, are terms probably too strong – at least to describe the status within the serious anthropological community of the monumental works on kinship and mythology bequeathed to us by Lévi-Strauss himself.

**Some historical background**

Missionaries, explorers and social philosophers in the eighteenth century used to examine “primitive customs” with great interest as affording a window on a human world of savagery which the march of enlightenment and progress in Europe had long since surpassed. A large portion of these “customs” – exogamy, mother-in-law taboos, “classificatory” relationship terms and so on – were later to be classed together to form the distinctive subject-matter of

“kinship” studies. Moiety exogamy, sister-exchange, a preference for marriage with, say, the mother’s brother’s daughter – these and countless other customs and rules were described and pondered over by antiquarians, historians, social philosophers and other thinkers, so that by the early part of this century a mass of material from most parts of the “primitive” world had been accumulated. But it was all too much. As reports were published at a steadily accelerating rate, the result became too unwieldy to be handled even by Sir James Frazer, who with astonishing perseverance devoted his life to the attempt to list and to pigeon-hole in some comprehensible framework what was basically a chaotic jumble of “facts” which had been piled one upon another over the preceding decades.

In retreat, the leading early twentieth century modernist schools of diffusionism and functionalism determined to set themselves more modest tasks. In the United States, where fieldwork was for the most part unavoidably salvage ethnography, Franz Boas and his students determined to leave theoretical considerations of all kinds aside, “the facts” as remembered by informants being patiently recorded for each culture-area, connections between them being postulated only where geographical proximity or historical circumstance indicated the probability of the “borrowing” of customs, styles or motifs between one group and another. In Britain, shortly afterwards, “functionalist” anthropologists led by Malinowski determined to deal with just one culture or localised community at a time, each scholar devoting him- or herself to as much fieldwork as possible in the chosen area, the stated aim being to help British colonial administrators understand how each custom in the community for which they were responsible functioned in relation to the social whole.

Both historical particularism and functionalism broadly served the purposes for which they were designed. Small-scale, localised reports functioned in relation to small-scale, localised administrative, welfare or historiographical concerns. Where functionalist “generalisations” were drawn, these were by intention restricted to the kinds which might prove useful to administrators. To those concerned, this appeared satisfactory until (a) the political climate changed as the colonial revolution got under way following the Second World War and (b) the number of ethnographic monographs from various areas began to



multiply so rapidly that once again the problem of what to do with the total result made itself felt.

It is in this context (summarised here all too briefly) that the achievements of Claude Lévi-Strauss need to be viewed. The difficulty with the (mainly-functionalist) recording of kinship “facts” was that in the post-war period they were still being piled up in heaps – albeit now in functionalist, whole-culture ethnographies – in order of publication, without the guidance of a theory which could help display the limits of variability and the unity of principle underlying them all. It was not until the publication of Lévi-Strauss’s *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté* (first edition Paris, 1949) that the concepts needed to sort out and arrange the various classes of facts began to become generally available. The discovery that all human marriage systems are exchange systems has been one of the greatest discoveries of twentieth century science. It provides the unifying conceptual framework which was long required. Before this discovery, anthropologists had looked at marriage-exchanges and exchange-rules without seeing them. Following it, the “exchange of women” became for a period so seemingly-obvious that some writers found difficulty in noticing much else.

A generation ago, then, Lévi-Strauss gave us a new way of looking at what we thought we already knew. Before the conceptual revolution which he helped inaugurate, “the facts” were still being accumulated, recorded in journals and monographs on library shelves around the world. But as a totality, they had long since become unusable. In their different ways, the prevailing, long-lingering modernist traditions of historical particularism and functionalism had rendered cross-cultural interpretation not merely unfashionable but virtually impossible. The “facts”, as gleaned through pre-structuralist paradigms, had been published within mutually incommensurable formats which might almost have been intentionally designed to fragment the body of what was cross-culturally known. We were deprived, consequently, of a retrieval-system: an efficient means of accessing, cataloguing and translating into common symbolic currency the vast quantities of data which had been accumulated indicating the range of variability of traditional human cultures. We have still not fully solved this classifying problem, but Lévi-Strauss has equipped us with techniques immeasurably more powerful than those we

possessed before. Much better than before, we are in a position to know what it is that we know about our cultural selves and about our creativity and diversity as a species.

### **Beyond structuralism: the ritual domain**

In this thesis, it is hoped to contribute towards this wider collective project of information-retrieval. The aim will be to arrange a diversity of the acknowledged “facts” of social anthropology within a conceptual framework which renders them more easily-accessible and less contradictory than they have seemed before. The primary area of studies to be worked over is that which falls somewhere between kinship and social organization on the one hand, and mythological thought on the other. It is an intermediate area which Lévi-Strauss, in the course of his intellectual evolution, skipped over rather lightly. Essentially, what is at issue is ritual, including taboos, avoidances, life-crisis ceremonial, “religion” and much of what used to be termed “folklore”. Not all behaviour in traditional cultures is ritually-structured, but it is typically the case that life is lived within a context of ritual avoidances, taboos, precepts etc. which at least tinge the more significant social acts and which make little distinction between “economics”, “kinship”, “religion” or other western-derived categories. Like “kinship” in many societies, the ritual domain in principle embraces all human life. Its study, consequently, constitutes not a narrow field but an immense one – although it is nevertheless more sharply defined than the topic ostensibly dealt with by Lévi-Strauss, which is the range of variability of the products of the human brain in general.

It was long ago remarked that Lévi-Strauss in *The Raw and the Cooked* maintains an “almost complete silence on ritual” (Yalman 1967: 82). To the consternation of many of his admirers, the virtual silence proved to be sustained throughout the four volumes of *Mythologiques*. When, finally, Lévi-Strauss came to consider the ritual domain in the closing pages of *The Naked Man*, he gave the subject a treatment which De Heusch (1975: 371) termed “astounding”. Willis (1982: ix) has described the same treatment as “idiosyncratic and misleading”. Such adjectives are hardly surprising: Lévi-Strauss in the passages in question (1981: 675-9) describes ritual not only as

“a bastardization of thought” but as a “desperate, maniacal” attempt to achieve “the actual abolition of thought”.

A careful study of Lévi-Strauss’s intellectual evolution will reveal the reasons for such hostility and for the consequent difficulties he faced in approaching dispassionately the study of the ritual domain.

After the publication of *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté* in 1949, the founder of structuralism remained for many years unsure in which direction to turn his attentions next. It was not until 1962, with the publication of his two transitional books, *Le Totémisme aujourd’hui* and *La Pensée sauvage*, that the outline of his decisions began to become clear. The two books (which really form a single work) dealt ostensibly with topics of ritual and folklore, classed broadly as “totemic” phenomena by an earlier generation of anthropologists. But in approaching such phenomena, Lévi-Strauss had faced a choice. He could either have treated them as systems of social action, in much the same way that he had treated kinship systems in his earlier work, or he could have treated them as essentially mental phenomena, disengaged from the realms of economics, sexual exchanges and practical action generally. Lévi-Strauss began embarking on the second course, turning away from kinship systems and practical life into what Leach (1967: 132) called “the land of the Lotus Eaters”. He began delving into the world of mythology considered as the free creation of the human mind communing with itself.

The fate of Lévi-Strauss’s grand system was sealed from that moment on. *Les Structures* had concerned itself with the principles underlying the arrangement of material realities: with forms of social organization in which real marriage partners were exchanged between real social groups. Despite a certain methodological continuity which survived, his decision to abandon such “external” realities meant that his entire life’s work would henceforth be divided into two parts, each with only the most tenuous of connections (in terms of content and substantive theory) with the other.

The author’s motives for in this way rupturing the continuity of his own work are clarified retrospectively in the “Overture” to his *Mythologiques*. After writing *Les Structures*, he recalls, “I felt the need for a break between two

bursts of effort” (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 9). His *La Pensée sauvage* represented such a pause in his efforts. It was an attempt “to scan the scene before me, to estimate the ground covered, to map out my future itinerary, and to get a rough idea of the foreign territories I would have to cross.” He felt dissatisfied with *Les Structures*. But his criticisms were not primarily of its methods or theoretical conclusions. What disturbed him was the fact that his great work had concentrated on the analysis of real, practical forms of social organization – namely, kinship systems as systems of matrimonial exchange. *Les Structures*, Lévi-Strauss writes, had discerned behind an apparently chaotic mass of seemingly-absurd rules governing the question of who could marry whom in various traditional cultures “a small number of simple principles” thanks to which the entire field could be reduced to an intelligible system. The book had revealed the force of certain inescapable obligations, as coercive as the laws discovered by physicists and chemists in other spheres, to which the world’s kinship systems of necessity conformed. “However”, the author continues – and in this lies his real criticism – “there was nothing to indicate that the obligations came from within.” He would like to believe that the constraints discovered were internal, mental ones, but he concedes a point to his opponents on this score: “Perhaps they were merely the reflection in men’s minds of certain social demands that had been objectified in institutions” (1970: 10). *Les Structures* had been unable to prove that the “obligations” – the scientific principles or constraints which he had discovered – expressed and revealed the internal structure of the human brain.

It was for this reason that his two transitional works, *Le Totémisme aujourd’hui* and *La Pensée sauvage*, began a change of course. The thinking behind the new choice of subject-matter was apparently as follows. The hypothesis to be tested was that mental activity, including that underlying the construction of kinship systems, is determined by inner constraints. These are of a categorical and logical nature whose precise properties remain to be uncovered. *Les Structures* had demonstrated that constraints of a rationally intelligible kind exercised their force upon the life of humankind. But how could they be shown to emanate essentially from the structure of the human brain? Kinship systems – the subject of *Les Structures* – are, after all, eminently practical in their effects and functions. However great their mental/symbolic dimension, this mental aspect is contaminated through

kinship's inevitable involvement in practical affairs, institutionalised social demands, economic necessities, historical contingencies and other "external" factors. Clearly – according to Lévi-Strauss – the result can only give a very impure picture of the mind's inner properties. And the same considerations would apply to the study of any other "material" social forms. Whether sexual, economic, social or political, as institutions they are the compromise products of two realms, the internal and the external, the mental and the practical, the subjective and the objective. They are the products, not of the mind acting freely, but of a complex interplay between internal and external constraints. Their study cannot, therefore, disentangle the contributions to structure which are made by the mind, from those which may be the outcome of merely external constraints.

In his *Totemism* (1969b: 163), Lévi-Strauss declared his own belief in the existence of a "logic" which was "the least common denominator of all thought." This, he emphasized, was "an original logic, a direct expression of the structure of the mind (and behind the mind, probably, of the brain), and not an inert product of the action of the environment on an amorphous consciousness." Returning to this theme in the "overture" to his *Mythologiques*, Lévi-Strauss concedes that *Les Structures* had been unable to prove the validity of this belief. It had not demonstrated beyond doubt that the patterns which had been revealed gave us a picture of the inner structure of the human mind itself. He goes on:

"The experiment I am now embarking on with mythology will consequently be more decisive. Mythology has no obvious practical function: unlike the phenomena previously studied, it is not directly linked with a different kind of reality, which is endowed with a higher degree of objectivity than its own and whose injunctions it might therefore transmit to minds that seem perfectly free to indulge their creative spontaneity. And so, if it were possible to prove in this instance, too, that the apparent arbitrariness of the mind, its supposedly spontaneous flow of inspiration, and its seemingly uncontrolled inventiveness imply the existence of laws operating at a deeper level, we would inevitably be forced to conclude that when the mind is left to commune with itself and no longer has to come to terms with objects, it is in a sense reduced to imitating itself as object; and that since the laws governing its operations are not fundamentally different from those it exhibits in its other functions, it shows itself to be of the nature of a thing among things. The argument need not be carried to this point, since it is enough to establish the conviction that if the human mind appears determined even in the realm of mythology *a fortiori* it

must also be determined in all its spheres of activity” (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 10).

This passage is extremely significant. It shows that Lévi-Strauss chose to study myths on the grounds that these were a phenomenon “not directly linked” with external social reality. He wished to study the human mind when it was “left to commune with itself and no longer has to come to terms with objects...”. What is emphasized here is the separation of the world of the mind from all external social constraints. Myths are conceived to be elaborated in a disembodied world of their own, a world of mental subjectivity no longer compelled to take account of “objects.” This conception apparently seems necessary to Lévi-Strauss if he is to justify his belief that mythological structures are “a direct expression of the structure of the mind.”

By the same logic, having established the disengagement of mythology from the kinds of practical constraints to which kinship systems are subject as they exist in real life, Lévi-Strauss is correspondingly forced to produce an equally decisive rupture between the two major phases of his own life’s work. He is compelled to disengage his works on mythology decisively and abruptly from the traditions of kinship-analysis which *Les Structures* in fact almost immeasurably enriched. Myths on the one side, “externally”-contaminated spheres such as kinship and matrimonial exchange on the other – the two have to be situated rigorously apart. They have to be shown to be “not directly linked.”

### **Totemism**

But then what about totemism? If ever there has been a concept in anthropology which has linked rules of marriage with mythological beliefs concerning animal and human groups, it is the old-fashioned concept, “totemism”. Beyond “totemism”, moreover, it may be said that ritual action in general provides the link between mythological beliefs on the one hand and, on the other, sexual, economic and other practices and dramas as acted out on the ground. When a mythological system is analysed in its ritual context, it turns out that almost every element in each mythical story has some “direct link” with ritual practice, while the ritual practice itself is by no means wholly unconnected with certain concerns of everyday life. This makes it clear why both the

problem of “totemism” and the more general problem of ritual action had to be dispensed with by Lévi-Strauss before he could embark on the argument of his *Mythologiques*. He could not allow ritual systems to be treated as embodied, corporeal social institutions. Had he allowed them to be so treated, his rigid division of the universe into two distinct realms would have been impossible to maintain. Instead of contenting himself with statements concerning the absence of any “direct link” between mythical structures and “external” reality, he would have had to tackle the difficult problem of understanding precisely what are the complex indirect links and relationships between these conceptually counterposed realms.

Understanding ritual involves – in Marxist terms – studying the relation between “superstructure” (including myths) and “infrastructure” (including social organization, economic production and similarly “practical” things). It may well be true, as Lévi-Strauss insists, that the two are not directly linked. But ritual may also be, as Yalman (1967: 87) has put it, “the one important point of contact between the two realms.” Durkheim (1965: 470), Leach (1954: 16), Turner (1957: 124, 1967: 365), Murphy (1972: 243) and many others have approached ritual in more or less comparable ways. They have treated it, like Yalman, as an intermediary between mythological or ideal conceptual scheme on the one hand, and everyday practice on the other. Leach’s words (1954: 15-16) remain among the most effective:

“The structure which is symbolized in ritual is the system of socially approved ‘proper’ relations between individuals and groups. These relations are not formally recognized at all times. When men are engaged in practical activities in satisfaction of what Malinowski called ‘the basic needs’, the implications of structural relationships may be neglected altogether; a Kachin chief works in his field side by side with his meanest serf. Indeed I am prepared to argue that this neglect of formal structure is essential if ordinary informal social activities are to be pursued at all.

Nevertheless if anarchy is to be avoided, the individuals who make up a society must from time to time be reminded, at least in symbol, of the underlying order that is supposed to guide their social activities. Ritual performances have this function for the participating group as a whole; they momentarily make explicit what is otherwise a fiction.”

It is in systems of ritual action that myths are acted out by real people down on the ground; and it is these systems that ordinary human beings in their

sexual and economic activities partake of (or define themselves against) some of the qualities of the personages depicted in myths. It is in rituals that people may on a formal level defer to ideals which they find it inconvenient to afford in their everyday economic behaviour. For all these reasons and others, the study of ritual action must inevitably span the conceptual divide which Lévi-Strauss's counterpositions set up. It must bring together the study of kinship systems and the study of myths, the study of mortal men and women and the study of spirits, the study of "this world" and the study of the "other worlds" of the mind. It was for this reason that Lévi-Strauss, wedded to an uncompromising philosophical dualism which simply could not countenance such a project, had to conjure the problem of ritual action away.

Once Lévi-Strauss had resolved to study "the mind" in its "pure" form, distilled in isolation from the "external" effects of the real world – it became the disjunction, not the conjunction, of these opposed realms which he had firmly to establish at the very outset of his analysis. All intervening phenomena connecting the two realms had to be cut away and left unexamined. The ropes had to be cut between heaven and earth. If, consequently, Lévi-Strauss in his *Le Totémisme* eliminated from his discussion all forms of ritual action (such as food-avoidances through which economic behaviour may link up with mythological beliefs (see Chapter 3 below), it was because he intended to do so. And if the results of his studies of mythology – however brilliantly informative and insightful – seem to most of us to hang in the air, this, too, was intentional. To take only one theme as an example, *Le Cru et le Cuit* certainly does not show the way in which the seemingly incoherent diversity and contingency of meat-cooking rules (rules concerning the avoidance of blood in meat, taboos against taking meat from menstruating women, distinctions between "the roast" and "the boiled" etc.) emerge from the same simple principles of exchange as govern the dimensions of variability of kinship systems. We are simply told that just as conventions of matrimonial exchange constitute a system of communication between social groups, so conventions of cooking constitute a system of communication between Man and Nature. And it is suggested that since both "systems of communication" are products of one and the same kind of human brain, the codes ought to be similar. Leach (1967: 132) long ago voiced his own disappointment at the meagreness of this conclusion in these words:



“Human brains devised styles of cooking, and human brains devised rules of marriage – the two codes of thought may well link up. But Lévi-Strauss has not tried to show that they in fact link up; he has simply moved off to study other things.”

The fact that this lack of connection is at least partly intentional on the part of Lévi-Strauss does nothing to detract from the sense of disappointment that is produced. It is a disjunction between the earlier work of Lévi-Strauss and his later work, and, like all such disjunctions in science, is an expression of internal intellectual contradiction. It indicates the limitations of Lévi-Strauss’s method and system as a whole.



***Chapter 2: The hunter's own kill rule***

Essentially, what will be argued in this thesis is this. Lévi-Strauss made his major initial impact with the publication of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. This outlined what was, in effect, a theory of the origins of human culture. Its premise was a form of human solidarity: the sexual solidarity of men. Whereas other theories had stressed (and continue to stress) the nuclear family, the pair-bond or the individual, Lévi-Strauss focused attention upon the group and upon collective action. Groups of men stood together, formed partnerships and exchanged their women between one another as groups. As each group renounced the sexual enjoyment of its own women, the “incest taboo” was born and the cultural realm established (Lévi-Strauss 1969a: 3-25).

Having shown how concrete kinship systems in their manifold ways express this unifying principle of exchange, Lévi-Strauss in subsequent books embarked on the intensive cross-cultural study of traditional ritual and myth. The question inevitably posed itself: Were the underlying principles in these domains to prove the same? The answer which he eventually came to was far from clear-cut. He seems to have concluded that they were the same only in the sense that all products of the human mind display certain patterns of alternation, binarism, mediation and contrast – patterns intrinsic to human thought as such. In the more substantive sense that ritual and myth give expression to the same unitary principle of social exchange as that manifested in kinship systems, the conclusion was a negative one. Totemic systems, he argued, unlike kinship systems, do not express a principle of sexual or economic exchange (see next chapter). Magical ritualism in general – in his view – “is an essentially irrational activity” (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 679—80).

In this thesis, Lévi-Strauss's logic will be scrutinised, and an opposite conclusion will be reached. The basic finding of this thesis is that mythology and ritual, no less than kinship systems, can be shown to express a principle of social exchange in which men and women as producers and consumers

circulate sexually and economically. The principle of exchange involved – it will be argued – remains identical for each domain.

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As a first step towards unifying the fields under study, we may bring into the discussion what is here referred to as “the hunter’s own kill rule”. In this connection, the basic problematic of this thesis presents itself as follows.

For over a century, social anthropologists have attempted to solve fundamental problems in the theory of kinship, social structure, pre-capitalist economics, ritual and many other topics whilst remaining unaware of an ethnographic “fact” of such importance that to omit consideration of it is to render these problems insoluble.

The ethnographic “fact” can be simply stated. It is that the most frequently-discussed universal rule of human culture – the “incest taboo” – has as its corollary in generating culture a rule prohibiting producers from consuming their own produce. Indeed, the two rules can be seen as one and the same. For a woman to have sexual relations with her own male offspring would be for her to appropriate for her own purposes her own “produce”. Likewise, within a community of hunters and gatherers, for a man to consume animals which he had hunted or cooked himself would be for him to eat his “own flesh”. This identification is so frequently made, in traditional cultures in so many parts of the world, that it is arguable that what has been described as an “incest taboo” is only one aspect of a double-sided rule or principle relating not only to sexual produce but to economic produce as well. The “own kin” rule and the “own produce” rule are in origin not two rules but one – the rule against “‘eating’ one’s own flesh”.

In hunting or hunter-gatherer cultures, economic produce consists of or includes game animals. These have been killed, typically, by men. They are often cooked and distributed by women. In most traditional cultures in which hunting plays a part, there are restrictions on hunters’ rights to appropriate the game which they themselves have killed. In many cases, an animal is entirely prohibited as food to the person who killed it. The principle that an

animal cannot be directly consumed or appropriated by its killer is here referred to as the “own kill” rule. It will be argued that although “sharing” has long been an important concept, the “own kill” rule as a taboo generating a process of exchange has gone almost unnoticed, and that the result of this has been to render incomprehensible a considerable portion of social anthropology’s classical field of study.

In the past thirty or forty years, anthropologists have made spectacular advances in the study of kinship systems following the theoretical discovery that incest rules are essentially rules of exchange. This – as has been noted above – was in very large measure the personal achievement of Lévi-Strauss. What were formerly seen as irrational “taboos” or “phobias” have become comprehensible as rules governing the giving and taking of wives, husbands and children between groups of human beings. The son or brother whom a woman renounces as a sexual partner is not just “tabooed”: the fact that one woman renounces him means that he is made available to others and is in that sense “given” to another woman somewhere else. The advances which have followed from this theoretical breakthrough have been considerable, but in an important respect they have halted half-way. For inseparable from the exchange of human beings themselves is the exchange of their economic produce – which is, in the case of hunters, their meat. The whole of “primitive culture” is shot through and through with seemingly-irrational “taboos” and “phobias” relating to the killing and eating of animals. Yet until recently few anthropologists have suspected that these, as formal counterparts of incest rules, might have been connected with the giving and taking of game animals between groups of women and men. This apparent blindness has been in the face of the most unambiguous message of all the most deep-rooted mythological traditions of “primitive culture” – traditions which spell out in countless different ways that essential “secret of the totem”: namely, that one’s “own kill” and one’s “own kin” are in some vital symbolic sense one and the same.

Failure to recognize the “own kill” rule has, it will be argued, wrought havoc in anthropological theory since the inception of the discipline over a hundred years ago. Anthropology once concerned itself with classifying hunter-lore under such headings as rites of atonement, sacrifice, totem and taboo, animal guardian spirits, hunting magic, and re-incarnation beliefs – to make only an

arbitrary selection from a mass of other categories. To this day, mention of such terms summons up a picture not of a field reducible to logical order and system but of a chaotic assortment of customs, folklore and irrationality run wild. This is not to suggest that something in the nature of an “oversight” could have been the root cause of so much confusion – much deeper social and ideological causes must be sought. In this context we may appreciate the extent to which reported “exceptions” to the own kill norm among traditional hunting peoples represent Eurocentric or Western misconceptions in applying concepts of “property” or “ownership” to relationships whose subtlety is systematically violated by such terms.

It is known, for example, that in many if not all hunting traditions, fixed rules exist to define unambiguously to whom a killed animal “belongs.” The rule may, according to the culture concerned, stipulate that the “owner” is the person who first sighted the animal, the one who struck the first blow, the one who despatched it, the one who happened to be standing closest to the killer at the time of wounding, or the one to whom the fatal spear or arrow belonged – to list just a few of the many possibilities which have been explored. “It seems to matter little”, comments Ingold (1980: 158) in reference to this situation,

“whether a slain animal belongs to the man who first sighted it, chased it, killed it or butchered it, or whether it passes to a recognized leader, a kinsman or affine, or to some passive bystander, so long as some rule exists, capable of more or less unambiguous application.”

Europeans once persistently concluded that such unambiguous rules of “ownership” proved the importance of “private property” among hunters and gatherers. Closer to the contemporary consensus, however, is the view that such rules “concern only the establishment of prior claims to the kill” (Ingold 1980: 158), often considerably before the consumption-phase begins. In other words, it seems evident that “possession of a kill in a hunting society confers not the right to its consumption, but the privilege of performing its distribution” (Ingold 1980: 158, citing Dowling 1968: 505). The factors motivating men’s hunting endeavours are powerful ones, but they are not in any direct sense reducible to the desire to eat meat:

“From being in a position to give away portions of meat the able or industrious hunter acquires influence. Others are attracted to

his camp, confident that their security will be assured. With a band of followers around him, he can organize collective hunts, and enhance his reputation still further through the festive redistribution that ensues" (Ingold 1980: 158).

This is "property" in a sense very different from – indeed the logical inverse of – the European or Western capitalist notion of resource-ownership as conferring the right to keep and hold a resource for one's own private use. All the evidence indicates that if we were to posit a "base-line" or "initial situation" for human culture in this regard, it would be better delineated with the help of the "own kill" concept than with that of "private property" as understood in bourgeois terms. Yet until recently, there seems to have been a reluctance even to consider the possibility of a system of reciprocity so relentless that for millennia, hunters renounced systematically all expectations or rights of consumption whatsoever in the animals which they had killed themselves.

In any event, whatever the causes – and in the inter-war years a struggle against the old concept of "primitive communism" had something to do with it – the results have been peculiar. Failure to recognize the "own kill" rule has led to the necessity to invent a whole series of other rules, institutions and problems in its place.

Most spectacular of these was the creation of, and endless preoccupation with, the problem of "totemism". A hundred years ago this was conceived, typically, to be an institution – the most primitive, once-universal form of religion – which involved "animal worship" (McLellan 1869), or a peculiar inability to distinguish human life or its sanctity from the animal life taken by men in the hunt. A community (according to this conception) was divided into a number of "totem" clans (or simply two moieties), the members of each being identified with one or more species of animals. There was often a rule prohibiting marriage within the clan, and often this rule was equated in some way with a rule preventing clan members from eating "their own flesh" – that is, the meat of their "totem" animals. In short, at the heart of this supposed system lay the tendency to identify certain edible species – usually animals – as both "kin" and "taboo". The Osage Indians, for example, refused to hunt the beaver, "because in killing that animal, they killed a brother..." (Frazer 1910, 3: 129-

31). The ritual aspects of “totemism” were justified, in native terms, mythologically. The myths were often attempts to overcome the contradictions implied by the identification of hunters’ own kills (that is, the animals they hunted) with their own kin (that is, their brothers, sisters, mothers etc.). The term “totem” was in fact derived from a North American Indian (Ojibwa) usage.

In the Ojibwa tongue, a reference to one’s “totam” was in fact a reference to one’s (uterine) “flesh” or “kin” (Hewitt in Hodge 1910: 2, 767-8); a man who refused to harm his “totam” – for example, the bear – was in native terms merely respecting his “kin”. Since, in most of the other well-known examples of totemism, the word for “totem” likewise meant “kin”, “flesh” or “meat”, it would have made as much sense to have described the institution as “fleshism” or “meatism”. It has to be said that despite vigorous modern attempts to liquidate it (Lévi-Strauss 1969b), the problem of totemism has remained with anthropologists to this day.

The problem of “totemism” arose in the context of an all-pervasive but unexamined and invisible assumption. This was that to eat one’s own kill was the base-line or “natural” position, in relation to which other practices (avoidances, taboos, renunciations etc.) were “abnormal” or “peculiar”. Ignorance of the “own kill” rule led to more than just “totemism”, however. Closely linked was the difficulty of accounting for a more general but equally extraordinary fact. This was that specialised hunters – of all people – often seemed to be guilt-ridden about the taking of animal life. In many cases, rituals of “atonement” had to be performed following each kill. What was not noticed (because it was taken for granted) was that those making the atonements were eating their own kills, or at least restricting consumption to within a narrow range of kin. This reflected the diametrically opposed assumptions of Europeans on the one hand, natives on the other. Whereas the native moral base-line assumption was that a large kill had to be surrendered or at least distributed very widely, the Western cultural assumption was that hunters killed in order to eat. Consequently, when (as under contact conditions became increasingly the case), a large animal was killed by a native and then privately consumed by him or his immediate family, each side “saw” a different fact. What the native experienced as “fact” was his own selfishness, greed and guilt at life-taking in the service of his own material hunger – a “fact” of moral failing for which ritual atonement had to be made. What the European saw



as “fact” was the native’s surprising reluctance to simply kill and eat in a business-like, matter-of-fact way – his apparent inability to kill an animal without making sacrifices, atonements and apologies for having to do so in order to eat the meat.

One further problem-area is worth mentioning here. This arose from European thinkers’ arbitrary inclusion of certain meat-renunciations and offerings, but not others, within the category of “religious sacrifice”. This was often held to be a universal feature of the world’s ancient religious systems. Two closely-related principles, it was usually agreed, seemed to underlie the institution of sacrifice: (1) the notion that to kill an animal simply in order to eat it was morally impure and (2) the belief that to take such a beast’s life unselfishly or for the purposes of a higher being (typically spiritual, but with more or less human appetites) was not only permissible but enjoined as the model of moral or devout behaviour. Attempts to explain these ideas have been almost as numerous and varied as those put forward to account for totemism. There is no need to underline the connection with the “own kill” rule here.

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### **Glimpses of the own kill rule**

It has long been recognised that the perception of “facts” depends upon the prior existence in language and in the mind of the concepts which correspond to them, so that the lack of certain terms or concepts can lead to an inability to see what is present before the eyes. The pre-Lévi-Straussian invisibility of marital exchange-rules has been noted already; here, it is proposed to show how something similar has applied – and still applies – to an immense class of rules relating in principle to the exchange of food.

To anyone familiar with the own kill rule, it affords a strange experience to glance back over the literature of social anthropology to see how this rule was consistently looked at yet not seen. Even in those cases – tragically few – where its explicit formulation as a rule was noted, it was still not seen or recognized for what it was.

## **Statements on the hunter's own kill rule in North America**

### **(a) General**

Among numerous North American statements on the own kill rule, the following examples are worth singling out for two reasons. Firstly, the earlier statements in particular show how the rule has been conceptualised in the literature through familiar pre-existent religious categories – feast-giving, “first-fruits ceremonies”, “sacrifice”, “rites of atonement” and so forth. Secondly, the statements illustrate something of the rule's range of variability in form:

“It is the custom among the Delawares that if a hunter shoots down a deer when another person is present, or even accidentally comes by before the skin is taken off, he presents it to him, saying ‘Friend, skin your deer’, and immediately walks off” (Heckewelder 1876: 311; Delaware).

“According to one informant the man who killed an animal had the least to say about its distribution and generally got the poorest share” (Radin 1923: 113; Winnebago).

“Whenever he hunted with me, he gave me all, or the greater part of what he had killed.” (Tanner 1940: 62; Ottawa).

“... any sharp utensils which you use to eat us with, you shall not have in your hand when you hunt. If you do, you will scare us far away” (instructions given by the ancestral Deer-people, spiritual “owners” of all deer; Luckert 1975: 40; Navaho).

“A Naskapi hunter who makes a kill is expected to give it to his hunting companion, or if he is one of a party, to its leader or most senior member, to whoever was standing closest to the hunter at the time of the shot, or to the first man to reach the carcass” (Ingold 1980: 158, citing Henriksen 1973: 31; Strong 1929: 285—6).

“When a deer or bear is killed by them, they divide the liver into as many pieces as there are fires, and send a boy to each with a piece, that the men belonging to each fire may burn it...” (Romans 1775, 1, 83; Choctaw).

“When a young man killed his first game of any sort he did not eat it himself, but distributed the meat among his clansfolk” (Adair 1775: 54; Chickasaw)

The author of the last statement, James Adair, was one of a number of early missionaries who, faced with the problem of explaining such Indian rituals of meat-giving, subsumed them under the familiar heading of “sacrifice” – a

particularly pleasing solution in that it suggested a connection with ancient Semitic practices:

“The Indians have among them the resemblance of the Jewish Sin-Offering, and Trespass-Offering, for they commonly pull their new-killed venison (before they dress it) several times through the smoke and flame of the fire, both by the way of a sacrifice, and to consume the blood, life, or animal spirits of the beast, which with them would be a most horrid abomination to eat. And they sacrifice in the woods, the milt, or a large fat piece of the first buck they kill, both in their summer and winter hunt; and frequently the whole carcass” (Adair 1775: 117; Chickasaw).

The following statements on the Ojibwa and their neighbours are in a similar vein:

“When an Indian meets with ill-luck in hunting... he devotes the first game he takes to making a religious feast, to which he invites a number of the principal men and women from the other wigwams... The kettle in which the meat has been prepared is taken off the fire... When all are served the remainder is put on the fire as a burnt offering. Each one also cuts off a piece from his portion, which he puts on the burning coals....

*Ooshkenetahgawin*... signifies the offering of the first animal or fowl killed by a boy, and is always turned into a feast. The whole is cooked, and part offered as a burnt offering. These feasts consist of two kinds. The first small game the boy kills, such as a bird, squirrel, or duck, makes the first feast; and the second is when he kills a bear, deer, or buffalo. It is a kind of offering of the first-fruits...” (Jones 1861: 94-7; Ojibwa).

The author of the above draws an analogy with the Christian “great atonement” itself (Jones: 94-6).

Writing of the Indians of the same general area, Tanner (1940: 62) mentions similar examples of feast-giving on the occasion of “firsts”:

“One day, when the ice in the ponds was covered middling deep with water, I reached a place about a mile distant from camp, and in a low swamp I discovered fresh moose signs. I followed up the animal, and killed it; and as it was the first, it was made a feast for the whole band, and all devoured in a single day.”

Tanner – a European adopted into an Indian family as a child – describes a similar incident in which he caught a sturgeon which had got trapped in shallow water. A feast was made of the fish because “it was the first that had been killed here...” (1940: 46). Tanner was often accompanied only by his immediate family, and on several occasions he shows that he did not feel it to

be altogether satisfactory that so small and close a unit should eat his "first kills". On one occasion, he writes, "I killed an elk, which, as it was my first, must be celebrated by a feast, though there were none but our own family to partake of it" (1940: 31). In another incident he was alone with his Indian mother when he killed a sturgeon:

"...and as this was the first sturgeon I had ever taken, the old woman thought it necessary to celebrate the feast of Oshkenetahgawin, or first fruits, though, as we were quite alone, we had no guests to assist us" (1940: 30).

This was the feast of Oshkenetahgawin referred to by Jones (1861: 97 – see above).

It is worth adding that the background assumption of an own kill rule pervades Tanner's account of his life as an Indian: again and again, he writes of examples of fasting during hunting-expeditions, of steadfast refusal (no matter how great the hunger) to eat meat whilst hunting, and of the obligation to bring elk, bear-meat or other animal flesh intact back to the camp (Tanner 1940: 48, 62, 68, 73, 78, 92).

## **(b) California**

Among the Juaneno of Southern California,

"The regulation that a hunter must not partake of his own game or fish was adhered to tenaciously. Infraction brought failure of luck and perhaps sickness" (Kroeber 1925: 643).

However, Kroeber adds:

"It would appear that this rule applied chiefly or only to young men. At any rate, there must have been limitations to its enforcement, since it is stated that sickness resulted only when the game was consumed secretly" (p. 643).

These Indians used a special verb, *pi'xwaq*, meaning "to get sick from eating one's own killing" (Harrington 1933: 179).

The main source for the Juaneno is the Franciscan missionary, Boscana (1846: 297—8):

"Another ridiculous belief among them was, that the deer hunters could never partake of venison which they, themselves, procured and

only of such as was taken by others, for the reason, that if they did, they would not get any more. And the fishermen, also, possessed the same idea with regard to their fish. More singular, however, than this, was the custom among the young men, when starting for the woods in search of rabbits, squirrels, rats or other animals. They were obliged to take a companion for the reason, that he who killed the game, could not eat thereof – if he did, in a few days he complained of pains in his limbs, and gradually became emaciated. On this account, two went together, in order to exchange with each other the result of their excursion”.

As with so many hunter-gatherer societies, Juaneno residence was initially matrilineal, with bride-service. A young hunter's game belonged to his bride's relatives, and to be accepted, a groom had to prove himself a good hunter. After a certain period, the husband was allowed to take his wife away to his own paternal home, where his rights increased. He gained certain rights in his own kills, but restrictions remained. During his wife's confinement, he had to abstain from “all kinds of fish and meat” (Boscana 1846: 279-283).

Alfred Robinson (1846: 233) inferred that rules against eating one's own kill characterised the Indians of Upper California, and Bancroft (1875: 418) generalised similarly for the whole state of California:

“They are very superstitious, and believe in all sorts of omens and auguries. An eclipse frightens them beyond measure, and shooting stars cause them to fall down in the dust and cover their heads in abject terror. Many of them believe that, should a hunter eat meat or fish which he himself had procured, his luck would leave him. For this reason they generally hunt or fish in pairs, and when the day's sport is over, each takes what the other has killed.”

Of the Southern Californian Luiseno, Kroeber (1908: 184) writes:

“When a man killed a deer, or rabbits, he brought them to the *wamgush*. Then the people ate the meat, but he did not partake of it. If he should eat of the meat of animals he himself had killed, even only very little, he would not be able to kill others. However, if he confessed to the people that he had taken some of the meat, he would again be able to hunt successfully”.

Among the Shasta (Northern California), the strict own kill rule apparently applied only to the younger hunters: “For a year after he began to hunt a boy never ate any game of his own killing for fear of his luck leaving him permanently. From his very first quarry his entire family refrained” (Kroeber 1925: 295).

We may end this Californian survey with some comments by Hugo Reid (1852: 238), who wrote in general terms of the Indians of Los Angeles County:

“A great number of their young men being hunters, they of course had their peculiar superstitions. During a hunt they never tasted food; nor on their return did they partake of what they themselves killed, from an idea that whoever eat of his own game hurt his hunting abilities”.

The same author (pp. 248-8) provides us with an interesting myth on the own kill rule. Seven sisters were married to a group of seven hunters who persistently ate their own kills, returning home empty-handed and reporting “bad luck” in the chase. The women arranged to spy on the men, and saw them roasting and eating large numbers of rabbits, afterwards carefully concealing the bones. The Seven sisters then discussed what to do, following which:

“They proceeded to the lagoon, where they daily collected flag roots and constructed a machine (impossible to describe) out of reeds, and ascended to heaven and located themselves at the *Pleiads*.”

By changing themselves into stars, their husbands would never again be able to use them for anything, since “they would be out of reach” (p. 248). (Later in this thesis, similar myths will be examined; evidence will be presented indicating that they refer to a means of motivating men to, hunt and then surrender their kills, non-compliance provoking feminine retaliation in the form of collective sexual withdrawal).

### **The own kill rule in Australia**

Various forms of the own kill rule were noted by early writers in Australia, but only incidentally, in the course of descriptions centred upon “in-law avoidances”, “totemism” and numerous other things. An early report (Taplin 1879: 52) on the Narrinyeri mentioned: “When they are cooking an emu, which has been shot or speared, they recite incantations, and perform a variety of genuflections over it.” Among the Wongaibon (Mathews 1904: 358; cited in Blows 1975: 31-2), young men could kill emus but were prohibited from eating any of the flesh themselves, although they could eat some if presented a piece by an old man or if they had been released from the taboo in a ceremony which involved singing a special song for the bird. Among the Wuradjeri (Berndt 1947: 353; cited in Blows, p. 34) a man who ate his own emu-flesh was made ill

“by the emu feathers and nails, said to have entered the eater with the meat.” In this region, the emu was identified with the ancestral all-mother, Kurikuta (Berndt 1947: 77). Beckett (personal communication cited in Blows p. 42n) “reports the tradition that if someone griddled emu in the bush instead of bringing it back to camp to be roasted, Kurikuta would come down in a thunder cloud to punish him.” Roth (1902: 51) wrote of the tribes around Koombana Bay, Wellington, in Western Australia, that hunters

“were very self-sacrificing; it was well that such was the case indeed, because an individual might be lucky in hunting on the one day, and yet be unsuccessful on the morrow”.

Many of the myths of the Australian Aborigines centre upon the punishments which follow from the crime of eating one's own kill. Very often it is the “spirit” of the abused animal species – often connected in some way with the Rainbow – which inflicts the punishment.

Berndt and Berndt (1970: 44) report a story from the Gunwinggu of North Australia in which “one man in a group travelling south near Nimbuwa killed a small rock wallaby and ate it secretly by himself, but its sizzling attracted the Rainbow, who swallowed him and his companions as well”. In a myth of another Arnhem Land tribe, the Birrikilli (Robinson 1988: 117—120), a man and his son keep killing and eating turtles, cooking the flesh on a fire of their own on the beach. However, the spirit of Garun the Turtle awaits revenge. The myth ends with the burning of the two men as the Great Mother of Turtles tells them: “You came here to kill my spirit. My spirit has killed you now.” The men had come to cook turtle-flesh but had themselves been cooked instead. An equally appropriate punishment features in a myth of the Kuppapoingo, who tell the story of a man called Kunji, who used to eat his own fish. His punishment was to be speared from behind, the spear-tip running through his body and protruding from his mouth, transforming him through death into a jabi-roo bird with a long bill, enabling him to spear and eat fish to his heart's content (Robinson 1966: 162-3). Often, a man who eats his own kills is regarded as incapable of self-control – and, in particular, as having an uncontrollable and ridiculous penis. In an Aranda myth (Róheim 1974: 233-4) a man uses his penis to spear rats for him, which he then eats himself. One day his penis is searching for meat in a hole in the ground when it is bitten by several snakes and the man dies.

From South West Victoria comes the story of Wirtpa Mit, a man whose name means “selfish”. It is worth quoting at length because the ethnographer gives not only the myth but also an invaluable account of the “own kill” rule which lies behind it:

“There are strict rules regulating the distribution of food. When a hunter brings game to the camp he gives up all claim to it, and must stand aside and allow the best portions to be given away, and content himself with the worst. If he has a brother present, the brother is treated in the same way, and helps the killer of the game to eat the poor pieces, which are thrown to them, such as the forequarters and ribs of the kangaroos, opossums, and small quadrupeds, and the backbones of birds” (Dawson 1881: 22-3)

Interestingly, the Aborigines consciously formulated this as a rule of exchange:

“The narrator of ibis custom mentioned that when he was very young he used to grumble because his father gave away all the best pieces of birds and quadrupeds, and the finest eels, but he was told that it was a rule and must be observed. This custom is called yuurka baawhaar, meaning ‘exchange’...”

As usual in Australia, mythology acts (among its many other modes and functions) as a charter for the rule. To “show the strict observance of it, and the punishment for its infringement”, continues Dawson (1881: 22—3)

“they tell a story of a mean fellow named Wirtpa Mit, signifying ‘selfish’, who lived on kangaroos, which were very scarce in those days. When he killed one he ate it all himself, and would not give away a morsel. This conduct so displeased his friends that they resolved to punish him, but as it was difficult to do so without infringing the laws of the tribe, they dug a deep pit and covered it over with branches and grass....”

There follows a long drawn-out account of the trapping and killing of Wirtpa Mit, who ate his own kangaroos until, appropriately, he was himself caught in a kangaroo trap.

So many Australian Aboriginal myth-systems centre upon animals, animal spirits and the “own kill” rule that it might even seem easier to cite exceptions than list examples. Yet, although anthropologists have often noted myths which are about the morality of reciprocity and the unacceptability of greediness the “own kill” rule as a rule of exchange has almost never been seen.



One of the better-known myth-analyses in social anthropology is Radcliffe-Brown's treatment of a Western Australian myth about Eaglehawk and Crow:

"Eaglehawk told his nephew to go and hunt wallaby. Crow, having killed a wallaby, ate it himself, an extremely reprehensible action in terms of native morality. On his return to the camp his uncle asked him what he had brought, and Crow, being a liar, said that he had succeeded in getting nothing" (Radcliffe-Brown 1960: 96).

Crow is forced to regurgitate the meat as Eaglehawk tickles his throat. In the recounting of this myth, Radcliffe-Brown's statement that eating one's own kill is "an entirely reprehensible action" occurs as an aside and is not elaborated upon or mentioned again. Radcliffe-Brown gives an interpretation of the myth in terms of an abstract principle of dialectical unity and opposition quite independent of the "own kill" principle or any other principle of material exchange. Yet "Eaglehawk and Crow" myths, of which the above is merely one version out of a multitude which have been recorded, simply cannot be understood without knowing that, to the Aborigines, ravens or crows are distinguished by the fact that they follow eagles, mob them and take their kills, a kind of "forced exchange" of game between the two birds being the result (Blows 1975: 26-7).

Turning now from ritual and mythology to everyday life, Fison and Howitt (1880: 261-3) described the rules according to which Kurnai hunters had to distribute their catch. The following is a summary of the procedures:

Kangaroo. A man kills a kangaroo, accompanied by two companions. The only parts they may cook and eat on the spot are the entrails. Most of the remainder is shared between the hunter's own parents and his wife's parents. If the hunter has nothing to eat, he may keep a little, or receive some back from his wife's parents the following day.

Black Wallaby. The hunter keeps nothing, all of the meat being given to the two sets of parents.

Wombat. "All of the animal is sent to the wife's parents, being regarded as the best of food. The wife's father distributes it to the whole camp, but he does not give any to the hunter, who is supposed to have eaten of the entrails in the bush, and therefore not to be hungry."

Native Bear. All given to the two sets of parents.

Swan. If one or two are killed, they are given to the two sets of parents, the wife's parents being put first. Only if several have been killed may the hunter himself keep some.

Conger Eel. All given to the wife's parents.

"In all cases", as Fison and Howitt (1880: 281-3) remark, "the largest and the best of the food is sent to the wife's parents."

Spencer and Gillen (1899: 489-71) found similar rules among the Aranda. A hunter was (a) obliged to surrender his kills (or large parts of them) to his wife's relatives and (b) was prohibited from eating with these people himself. If a man were to be seen by his wife's kin eating with them "the food would disagree with him, and he would sicken and suffer severely..." Each hunter was particularly prohibited from eating his own kills during his wife's pregnancy, although in this period there was "nothing to prevent the man from eating game which has been killed by other men."

In a slightly different vein, Warner (1957: 128) found a form of the "own kill" rule among the Murngin. His description concerns, in principle, "all the animals a male kills until he has a baby":

"The bones of the animal or bird are painted with red ocher. If a boy kills a turkey or other large bird, he does not pick it up but leaves it, returns to the camp and tells some old man.... If a young man finds a porcupine (echidna), he will not kill it but goes to tell an old man of his find. If it is killed, he cannot eat it."

In the Ooldea region (western South Australia), Berndt and Berndt (1945: 224) reported that "the man's gift (or obligation) of meat to his wife's parents (tabu to him) is taken by the woman herself." She then passes it on to her mother, who is particularly to be avoided by the hunter.

Still more recently, McKnight (1975: 77) noted the Wik-Mungkan term *ngaintja*, meaning "taboo" or "forbidden". It applies to anything which is "stepped over" by one's mother-in-law or other affinal ("wife-giving") relative. For example, if some meat which a man has hunted is stepped over by his mother-in-law, this makes the meat "ngaintja" to him (the animal's blood becoming in some way suggestive of the tabooed menstrual blood of the mother-in-law and other women – p. 85).

The role of in-laws in the above avoidances will have been noted. Throughout Australia, it was long ago observed that in-law avoidances – particularly of

the wife's mother – were among the severest of taboos imposed upon men (1938: 149). It seems important to realize that the taboo on a hunter's in-laws ensured that his meat – the very food which it is his duty to provide for them in bride-service – became thereby inaccessible to him. In other words, in-law taboos were inseparable from the “own kill” principle already discussed: they implied that although a man had to provide game for his in-laws, he could not share meals with them, and therefore could not eat this game which he had killed (“produced”) himself. Malinowski (1913: 290) called this the “custom of a communistic division of game”, adding that “these duties are a sort of continuation or equivalent of the bride-price, of which we find traces in Australia.”

In recent years, the “own kill” rule in Australia has continued to be noted, but still (with the exception of Testart 1985) not as a concept central to theoretical analysis. Goodale (1959: 122) gives the following example of the rule among the Tiwi:

“The very act of cooking distributes the food to others beside the hunter and his or her spouse... Under most circumstances the hunter is not alone and gathers with his companions in some designated area where they cook their food together. At such time it is against custom for the hunter to cook what he has obtained; he must give it to another. The hunter is considered the ‘boss’ and the other, naturally is called the ‘cook’. In the case of an animal catch, the boss always receives the forequarters and brisket and the cook gets the tail.”

Actually the choice of a cook depends on who first yells, ‘That’s my tail’:

“The first to call must always cook the food. The second one who calls out, claims the head, and the third claims a leg. This order is invariable.”

All this, however, is “a preliminary distribution only”. Once each man has gained his piece, he is then “obliged” to give food to a whole series of persons in an invariant order defined by their relationship to him within the kinship system (Goodale 1959: 122-3).

Gould (1981: 435), likewise, writing of the Western Desert Aborigines, notes that “food-sharing relationships are too important to be left to whim or sentiment”. For example:

“When a group of men hunts a kangaroo or other large animal, the man who kills the animal is the last to share, and he sometimes receives only the innards.”

Gould (1969: 17) notes elsewhere that certain kinds of kin, “such as fathers in-law and brothers-in-law, have first choice from among the portions”, and comments that although at first glance “this system of sharing seems unfair to the hunter”, in fact the hunter is recompensed (a) by the prestige which his gift-giving creates and (b) by his own obtaining of meat “when, according to the same set of rules, he takes his share from someone else’s catch”.

Yengoyan (1972: 91) in a similar vein writes of the Pitjandjara that the rule is an effective mechanism for redistribution:

“Thus, for example, individuals who are the least productive – old men, old women, nursing mothers, pregnant females, young children – always have access to the full range of foods. It is the middle range, the males who are most productive, who are usually cut out. Thus, for example, when a male gets a kangaroo and brings it in, the animal, after it has been cooked is divided out to all according to kinship ties, and the oldest males get the best parts, etc. What you commonly find is that the hunter gets virtually nothing.”

Similar rules were, in fact, almost certainly universal in Australia up until European contact. Yet they were apparently never conceptualised as rules of exchange. Even the discovery by Dawson (1881: 22) that in south-west Australia the own kill rule was “called yuurka baawhaar, meaning ‘exchange’” was a clue which went unnoticed.

### **The own kill rule in Papua New Guinea**

Turning to Papua New Guinea, the Mbowamb (Strathern and Strathern 1968: 190 91) believe all game animals to be “owned” by wild spirits. A hunter who kills several marsupials in a single nocturnal hunt is believed to have been specially favoured by these spirits and by his own ancestors, to whom he must make a return offering of pig-meat to avoid bad luck in the future. Similar ideas about pigs and game animals are very widespread. Usually the idea seems to be that one’s own kill may be eaten – provided some apology, atonement or return offering is made. Yet in other cases, the rules are more strict.

In the case of the Arapesh, Mead (1935: 29) writes:

“The ideal distribution of food is for each person to eat food grown by another, eat game killed by another, eat pork from pigs that not only are not his own but have been fed by people at such a distance that their very names are unknown... The lowest man in the community, the man who is believed to be so far outside the moral pale that there is no use reasoning with him, is the man who eats his own kill – even though that kill be a tiny bird, hardly a mouthful in all.”

For a man even to eat game which he had seen alive would be to risk bad hunting luck – “Don’t eat game you have spied, for fear you will see no more” (p. 449). Mead also mentions “The universal taboo that one may not eat the animal for whose capture or growth one knows the magic” (p. 412). She also notes (Mead 1941: 352) that “the taboo upon eating one’s own kill is equated with incest”. Own kin and own produce are equally for others to enjoy. “The native line of thought”, as Mead (1935: 83-4) explains, “is that you teach people how to behave about yams and pigs by referring to the way that they know they behave about their female relatives”.

It would be tedious to detail other Papua New Guinea cultures with similar rules. By way of a brief survey, the following may suffice. Among the Mundugumor “A hunter may not eat his own kill or it will spoil his magic” (Mead 1947: 218n). The Gnau refuse to eat their own kills because in killing a game animal, a hunter puts “his own blood” into it, a basic rule being that people “should never eat their own blood” (Lewis 1980: 174). The Umeda have a rule that a hunter “cannot eat any part of the animal he has killed – a kind of incest taboo on meat” (Gell 1975: 109). Among the Siane, the idea of eating one’s own pig “is treated with the same distaste and horror as is expressed at the idea of cannibalism” (Salisbury 1962: 65). In the Tor Territory “The hunter who has killed a boar must divide it amongst the villagers, but he is not allowed to eat any of it” (Rubel and Rosman 1978: 13, citing Oosterveld 1961: 65). In the case of the Iatmul: “One cannot eat one’s own pig, or cassowary and wild pig caught in the bush” (Rubel and Rosman 1978: 45). Likewise, with the Northern Abelam: “A man cannot eat the pigs he himself has raised, nor can he eat wild pigs or cassowary he has killed in the bush” (Rubel and Rosman 1978: 61). The rule about pigs also applies to the Wogeo, Keraki, Banaro and many other groups. Rubel and Rosman (1978: 287) are among the few writers to have

made the “own produce” rule central to their analysis of social structure in the area. They argue persuasively that “own sister” and “own pig” rules in Papua New Guinea represent merely two aspects of a unitary principle of give-and-take whose institutional outcome is “a dual organization in which like is exchanged for like”. Other structures – they argue – are elaborations derived from this simple starting-point.

### **The own kill rule in Africa**

Bleek and Lloyd (1911: 274-5) recorded the following specimen of southern African “Bushman folklore”.

The old people, says a young hunter,

do not allow us to take hold of springbok's meat with our hands, because our hands, with which we held the bow and the arrow, are those with which we are taking hold of the thing's flesh...”

The man who has killed an animal is carefully kept from it:

“they do not allow him to carry the springbok; they let him sit down at a little distance, while he is not near to the place where the people are cutting up the springbok. For he sits at a little distance, because he fears lest he should smell the scent of the springbok's viscera...”

Schapera (1930: 306) cites an early report that a Khoi-Khoi hunter could not eat his own kill of an elephant, rhinoceros, or hippopotamus: if he wanted meat following such an occasion, it had to be that of a sheep or goat. The Heikum Bushman hunter was permitted a few strictly-specified parts of the animal he shot with a poison arrow, but the rest was tabooed on pain of his losing his hunting luck. Even the permitted parts were tabooed until a whole series of rituals had been performed (Schapera 1930: 98-99). More recently, it has been said of the !Kung: “The society seems to want to extinguish in every way possible the concept of the meat belonging to the hunter” (Marshall 1961: 238).

Evans-Pritchard (1974: 58) cites a Central African (Azande) anecdote concerning a woman who complains of her husband: “That man, that man, he is not a human being, he behaves just like a dog... – he goes and kills a beast and keeps it entirely for himself.” It is made quite clear by the Azande themselves (p. 145) that a normal man's kills are the property of his wife; Evans-Pritchard makes no comment on the matter.

In West Africa, Rattray (1927: 184) noted that many game animals were considered by the Ashanti to have a dangerous *sasa* or soul, adding that a “hunter who kills a *sasa* animal may not himself eat its meat.” However, this information was given the prominence only of a one-line footnote. Nothing more on the subject was said, and it seems pure chance that the existence of the rule among the Ashanti was recorded at all. Yet Rattray’s Ashanti material provides an excellent picture of the links between the “own kill” rule and the rule of matrilineal clan-exogamy (defined as the prohibition against “the eating up of one’s own blood” – Rattray 1929: 303). Subsequent writers on the Ashanti have not mentioned the “own kill” rule at all, no doubt in part because of the disappearance of hunting as an important economic activity in most areas.

### **The own kill rule in South America**

The last area to be considered here is South America. Baldus (1952) seems to have been one of the very few anthropologists from any region to have noticed the rule as a cross-cultural phenomenon and to have attempted a distribution-survey. Citing various sources, he writes of its existence in eastern and southern Brazil:

“The custom of the hunter’s not eating the game he kills was found, in 1814, among the Puri of Minas Gerais. In the twentieth century it was observed among the Kaingang of Sao Paulo, among the so-called Botocudos of Santa Catarina, also known by the names Kaingang, Awelkoma, Shokren, and Shokleng, and, finally, among the Kraho of Goyaz

Baldus notes that “These four tribes have significant cultural traits in common, which distinguish them radically from other linguistic families in Brazil,” They have a “typical hunter culture” and, to his knowledge, are the only tribes in Brazil to hold to the custom. Elsewhere in South America, Baldus finds only one example: that of the Siriono of eastern Bolivia – who also have “a typical hunter culture”.

Baldus, then, notes the “own kill” rule as a cross-cultural phenomenon limited in its distribution and described by one writer as “a strange custom conducive to sociability”. In seeking an explanation, he notes that the Kraho believe in a “supernatural” relationship with the animal which a hunter kills. This relationship is described – in native terms – by saying that

“the ‘strength’ of the hunter is going with the arrow or the lance like his ‘blood’ entering the animal. This would cause such weakness in a young person that the spirit of the animal could easily take possession of the spirit of the hunter and destroy it if the abstention from eating the meat and ritualistic treatment were not applied to the killer” (Baldus 1952: 197).

On the basis of this and similar evidence, Baldus concludes that the rule has no economic significance but is to be explained by reference to “another aspect of culture” – namely, the “aspect relative to the supernatural”. The lives or bodies of animals are respected because the creatures are believed to talk like humans and to have souls. Religious belief, in other words, is treated as the source of the rule.

Apart from Baldus, the only other writer to have focused upon the own kill rule in South America is Clastres, who worked among the Guayaki of eastern Paraguay. The Guayaki, writes Clastres (1972: 168-70), are “hunters par excellence”. They observe

“a food taboo which dictates that a hunter cannot eat his own take from the hunt. Neither he nor his parents are allowed to eat the meat he brings into camp...”

If a hunter were to eat his own kill “he would have bad luck in hunting”, a condition known as *pane*:

“This is the worst thing that can happen to a Guayaki, since to be *pane* is to be incapable of feeding one’s family, of giving to others, and therefore, of receiving. It is consequently to be incapable of feeding oneself. The fear of *pane* is a veritable anguish, and one scrupulously avoids taking any risk that might cause it. On the contrary, the Guayaki unceasingly dwell, as if to ward off that always possible evil, on their hunting exploits, on their *pana* (which means *pane-ia*, “bad luck not”). For a woman, the ideal husband is a *pana* man, and every young boy aspires to become a great hunter, a *pana*, a man of good luck...”

Clastres seems to have been the only anthropologist in South America to have treated the own kill rule as more than a fascinating custom or curiosity. In his account it becomes central to the analysis of the culture:

“It will be seen, in effect, that the social life of the Guayaki is organized around this taboo...”

Clastres sees the taboo as functional in terms of exchange. The hunter surrenders his kill. But in this case,



“...what is he himself going to eat if he cannot touch his own meat? It is precisely here that the counterpart of the gift, the compensation of the food taboo, enters into play. This is where the exchange of goods occurs. All the hunters are in the same situation; all of them must make a gift of the fruits of their hunt to the band. In other words, each hunter gives his game to others, but, in return, the others offer their own game to him. Each Guayaki is therefore permanently a potential giver and receiver. When he gives away his own meat, he knows he can count on the meat of his comrades, because the same obligation of giving away the meat falls on all the hunters without exception....”

In a conclusion clearly modelled on Lévi-Strauss's (1969) treatment of the incest-taboo, Clastres writes:

“Thus, one can speak of a fundamental law of the Guayaki society, articulated in a food taboo, which requires every hunter to include his game in the cycle of food circulation.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Within the perspective of this thesis' central argument, Clastres' contribution marks a significant step forward. However, Clastres treats the Guayaki own kill rule in terms specific to that culture, not citing Baldus or others in connection with it. In fact, however, the “own kill” rule in South America is so widespread as to suggest its universality as a point of departure from which varying traditions have been derived. We may begin a more general survey in the Amazonian rain-forest, with the Yanomami:

“Generosity is considered an essential prerequisite for success in hunting. Hunters do not eat the meat of game they have killed themselves, for any man who does so will, the Yanomami believe, be deserted by the hawk spirit which must enter him if he is to thrive In the chase. If they are hunting with other men, they will not even carry their own kills back to the yano, but will give them away to someone else at once. When the group returns to the yano, the recipient will then distribute the meat to his own network of relatives. The original hunter will not go hungry, however, for the man to whom he gave his kill will generally reciprocate by offering in return his own bag” (Hanbury-Tenison 1982: 95).

Secondly, the Bororo of central Brazil:

“Among the Bororo the hunter never roasts the meat he has shot himself, but gets someone else to do it for him. Failure to observe this taboo, as well as failure to carry out the propitiatory ceremony (the so-called ‘blessing’), causes the vengeful animal spirit to send sickness and death to the hunter and all those who eat of its flesh” (Zerries 1968: 272, citing Steinen 1894: 491).

Baldus (1952: 198n) writes that the own kill rule studied in his paper “has nothing to do with the custom of the Bororo giving to another fellow the game of certain species killed by himself in order that this man may carry the dead animal and prepare it for eating”, since among the Bororo “the killer isn’t excluded from the distribution of the meat supplied by himself”. Lévi-Strauss (1977, 1: 109) notes that before a large game animal could be eaten by anybody, the shaman had to consecrate it with a special ritual of biting and shrieking lasting several hours. It was the firm belief of the Bororo that should anyone touch unconsecrated meat (or maize), he and his entire tribe would perish.

Crocker (1985) provides some more recent information on the Bororo, including the fact that many game animals are termed *bope* creatures – which means that they belong to spirits which are also responsible for menstruation, the waxing and waning of the moon, eclipses and floods. These animals are the “best” food, but their flesh – like the sexually-desirable yet often-dangerous flesh of women has to be approached with great care and respect:

‘If a large bope animal is killed far from the village, the successful hunter cannot cut it up into pieces to facilitate transportation.... He must transport it to a shaman, or one must come out to where it was killed.’

The bope animals (which include tapir, capivara and deer) are usually taken in ritual, collective hunts; when the game is brought back “it is first given to the bope through the shaman.” Great care has to be taken not to consume the blood (in fact, meat of all kinds “is thoroughly boiled to the point of tastelessness to ensure that the slightest trace of blood is removed” – pp. 41-2). Although it is not said that a hunter’s direct appropriation of his own kill would be like incest, moiety-exogamy is nevertheless involved; Crocker (1985: 166) comments that the meat-transactions which follow from a collective hunt may be regarded “as an elaborate metaphoric parallel to the exchange of feminine sexuality between the moieties.”

Among the Urubu (at the south-eastern limit of the Amazonian basin), “...the man who kills an animal leaves the cutting up to one of his companions...” (Huxley 1957: 78). Food is “something which has to be shared”:

“Whatever game a man kills, he should only keep the head and the spine for himself, and give away the rest. The best pieces he gives to his nearest relatives, his brothers, his parents-in-law, especially to his brothers-in-law, and if there is anything left over the others in the village get it” (Huxley 1957: 85—6).

Usually, a man's wife or some other woman is the agent through whom the hunter is separated from his kill:

“The man who kills a deer may not bring it into the village himself. He lays down the *pera* containing the meat at the edge of the clearing, and sends his wife to get it or, if he has no wife, another woman, or even a man who has not been hunting that day.”

A hunter who brought his own game into the village would be punished with a terrible fever and become *kau*, crazy (Huxley 1957: 83—4).

Rules of the above kind – preventing a man from fetching his kills beyond a certain point – are strict in numerous hunter-cultures, and illustrate the manner in which sexual boundaries mapped out spatially function in support of the own kill rule. The Desana (a subgroup of the Tukano, in the Vaupés region of the Colombian Northwest Amazon) provide an example:

“When returning from the forest, the hunter deposits the dead animal near the entrance of the *maloca*, and it is then taken in by the women; if the hunt took place in a site accessible only by river, he leaves the dead animal in his canoe at the landing and goes to the *maloca* to tell the women. Under no circumstances should the man carry the animal into the *maloca*, whether this is represented by the door of the dwelling or the canoe at the landing: both form a threshold, a limit between two spheres of activities, that must be very strictly observed. To this point, but no further, can the hunter act; once this threshold is crossed, the prey enters the feminine sphere where it will be transformed into food” (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1966: 231).

Although a taboo on own kills is not explicit in the ethnography, the Desana provide a particularly interesting case of the interconnections between sexual avoidances and rules concerning the hunt. “It can be said”, according to Reichel-Dolmatoff (1969: 67), “that the law of exogamy refers not only to society but also to its symbolic complement, the animals”. Men's avoidances of human female flesh and their avoidances of animal flesh are aspects of one and the same unitary logic of exchange.

We may turn, now, to the Trio of northern Brazil and southern Surinam:

“A married man does not keep the game he brings home, or at least not all of it, and often none of it. The husband gives it to his wife who, in turn, hands it over to her parents or brother.... Normally, at a communal meal, a man does not eat meat which he himself has killed .... [initial transfer of meat] is almost always between affines (Rivière 1969: 214, 214n, 220).

In the case of the Waiwai, along the frontiers of Guiana and Brazil;

“My main informant, Ewka, told me that when he was quite a young man neither his mother nor he ever ate any of the meat, apart from tapir flesh, that he himself had killed. They ate all kinds of meat obtained by others, but believed that he would lose his aim if he consumed his own bag. The basis for this idea is probably the belief in the reincarnation of certain animals and in the yin concept” (Fock 1963; 121).

Once again, then, the own kill rule is explained as resulting from religious or metaphysical ideas – when, of course, it is precisely the belief-system (inseparable from the rule) which itself needs to be explained. It is worth noting that among the Waiwai, the own kill rule applies to hunting-dogs as well as humans – if dogs were to be allowed to eat their own kills, their hunting-abilities would be destroyed (p. 122).

Among the Kraho (eastern highlands of Brazil), the mythical culture-hero Kenkunan

“teaches respect for the taboos on which a successful hunt depends. The hunter must not eat the game he himself has killed or, if he eats it, he must at least postpone the act of consumption in two ways which are complementary to each other: in time, by allowing the meat to become cold; and in space, by taking care not to grasp it with his naked hands, but to pick it up on the pointed end of a stick (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 145, citing Schultz 1950: 108).

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### **Negative instances and the origin of “totemism”**

Some examples of the own kill rule from around the world have been presented. Many other instances could be cited. However, it is not the intention here to amass instances as if this in itself were sufficient to prove anything. A search for negative instances – cases in which hunters do eat their own kills – would also uncover numerous examples, probably for all continents and regions.

The own kill rule in the broadest sense may be defined as any restriction upon a hunter's right or expectation to consume the meat of an animal which he himself has killed. In this sense, the rule can probably be regarded as universal. In virtually all traditional cultures, some such restrictions are at least theoretically supposed to apply to certain species when hunted by certain categories of hunters at certain times. Even if they apply only to a youth's first kill, to the first kill in a given season, to kills made for a special ceremony or occasion, or to kills of only one or more specified species of game, the own kill principle may still be said to be acknowledged on some level.

Nonetheless, the corollary is that avoiding one's own kill is not in all cultures applied to all species by all hunters at all times. Hunters on occasion evade their societies' rules; there are often species (for example, "small animals") to which the rule does not apply, or categories of humans (for example, "older" or "initiated" men) exempted from observing it. In some cultures, hunters may even eat their own kills as a matter of course. Two African examples will illustrate this.

Firstly, in the case of the Hadza, "Men most often return from the bush empty-handed but with their hunger satisfied" (Woodburn 1968: 53). Here, mechanisms ensuring female access to meat appear weak almost to the point of non existence. Certainly as regards "any small animal he kills", a man on his own will normally light a fire, cook and then eat on the spot whatever he has hunted. Only after he has satisfied his own hunger "will he bring meat back to camp and, even then, a small animal is as likely to be eaten by the men as by the women and children." Secondly, among the Ndembu,

"...hunters often conceal from their fellow villagers that they have made a kill, pleading dolefully that they have had no luck. Meanwhile, they have divided the meat secretly among the members of their elementary family" (Turner 1967: 286).

However, the negative logic is as interesting as the positive, for both tendencies are involved in producing the ethnographic record as it is actually found. It is in this context that we can most usefully understand "totemism", "rites of atonement", "hunters' taboos" and related phenomena. All of these can be seen as the compromise products of two pressures – one towards respecting

the own kill rule as something general and absolute, the other towards disengaging it from the economic realm and restricting its scope until its material consequences approach vanishing-point. Each kind of pressure is concerned with the own kill norm, one in upholding it, the other in evading or denying it; in understanding the institutional embodiments of each logic, the rule as base-line is equally essential to grasp.

It will now be shown that in at least some cases, what used to be termed “totemism” is clearly a residue left when a more generalized own kill rule (linked with exogamic taboos) has become systematically evaded on the level of everyday economic practice, whilst becoming attached on another level to one or more specific categories of game.

\* \* \* \* \*

Among the many possible methods of evading or lessening the rigours of the own kill rule, the following rationalisations are often met with. We find hunters arguing that

1. The strict rule applies to “large” animals only;
2. It applies to a particular species only;
3. It applies to particular species, differing according to one's lineage or clan;
4. It applies to ‘first’ kills only (the first in a given season, the first of a given species, a young hunter's first kill of any kind etc.);
5. It applies only to hunters whose wives are in a ritually-dangerous condition (menstruating, pregnant, suckling etc.);
6. “Older” or “initiated” or “privileged” men need not observe the rule;
7. Own kills can be eaten provided it is without secrecy, or provided the meat has been handed over for sharing among others first;
8. Own kills can be eaten provided a return offering of some kind is made;
9. Own kills can be eaten provided an apology is first made to the animal concerned;

10. Own kills can be eaten provided other men can be blamed for the killing;
11. Own kills can be eaten provided the animal is not killed brutally, or provided action is taken to ensure restitution, soul-immortality or future reproductivity of the species.
12. Own kills can be eaten, provided the killing is in the service of a higher being, who eats or consumes the “essence” of the animal.

In the materials discussed already, many of these stratagems have already been touched upon. In what follows, we will discuss their bearing on some remaining examples of hunters' avoidances and beliefs. The extent of departure from previous interpretations of such phenomena must be stressed. Instead of assuming killing-and-eating as the base-line position, as a consequence of which it then becomes necessary to produce a multitude of separate theories to account for different categories of observances (“sacrifice”, “totemism”, “atonement rites” etc.), a base-line of thoroughgoing “sacrifice” or “totemic” avoidance – namely, the own kill rule as applicable to all game at all times – is assumed. The problem then becomes that of explaining how and why the strict rule becomes attenuated in different cultures in different ways. The novelty of this approach is not that it claims to solve all problems. There remains the substantive problem of relating each particular observance to its function or functions in the context of the economic, social, technological, ecological etc. circumstances of each culture. What can be claimed for the methodology is that it clears the ground for such a task. It takes us beyond definitions of supposedly-separate, all-too-often reified categories (“totemism”, “sacrifice” etc.), showing instead that an extremely wide spectrum of beliefs and observances are systematically interconnected variations on a theme.

We may note, to begin with, that it is with respect to large animals that guilt-feelings about evading the own kill rule are most likely to arise. This seems intuitively understandable: the larger the animal, the greater the range of relatives who “ought” to be invited to share in the meat, and consequently the greater the scale of potential social disapproval for any private or narrow family appropriation of the food. “Large” animals, then, (according to this logic) have the more powerful “souls”. Although this is certainly not the

only possible logic (other lines of argument could produce a variety of results), it is certainly a common one.

### **The Bear Cult**

From Lapland across Siberia to the Bering Strait, and from there to virtually the whole of Canada and much of the northern United States, it was above all the bear which came into the category of a “large” animal demanding hunters’ respect. In North America an address of pardon or apology to the bear was reported for the ) Montagnais-Naskapi, Malecite, St. Francis Abenaki, Eastern Cree, Northern Saulteaux, Tête de Boule, Ottawa, Menomini, Sauk, Fox, Ojibwa and many others (Hallowell 1926: 55—6).

In the case of a Menomini hunter, the bear was told that the “killing was accidental or else that he must forgive him this one offense for his poor family is starving” (Hallowell 1926: 55). The Plains Ojibwa hunter promised the spirit of the beast a return gift of maple sugar or berries. Among the Eastern Cree and Northern Saulteaux, a hunter explained that nothing but hunger drove him to such abuse of the bear and “begs the animal not to be offended”, nor ‘permit the spirits of other bears to be angry’. A St. Francis Abenaki hunter explained: “I killed you because I need your skin for my coat, and your flesh so that I can eat, because I have nothing to live on” (Hallowell 1926: 55).

Note how in these statements the hunter’s material need is emphasised; it is clear that the killers intend eating or utilising the flesh themselves. It is equally noteworthy that this seems not to have been remarked upon before. Among the many authorities cited by Hallowell (1926) in connection with the “bear-cult”, not one notes as a “fact” the evidence that hunters are eating their own kills. It is not the initial materially self-interested motivation for killing, but the apologies, the anxieties and the attempts to make recompense for such motivation which are thought to be remarkable and to require special explanation.

If the killing of a bear can be blamed on someone else, then of course the meat can safely be eaten – the own kill rule is supposedly being upheld. One is eating meat which someone else has killed. While there can be offered no



strict proof that this is the explanation for certain aspects of the bear cult, the evidence is suggestive. Czaplicka (quoted in Hallowell 1926: 57) gives this as typical of a Siberian hunter's apology to a bear:

"It was not I, grandfather; It was the Russians (i.e. any European) who have killed you through me. I am grieved, I am truly grieved. Be not angry with me."

The Koryak, Kamchadal and Yukaghir made similar pleas, the latter placing the blame upon the Yakut or the elk, the others blaming the Russians. The Yakuts, having killed a bear and blamed the deed on foreigners, felt predictably free to eat the meat. But even during the feast they continued to make excuses and denials:

"While eating the bear the guests 'apostrophize the ghost.' 'No,' say they, 'don't believe us capable of having perpetrated such a murder. Among us, poor Yacoutes, the art of making guns and deadly balls is unknown. They are either some Russian's or Tungouse's who have done the evil deed.' As it is customary with them to preserve the bones, they go on to say 'Far from being murderers, it is, on the contrary, we who gather together here the bones of this bear killed by others'" (Hallowell 1926: 58n, quoting Galitzin 1854).

The Kamchadals made accusations against the Russians when they had finished their meal, requesting the beast to take vengeance upon them. Among the Ostyaks, similar accusations were made (Ides 1706: 21, quoted in Hallowell 1926: 58n). It should be noted that many of these customs applied to all large animals, the bear being only the first among equals in this respect. That is, in the case of many large animals, hunters killed and ate their own flesh, blaming the kills meanwhile on someone else.

One theoretical possibility, then, is that a hunter, in breaking the own kill rule, might ease his conscience by denying that it was really he who killed the animal in the first place. An alternative theoretical possibility immediately comes to mind. The hunter can deny that the animal is really killed at all.

It is in this context that we may appreciate the ideological functionality of the belief in animal "souls". Once this belief has been constructed, the hunter can argue that the meat which is eaten is only peripheral to the animal, its essential life and essence remaining intact. What appear to be expressions of

this logic are or were extremely widespread. In particular, the respectful treatment of each animal's most "enduring" parts (bones, skull etc.) or most "essential" life-fluids (often the blood) was apparently felt to constitute nourishment or protection of the creature's spiritual essence, mitigating the act of killing involved in the hunt. The own kill rule only prohibits eating an animal one has killed. If the animal is not really killed at all – if, on the contrary, through ritual means animals of the species have been given new life – then ill-luck should not follow upon eating the flesh.

It may be in this light that we can most profitably re-examine much of the material gathered by Frazer in *The Golden Bough* under the heading "spirits of the wild". For example, many of the Minnetaree Indians "believe that the bones of those bisons which they have slain and divested of flesh rise again clothed with renewed flesh, and quickened with life, and become fat, and fit for slaughter the succeeding June".

Hence on the western prairies of America, the skulls of buffaloes were seen arranged in circles and symmetrical piles, awaiting resurrection (Brinton 1876: 278; quoted in Fraser 1912, 5, 2: 256). It is tempting to suppose that these Indians were killing and eating their own bison, the skull-offerings and reincarnation-beliefs serving to dispel any traditionally-consequent guilt and fear.

In a comparable manner, the following Eskimo myth can be interpreted as expressing the need to believe that game animals which are to be eaten have been killed and yet not killed:

"The seals and whales live in the salt water, and are therefore continually thirsty. They have no means of getting fresh water, except to come to men for it. A seal will therefore allow himself to be killed by the hunter who will give him a drink of water in return: that is why a dipperful of water is always poured into the mouth of a seal when he is brought ashore. If a hunter neglects to do this, all the other seals know about it, and no other seal will ever allow himself to be killed by that hunter, because he knows he is not going to get a drink" (Steffanson 1913: 56 sq., quoted in Fraser 1936: 414).

A naive questioner might ask a series of questions. Why should a dead animal need to drink water? Why should sea animals be short of water at all? What

happens to the seals which humans do not kill – do they die of thirst?

Frazer's presentation invites us to ask questions of this kind, deriving amusement from the quaint innocence of primitives such as these. Most of us now realize, of course, that amused questions of this kind would be misplaced. The Eskimos, in this case certainly, are not nearly as foolish as they are portrayed. In fact – provided only that we assume the own kill rule as our point of departure – the myth as an ideological rationalisation of self-interest becomes all-too-intelligible. The seals have to be killed and eaten: this is the whole point of the exercise, since the hunters need food for themselves. Yet the own kill rule is acknowledged on some level as a traditional norm, breach of which will bring bad hunting luck. Consequently, unless the seals can be stated to be “not really dead”, guilt and fear over the killing-and-eating will be the traditionally-sanctioned response. So an elaborate ritual is invented. To prove that the seals are alive from the moment of their killing, they are given nourishment. We may suppose, however, that solid food of the kind humans enjoy would be missed by the Eskimos if it were thrown into the water for the seal-spirits. So a cheaper solution is found: the dead seals are only given water. The final touch is a mythological belief to justify this gesture, which might otherwise seem less than generous. It is argued that fresh water is scarce in the sea, and that this is what the seal-spirits really need.

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It was stated above that one method of lessening the rigours of the own kill rule is to limit application of the strict rule to certain species. Within this, however, there are various possibilities. Three choices stand out. Firstly, the species or set of species can differ according to whether the hunter belongs to one lineage or clan within the community or another. Secondly, the species can differ according to whether the hunter is old or young, initiated or uninitiated. Thirdly, the set of species can be the same, or roughly the same, for the entire community. In what follows, an example of each choice will be presented; it will be shown that the results account for a representative sample of what have been described as “totemic” avoidances among hunter gatherers.

To begin with, let us take the case of a community divided into exogamous clans, each of which applies the strict own kill rule only to a specific set of species characteristic of that clan. One clan would then apply the rule to one species (or set of species), another to another and so on. If this were the process through which totemism in a given region had evolved, we might predict that the members of a clan might eat their totem-animals provided they had not been responsible for the killing, or kill their totem-animals provided this was not for the purpose of eating the meat. An Australian example of “totemism” will now be presented which meets this expectation.

### **Australian totemism as exchange**

In the course of a discussion on “the problem of the relation between so-called totemism and sacrifice”, Lévi-Strauss (1966: 223-228) mentions a form of totemism which gives expression to a principle of exchange. The exchange takes place between totemic groups, one group of people abstaining from eating certain species of animals or plants so that another group may enjoy them, this group reciprocally “producing” another set of species for consumption by its partner. Lévi-Strauss refers to it briefly in *The Savage Mind* (1966: 226), while discussing the Intichiuma ceremonies of the Australian Aranda and other Central groups. He describes the Intichiuma as a kind of “game” in which human groups and natural species arrange themselves in complementary pairs, “species nourishing the men who do not ‘produce’ them, and men producing the species which are forbidden to eat.”

Our primary source for the Intichiuma is Spencer and Gillen (on whom Lévi-Strauss heavily relies). To a greater extent than initiation rites, totemistic “increase rites”, while grading into the former and often inseparable from them, were intimately bound up with the pre-contact economy of the Aborigines, and have largely vanished with increasing welfare-dependence and the adoption of a relatively settled life under European influence (Maddock 1974: 136). To a considerable extent, therefore, we are forced back into reliance on the early accounts.

In *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, Spencer and Gillen (1899) show how the Intichiuma rituals set in motion a symbolic process of economic exchange.

Among the Aranda, witchetty grubs are gathered (as they come into season) by men who do not belong to the witchetty grub totem. However, it seems that they are gathered in a sense “on behalf of” the totem-members, for the grubs, on being collected, are ceremonially presented to an assembly of witchetty grub men. These men grind up the grubs and taste just a little, as if to assert their peculiar rights in this food. They then make a very definite point of renouncing the bulk of the grubs, handing them to men of other totems to eat (p. 204). A rather similar ritual is played out in relation to the *Idnimata* (grub of a large longicorn beetle) totem. In the case of the Bandicoot, men not of this totem kill a bandicoot. They then put fat from the animal into the mouths of men of the totem, who may then eat the animal sparingly (pp. 205-206).

There are a number of variations. Sometimes, those who kill an animal (or gather a plant food) eat none of it themselves at all; sometimes, they assert their right to eat it by tasting some, in order (it seems) to emphasise the more the act of renunciation which then follows; at other times, the “producers” feel at liberty to eat a portion of their own produce, but not until after the bulk of it has been handed to others as a gift. In all cases, though, two things stand out. First, a firm boundary is drawn between those with the right to kill (or gather) a species and those entitled to appropriate or eat it. Second, the “taboos” – which, where they concern animals, are rules against eating one’s own kill – are more than mere negative rules of avoidance. They give expression to a positive principle of gift-giving or exchange.

In the case of animals, what ensures that an exchange of flesh takes place is the separation (both socially and in terms of time) of killing rights from rights to eat. With regard to any one species, the two kinds of rights are vested in opposed “kinds” of men – namely, (a) members of the totem and (b) non-members.

This binary opposition is not limited to the Aranda, but is or was apparently quite widespread in southern, central and northern Central Australia:

“A Warramunga man, for example, will not hesitate, under certain conditions, to kill his totem animal, but he hands it over to men who do not belong to the same totemic group, and will not think of eating it himself.”

Or to take the case of the Urabunna:

“No member of any totemic group eats the totem animal or plant, but there is no objection to his killing it and handing it over to be eaten by men who do not belong to the totemic group.”

“The fundamental idea”, as Spencer and Gillen (1904: 327) summarize matters, is that men of any totemic group are responsible for the maintenance of the supply of the animal or plant which gives its name to the group... If I am a kangaroo man, then I provide kangaroo flesh for emu men, and in return I expect them to provide me with a supply of emu flesh and eggs, and so on right through all of the totems.”

### **Totemism by elimination**

Our second and third cases come from South America. These reveal in particularly sharp focus the own kill rule as the base-line position from which observances of the kind discussed have been derived. We begin with the Kaingang, who apply or do not apply the own kill rule to animals of one particular species – tapirs – according to whether the hunter is considered appropriately “mature” or not.

Among the Kaingang, game animals have a kupleng or “ghost-soul”. Henry (1984: 85) writes:

“... the personal speech to the animal's kupleng is almost always a feature of hunting rites.... When a tapir has been killed and eaten, its wind-pipe (called ‘the tapir's heart-tube’) is wrapped in vine and tapir's raw food; and before it is burnt, a short speech is addressed to the tapir's kupleng in order that succeeding tapirs may stand still and allow themselves to be shot...”

The derivation of this could be overlooked were it not for the fact that Henry in this case makes clear that a Kaingang hunter has no natural right to eat his own tapir-kills in the first place. The fact that he does eat his kills is a special privilege granted to hunters at a certain age. The privilege is conferred by his eating of a ritual little meal — a meal which

“the grown hunter eats with his closest relatives when he has at last reached the point where without fear of death from supernatural causes he may eat the tapir he has killed. Up to this point the *kelu*, the fledgling male, must never eat of the tapir he has brought down himself, although he may share the kill of other men. When he becomes mature, ‘grown for a long time’ – an extremely variable age – he eats a ritualistic dish of tapir meat, which someone who

loves him has first thoroughly masticated and mixed with the charcoal of the tapir's heart-bundle. The preparation of this dish is essentially a service of love of one close blood relative to another. It comes at the time when the grown man is most likely to separate himself from the group with which he has spent years, and it marks the point at which he is no longer dependent on it for his food but may now launch out for himself. Previously, not being able to eat the meat of the tapir he had killed, he was dependent on others; no matter how great his prowess, he had to remain in the group or run the risk of starvation."

It may be significant that the meat in this ritual has to be pre-masticated – as if to soften the effect of eating one's own kill by ensuring that, even in this case of privileged evasion of the rule, it remains another person who is the first to begin the eating. In any event, quite clearly the own kill rule provides the base-line assumption from which derives the felt need for a ritual act of deference where the strict rule is being evaded or denied.

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Our final case in this chapter are the Siriono, who appear to have gone even further in evading the obligations of the "own kill" rule, the result being a complex of "totemic" ideas and avoidances of an even weaker or more vestigial kind. Here, the species which end up being tabooed are theoretically, it appears, the same for the whole community.

We begin with a brief description of the Siriono avoidances. It will be seen that these appear (from the description) to be of a kind which earlier anthropologists might well have conceptualised as some form of "totemism". Holmberg (1946: 462) writes in Steward's Handbook of South American Indians, under the heading, "Magic":

"A hunter is not allowed to eat the meat of a particular animal of certain species that he kills (e.g. the tapir) lest he offend the animal and be unable to hunt another" (Holmberg 1946: 462).

This is a very unexceptional hunters' taboo, of a kind familiar in hunter-gatherer societies in many other parts of the world. Had no further information been given, the reader would have concluded, perhaps, that the Siriono recognised certain animal species, such as the tapir, as "totemic" in some sense.

But fortunately, in his major work on the Siriono, Holmberg (1950: 33) provides sufficient data to make it clear that here as elsewhere this avoidance is only the residue left when a more substantial avoidance rule (applying to all game) is evaded:

“Theoretically, a man is not supposed to eat the flesh of an animal which he kills himself. If a hunter violates this taboo, it is believed that the animal which he has eaten will not return to be hunted by him again. Continued breaches of this taboo are consequently supposed to be followed automatically by the sanction of ill-luck in hunting”.

How does this link up with the previously-mentioned idea that the tapir is specially to be avoided as food? Holmberg provides the answer: the own kill rule has fallen into disuse, applying to fewer and fewer species until only one or two are left within its ambit:

“This rule may formerly have been an effective mechanism by means of which to force reciprocity in the matter of game distribution, but if so, it has certainly lost its function today, for the disparity between the rule and its practice is very great indeed. Few hunters pay any attention to the rule at all, and when they do it is only with respect to larger animals, such as the tapir and the harpy eagle, that are rarely bagged anyway. In the case of smaller animals, such as coati and monkeys, I never saw hunters show any reluctance to eating those that they had killed themselves.”

The “own kill” rule was previously more strictly obeyed, and forms the base line assumption from which tapir-avoidance as a species-specific rule has derived by a process of elimination:

“In the case of smaller animals, such as coati and monkeys, I never saw hunters show any reluctance to eating those that they had killed themselves. Embuta, one of my older informants, told me that when he was a boy he never used to eat any of the game that he killed, but that nowadays the custom had changed and that it was no longer possible to expect meat from someone else who hunted.”

Holmberg's conclusion is positivistic and utilitarian: through a process of self-enlightenment through “experience”, motivated by the search to find “satisfaction of the hunger drive”, the natives have discovered the objective falsity of an indigenous superstition which had previously impeded them in the food-quest:

“It thus seems that through a gradual process of change hunters have discovered that eating their own game does not necessarily result in poorer luck in hunting but, rather, in greater satisfaction



to the hunger drive. The reinforcing experience of eating one's own game has thus caused a partial breakdown in an old tribal custom."

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In fact, it seems that Europeans who have been puzzled by "totemic" avoidances and rituals have been looking at things upside-down. They have seen the "rituals" as the anomaly to be explained, taking for granted the fact that hunters should eat their own kills. Given the individualistic and competitive premises of modern Western culture, it was a natural enough response. To understand the ritual observances of traditional hunters, however, such assumptions have to be reversed. The anomaly which has to be explained is not the ritual avoidances. It is the fact that in surviving hunter-gatherer cultures, hunters do tend to eat their own kills. The question to be asked is: Why do they do this? What economic and social circumstances have driven them to eat their own kills? The avoidances which accompany killing and eating do not need to be explained, once it is realised that from the native standpoint, it is or was culturally "normal" to avoid one's own kill. In their eyes, their "rituals" do not need special explanatory justification. They do not feel the need to justify such "non-economic" observances – any more than we in the west, in the ordinary course of life, feel the need to justify such things as incest-avoidances. To the hunters themselves, it is not their "rituals" but the fact that they are eating meat which they have killed themselves which needs to be excused, atoned for and If possible explained.

In this chapter, it has been shown that the own kill rule in its strict form is far from universal. It has been made clear that lapses from and evasions of the rule are among the commonplaces of hunter-gatherer ethnographies. Almost universally, however, hunters and gatherers observe rituals and believe myths. Many of these myths and rituals – beliefs about animal "souls", about the need to placate the animals' "owners", about the need to "respect" certain kinds of animals and avoid their flesh etc. etc. – are comparable with those, illustrated in this chapter, which can be shown to be intimately linked with the own kill rule. It has been shown that these latter beliefs and rituals operate on the basis of a shared logic, which assumes the own kill rule as its point of departure. To the extent that such a logic of belief and ritual may itself be universal, the own kill rule may also be said to be universally

present – although present in its forms of negation more frequently and (in the literature of social anthropology) much more spectacularly than in those occasionally recorded forms in which it is still positively asserted as a rule.

***Chapter 3: The totemic illusion***

In *Totemism and The Savage Mind*, Lévi-Strauss approached the study of ritual only to dissolve it into a kind of psychology – an investigation into the nature of “the mind”. In effect, by subsuming most forms of ritual action under the heading, “totemism” – which he then described as essentially imaginary – he avoided having to construct a theory of ritual action at all. Instead, he simply conjured the problem away.

Lévi-Strauss’s verdict that “totemism” is “imaginary” has been widely accepted – so much so that it is almost impossible any longer to use the term as an analytic category. The aim in this chapter is to question this verdict, surveying some of the classical literature on “totemism” in the light of the preceding discussion. Much of the ethnography which will be cited seems outdated to us now, but it seems important to locate Lévi-Strauss’s work in its context as one particular contribution to a long-standing and still-unresolved debate.

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The classical concept, “totemism”, may have been an ill-defined and confusing one. But it was also a unifying concept, and stood for much of what social anthropology has always been about. Indeed, Fortes (1966: 5), following Radcliffe-Brown (1929 117), offered “totemism” as “an example of a subject of enquiry that is distinctive of the data, the methods and the theories of social anthropology, and characteristic of its historical development.” Totemism, continued Fortes, has always been “a peculiarly anthropological subject in a way that, say, problems of kinship or law or economics are not.” Other anthropological topics may be studied by, say, historians, economists or sociologists; totemism is so intimately linked with anthropology that it can hardly be imagined as a topic in any other field.

Totemism was put on the scientific map for the first time when J. F. McLellan (1869) published two short articles entitled “The Worship of Animals and Plants” in the *Fortnightly Review*. McLellan proposed that primitive peoples believe in the sanctity and mystical powers of animals and plants, and that “there is no race of men that has not come through this primitive stage of speculative belief” (p. 423). Over the next few decades, this view came to dominate British anthropology, and was developed into an elaborate scheme linking (a) mythological beliefs, (b) food-prohibitions, (c) exogamy and (d) “the matriarchal stage of culture” (Haddon 1902: 8-11; see footnote, p. 7). One of the most ambitious and influential works in this spirit was Durkheim’s (1965; original 1915) *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, which treated totemism as humanity’s most primitive form of religion.

Modern studies of totemism, however, may be said (following Lévi-Strauss – 1969b: 72-5) to date from an article written in the *Journal of American Folklore* by Goldenweiser (1910). The essential conclusion of Goldenweiser’s study was that “we must regard the group of phenomena which in various areas have been termed ‘totemic’ as conglomerates of essentially independent features...” (p. 266). For example, the exogamy rule had nothing necessary to do with seemingly-associated food-taboos. On the one hand, “taboos, whether totemic or not, permit of a great variety of origins” (p. 258), while on the other, the “conditions under which exogamy may develop are practically innumerable” (p. 265). Goldenweiser certainly did not believe, then, in a unitary principle according to which “one’s own kin” and “one’s own produce” were for others to enjoy. Instead of an integral logic operating on different levels at once, he saw only isolated fragments thrown together by history and chance. An “integral development of totemism”, as he put it, “loses its plausibility, in view of the demonstrated historical independence of its factors....” (p. 266).

The essay caught the mood of the times. Lévi-Strauss (1969b: 73) writes that “in the end Goldenweiser’s 110 pages were to exercise a more lasting theoretical influence than the 2,000 pages in Frazer’s four volumes” on totemism which were published in the same year.

### Defining an illusion

Lévi-Strauss's *Le Totémisme aujourd'hui* was published in 1962. On the surface, it was presented as an endorsement of Goldenweiser's findings – an attempt to deliver the coup-de-grace to “totemism” as a subject of study. It can be seen, however, that what Lévi-Strauss really set out to achieve was a victory more subtle. His aim was to justify his own reluctance to develop a theoretical framework specifically to analyse the ritual domain. He preferred to treat ritual complexes (a) as non-existent or imaginary or (b) as consisting – like mythological complexes – only of “ways of saying things”. This would enable him to treat the study of ritual action as a secondary specialisation within the broader “science of mythology”.

To appreciate this, we must review at this point the central arguments of Lévi-Strauss's two “transitional” books, *Le Totémisme* and *La Pensée sauvage*. Referring to Boas' view that cultural phenomena cannot be brought together into a unity (i.e. the historical particularist view that virtually everything in culture is unique and distinct), Lévi-Strauss remarks that this applies to “totemism” in particular. As he puts it,

“... .totemism is an artificial unity, existing solely in the mind of the anthropologist, to which nothing specifically corresponds in reality” (1989b: 79).

In the view of Lévi-Strauss, totemism is a mode of classification. Or perhaps it is less than that – it “constitutes not even a mode of classification, but an aspect or moment of it” (1968: 218). Totemic classifications are not qualitatively distinct from other forms of classification (1968: 182-3). For all human beings classify things in essentially similar ways, conceptualising similarities and differences in binary terms and by reference to familiar categories drawn from various spheres of experience (1966: 135). When people in traditional cultures identify their clans or exogamous groups with various species of animals, they are doing no more than that. They have simply found a convenient way of using the differences between animal species as a way of conceptualising the distinctions between human social groups. From totemism we can learn nothing about the past of humankind, for even to the extent that totemism is real, “there is nothing archaic or remote about it” (1989b: 177).

We are all using totemic modes of thought all the time – or, alternatively, it could be said that to define thought as “totemic” means nothing at all.

Lévi-Strauss in this way dissolves into thin air the study of most of the ritual distinctions, taboos and observances previously linked together as “totemic”. As Leach (1965: 24) put it,

“In its new guise ‘totemism’, as such, really disappears; it becomes just one specialized variety of a universal human activity, the classification of social phenomena by means of categories derived from the non-social human environment.”

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If Lévi-Strauss were simply suggesting a helpful redefinition of “totemism” as a category – restricting it henceforward to the mental activity of allocating names to social groups – the usefulness or otherwise of this new definition might profitably be discussed. Unfortunately, however, Lévi-Strauss never tells us that he is simply redefining “totemism” as a term. Following Goldenweiser, he argues instead that “the facts” themselves indicate the lack of any internal connection between the previously-linked phenomena. For example, Lévi-Strauss categorically insists that in the ethnographic record itself, there is no indication of any intrinsic connection between “naming systems” and “food-taboos” (to take two of the main ingredients of “totemism” as previously defined), naming systems (he asserts) are “mental”: in them, animal species are chosen, not because they are “good to eat” or “good to prohibit” but because they are “good to think”, the differences between one species and another providing the human intellect with a useful model through which to conceptualise distinctions between human social groups. Entirely separate are “food taboos”, which revolve around the natural and/or cultural edibility of different species of animals and plants. It was a profound mistake of earlier generations of anthropologists – alleges Lévi-Strauss – to have confused the two.

In arguing this point, Totemism begins with a discussion of the Ojibwa Indians, as most treatises on “totemism” do (*ototeman* being an Ojibwa expression). We are told almost immediately that “all the food tabus reported from the Ojibway derive from the manido system”, which is “entirely distinct from the system of totemic names” (1969b: 90). In other words, the fact that a

man belongs, say, to the Bear totem need in no way make him feel guilty about hunting and eating bears. Now, this statement is directly contradicted by Long (1791: 86), whose account of Chippewa and Ojibwa “superstition” first brought the expression “totamism” into print. The objection, however, is easily disposed of by Lévi-Strauss. Long was obviously “confused” (Lévi-Strauss 1969b: 92). Lévi-Strauss insists that a man in recent times was perfectly free and willing to kill and eat his own totem-animal. The fact that no-one would do so without first asking the animal permission, apologising to it afterwards, is dismissed by Lévi-Strauss as of little consequence, although he mentions it in passing (p. 89).

Turning to Tikopia, the author enumerates a list of food-taboos which most previous writers had been content to label “totemic”. Lévi-Strauss, however, will not allow food-prohibitions to be in any way “confused” with totemic naming systems. He states – as if it were a simple “fact” – that the prohibitions are “not totemic.”

As evidence, he offers the fact that among the Tikopia the food-prohibitions seem to give expression to a principle of exchange. For example, when a dolphin is stranded on the beach, members of its affiliated lineage make it a *putu* or “offering on the grave of a person recently deceased”. The meat is then cooked and everyone joins in eating it

“...with the exception of the kin group in question, for which it is tapu because the dolphin is the preferred form of incarnation of their atua (spirit)” (1969b: 97).

This presents a problem for Lévi-Strauss. Here we have a totemic conceptual identification or affiliation which is indisputably linked with a food-taboo. Indeed, the Tikopia ethnography is rich with examples of this kind. But after discussing some taboos against eating various fish, birds and bats, Lévi-Strauss declares that the solution is simple:

“These prohibitions, which may be either general or limited to a clan or lineage, are not, however, of a totemic character: the pigeon, which is closely connected with Taumako clan, is not eaten, but there are no scruples against killing it, because it plunders the gardens. Moreover, the prohibition is restricted to the first-born” (p. 96).

It is difficult to know how to respond to this. We are here introduced, quite without prior warning, to two new rules by means of which food-prohibitions can be declared to be “not....of a totemic character.” They are not of a totemic character when rights to eat are separated from rights to kill; and they are not of a totemic character when they are “restricted to the first-born”. If Lévi-Strauss were stating frankly that according to his new definition of totemism, food-taboos of one kind or another will always fall outside its scope, we would have no cause for complaint. What is disconcerting is that he does not adopt this approach. He claims instead that “the facts” themselves indicate that “valuing systems” and “food taboos” have nothing to do with each other.

There is no need to follow Lévi-Strauss as he surveys various tribes, carefully excluding their food-avoidances from what he calls their “totemism”. In some cases, as it happens, there is a considerable divergence between “naming systems” and food avoidances, whereas in others, Lévi-Strauss has to struggle to set up the distinctions he requires. To the extent that Lévi-Strauss excludes food-taboos from “totemism” on the basis of his own redefinition of the term, we can only note and respect his personal usage. To the extent that he claims as a matter of “fact”, however, that there is no necessary connection between identifying with a species and avoiding it, he makes an assertion which we must test against the evidence itself. The real question concerns neither the degree of empirical connection in each case, nor whether we should refer to the taboos or avoidances as “totemic”. What matters is whether the earlier writers were correct to perceive some unity of principle linking (a) the identification (through “naming”) of oneself or one’s clan with a natural species and (b) the idea that “one’s own” species is to be respected or avoided as food. It is here argued that there is a profound internal logic – as universal in its way as the “incest rule” – connecting these two. Lévi- Strauss’s argument is that there is no necessary connection at all.

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To speak of someone as “my own flesh” means, in many languages of the world, that the person concerned is a close relative, usually by “blood”.



The Peruvian Sharanahua say “my kin, my flesh” (Siskind 1973: 54). Both in Hebrew and In Arabic, “flesh” was traditionally synonymous with “clan” or kindred group; kinship meant “participation in a common mass of flesh, blood and bones....” (Robertson-Smith 1914: 274).

Among the Trobriand Islanders (Malinowski 1922: 191), matrilineal kinship alone is “the blood relationship, the identity of flesh, and the real kinship.” It is said that when Trobriand men learn that one of their sisters has had a child, they feel that an addition to their own bodies has been made: “The kinsmen rejoice, for their bodies become stronger when one of their sisters or nieces has plenty of children”. Malinowski (1932: 170) comments:

“The wording of this statement expresses the interesting conception of collective clan unity, of the members being not only of the same flesh, ‘but almost forming one body’.”

One’s sisters’ children, like one’s sisters themselves, are a part of one’s “flesh”.

Now, it is significant that among the Trobrianders, the concept of bomala, “taboo”, is likewise identified with the very body or kindred of the person observing the taboo. Writes Malinowski (1932: 388-9; quoted in Fortes 1968: 18):

“This noun takes the pronominal suffixes of nearest possession.... which signifies that a man’s taboo, the things which he must not eat or touch or do, is linguistically bound up with his person; parts of his body, his kindred, and such personal qualities as his mind (*nanana*), his will (*magi’la*) and his inside (*lopoula*). Thus bomala, those things from which a man must keep away, is an integral part of his personality, something which enters his moral make-up.”

A man must “keep away” from a whole series of female relatives – his “flesh” – and also from certain kinds of food. In either case, he is “keeping away” from something which is “his own” – as if it were a part of himself.

Turning to Australia, according to Elkin (1933: 118n), “the usual word for totem in north-eastern South Australia means flesh.” Among the Wotjobaluk of South-East Australia, Howitt (1904: 145) found that “the group totem is called by the terms *Nir*, *Ngirabul*, and *Yauruk*, the latter word meaning flesh,

frequently expanded into *Yauruk-gologeitch*, that is, ‘flesh-of-all’”. Among the Buandik, according to the same author (p. 146):

“A man would not kill or use for food any of the animals of the same subdivision with himself, excepting when compelled by hunger, and then he expresses sorrow for having to eat his Wingong (friend), or Tumung (his flesh). When using the latter word, the Buandik touch their breasts to indicate close relationship, meaning almost a part of themselves....”

The following passage of Elkin’s (1933: 136-7) is worth quoting at some length. He is writing of what he terms “matrilineal social clan totemism”, which he identifies in most of Eastern Australia, Queensland, New South Wales, Western Victoria and Eastern South Australia. One’s matrilineal clan-relatives

“...are one flesh, for all have ultimately received their body, their means of incarnation, from and through the womb of the same matrilineal ancestress. Now, it is this belief which the matrilineal social totem symbolizes and which underlies the reference to the totem as flesh, as is the custom in eastern South Australia. Further, because the totem is one’s flesh, in many tribes it is neither injured, killed nor eaten, except on very rare occasions of hunger and after regret and sorrow have been expressed. A person respects the symbol, the ‘flesh’ of his mother’s line.”

Elkin immediately adds:

“Likewise, the exogamy of the matrilineal social totemic clan is observed, for it is based on the fundamental aboriginal incest laws, which forbid marriage with sister or mother, and all who belong to the one totem, being one flesh, are brothers and sisters, or children and mothers”.

Avoidance of totemic meat and avoidance of female relatives are, then, equally the avoidance of “one’s own flesh”.

In fact, the evidence suggests a cross-cultural pattern in which totemic food avoidances are in some sense avoidances of the self. If one’s “taboo” or “totem” is not one’s “meat” or “blood” or “flesh” in the most literal sense, it is at least one’s “spirit”, “substance” or “essence”. And the crucial point is that the “self”, however conceived, is not to be appropriated by the self. It is for others to enjoy.

According to this logic, a man’s sisters are inseparable from himself and, sexually, they are therefore for others to take as sexual partners. A man’s

hunting-products – the game animals which he kills – are likewise inseparable from himself, and are his own flesh, his own blood, or his own essence which he is not allowed to eat. Not two rules are in force but only one: the rule against “eating one’s own flesh”. This conceptual simplification has obviously been achieved by countless traditional cultures, for again and again we find the two kinds of prohibitions – dietary and sexual – simply equated. A woman who “ate”, sexually, her own son or younger brother, would be doing the same thing, in principle, as a man who ate his own totem or the game animals which he killed himself. Both would be “eating their own flesh”. They would be appropriating their own produce – conceived as a part of themselves – for their own private use.

At a deep level, then, in many traditional cultures, there are not two or several conceptualised rules of exchange but only one: the rule against “eating one’s own blood” or “eating one’s own flesh” or “self”. There is no separate thing called “totemism”. There is not even any special term for what Europeans have labelled a “totem”. In the native languages, the term for “totem” is simply the term for “meat” or “flesh” – or perhaps some other aspect of the social or collective “self”. In this connection it is worth remembering a point touched on earlier in this discussion – that our very word “totemism” is derived from an Ojibwa expression which means nothing exotic at all, but simply “uterine kin”:

*“Totem: irregularly derived from the term ototeman of the Chippewa and other cognate Algonquian dialects, signifying, generically, ‘his brother-sister kin’, of which ote is the grammatic stem signifying (1) the consanguine kinship existing between a propositus and a uterine elder sister or elder brother; and (2) the consanguine kinship existing between uterine brothers and sisters....”* (Hewitt in Hodge 1910: 2, 787-8).

Would it, then, clear away much confusion if we were to cease speaking of “totemism” at all, and to refer instead to the “own flesh” rule? In the light of many ethnographies, the temptation to do this becomes strong.

Let us take, for example, Margaret Mead’s set of aphorisms obtained from the Arapesh, which Lévi-Strauss quotes in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969a: 27, citing Mead 1935: 83):

*“Your own mother,*

*Your own sister,  
Your own pigs,  
Your own yams that you have piled up,  
You may not eat.  
Other people's mothers,  
Other people's sisters,  
Other people's pigs,  
Other people's yams that they have piled up,  
You may eat."*

It would seem unnecessarily confusing to refer to this as a form of "totemism". Admittedly, contained here are virtually all the usual "features" of totemism, for we have (1) a set of sexual taboos, (2) a linked set of food taboos, (3) a system of classification of the social universe matched precisely by (4) a system of classification of edible parts of the natural universe. Finally, there are contained here, at least implicitly, (5) the idea of a man's intimate connection with his "mothers" and "sisters" matched by (6) belief in his equally intimate connection with the animals he has killed, the pigs he owns or the foods he has otherwise produced. Yet it seems unnecessarily laborious to describe this as a set of various different rules and concepts corresponding more or less closely to what anthropologists once described as "totemism". It is evident that to the Arapesh, there is only one rule or principle involved, not an assemblage of rules, and that this one thing is the principle that one's own "flesh" (in the sense already defined here) is for others to consume or enjoy.

Having quoted the set of aphorisms, Mead (1935: 83-4) comments:

"This sums up the Arapesh attitude towards selfishness, their feeling that there is an intimate connection between a man and his surplus yam crop that would make his eating from it rather like incest, and similarly that to appropriate for one's own purposes one's mother or sister would be of the nature of antisocial and repellent hoarding. But this set of aphorisms was given to me to explain how a man who made an *abullu* (ceremonial yam-display) should act about his yams, and I never received it In reply to any inquiry about incest. The native line of thought is that you teach people how to behave about yams and pigs by referring to the way they know they behave about their female relatives".

In the case of (a) one's female kin and (b) the animals a hunter kills, the rule of avoidance is consciously seen as a rule of exchange rather than as a mere irrational "taboo". In the first case:

“To questions about incest I did not receive the answer that I had received in all other native societies in which I had worked, violent condemnation of the practice combined with scandalous revelations of a case of incest in a neighbouring village. Instead both the emphatic condemnation and the accusations were lacking. ‘Na, we don’t sleep with our sisters. We give our sisters to other men and other men give us their sisters’. Obviously. It was as simple as that, Why did I press the point?” (p. 84).

In the second case, as was noted in Chapter 2 (p. 61), the ideal distribution of food is for everyone to eat game killed or food grown by “people at such a distance that their very names are unknown....” The “lowest man in the community” is “the man who eats his own kill – even though that kill be a tiny bird, hardly a mouthful in all” (p. 29).

This parallels extremely closely a nineteenth-century description of “totemism” in Australia. Andrew Lang (1887: 1, 61) describes matrilineal social totemism in the continent as follows:

“The creature from which each tribe claims descent is called ‘of the same flesh’, while persons of another stock are ‘fresh flesh’. A native may not marry a woman of ‘his own flesh’; it is only a woman of ‘fresh’ or ‘strange’ flesh he may marry. Nor may he eat an animal of ‘his own flesh’; he may only eat ‘strange flesh’.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now, the unity of principle involved here – the equation of own kin with own produce – is acknowledged by Lévi-Strauss himself. He refers to Australia as a place “where food prohibitions and rules of exogamy reinforce one another” (1966: 111), and treats both kinds of rules as exchange-rules with similar functions:

“Both the exchange of women and the exchange of food are means of securing or of displaying the interlocking of social groups with one another” (1966: 109).

In a more general context, in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969a: 32-3), he writes that marriage prohibitions represent only

“....a particular application, within a given field, of principles an encountered whenever the physical or spiritual existence of the group is at stake. The group controls the distribution not only of women, but of a whole collection of valuables. Food, the most easily observed of these, is more than just the most vital commodity it really is, for between it and women there is a whole system of real and symbolic relationships, whose true nature is only

gradually emerging, but which, when even superficially understood, are enough to establish this connection.”

He observes that there “is an analogy between sexual relations and eating in all societies” (1966: 130). And writing of “certain Burmese peoples”, Lévi-Strauss (1969a: 33) comments on “the extent to which the native mind sees matrimonial and economic exchanges as forming an integral part of a basic system of reciprocity”, adding that the “methods for distributing meat in this part of the world are no less ingenious than for the distribution of women”.

Lévi-Strauss’s statement that between culinary exchanges and sexual ones “there is a whole system of real and symbolic relationships, whose true nature is only gradually emerging” suggests that he felt the temptation to analyse totemic food-taboos as exchange-rules, following the method he was demonstrating so effectively in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Yet when, after a long pause, he came to his study of totemism, Lévi-Strauss chose not to take this course. While he admitted that food-taboos and rules of exogamy were connected, he insisted: “The connection between them is not causal but metaphorical” (1966: 105). He insisted that “food prohibitions are not a distinctive feature of totemism” (1966: 129), and argued that all exchanges on the model of the Australian Intichiuma rituals pertained only to metaphor and the realms of the mind. As he put it:

“... marriage exchanges always have real substance, and they are alone in this. The exchange of food is a different matter. Aranda women really bear children. But Aranda men confine themselves to imagining that their rites result in the increase of totemic species. In the former....what is in question is primarily a way of doing something. In the latter it is only a way of saying something” (1966: 110).

In this passage, Lévi-Strauss seemed to be unequivocal in stating that food- exchanges – unlike marital ones – are unreal. Yet he cannot have been unaware of the degree to which in countless traditional cultures – including the overwhelming majority of those touched on in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* – practices of bride-service or bride-price render meaningless the attempt to disentangle “exchanges of women” from economic exchanges such as those of labour or food.

Lévi-Strauss can give plausibility to his case only by concentrating on the theme of erroneous belief. It is as if it were to be alleged that the own kill rule can never really result in exchanges of meat – because observance of the rule does not in reality result in good hunting luck or an abundance of game. Hence, for Lévi-Strauss, totemism represents only a “purported reciprocity” (1966: 125). Each totemic group “imagines itself to have magical power over a species, but as this illusion has no foundation it is in fact no more than an empty form....” (1966: 125). Or, even more caustically:

“Totemic groups certainly give an imitation of gift—giving which has a function. But, apart from the fact that it remains imaginary, it is not cultural either since it must be classed, not among the arts of civilization, but as a fake usurpation of natural capacities which man as a biological species lacks” (1966: 126).

So not only is totemic gift-giving unreal – it is not even cultural at all.

Totemism, according to Lévi-Strauss, may look superficially like a system of economic division of labour, as in a caste system. But the appearance of functional value is purely illusory. Each totemic group in an Aranda Intichiuma ceremony claims to make available supplies of its totem-species for other groups, just as each caste in a caste-system practises “a distinctive activity, indispensable to the life and well-being of the whole group”. However,

“....a caste of potters really makes pots, a caste of launderers really washes clothes, a caste of barbers really shaves people, while the magical powers of Australian totemic groups are of an imaginary kind” (1966: 122).

Lévi-Strauss hangs his case on the fact that, while women really produce babies, groups of men in totemic rituals do not really produce game animals. The only “true reciprocity” is the sexual and procreative kind. The meat-producing reciprocity is only a “fake usurpation”. Forgetting that it is he himself who has ruled that “food prohibitions are not a distinctive feature of totemism”, forgetting that it is he who has chosen to concentrate exclusively on belief and therefore on totemism’s “magical” claims, forgetting that men really do produce game animals for each other when their hunting expeditions are successful and forgetting that in the Intichiuma-rituals, men really do engage in exchanges of food – forgetting all this, Lévi-Strauss manages to destroy altogether the unity of principle underlying the various aspects of Australian totemic and matrimonial exchanges. In this way, he enables himself

to treat bride-service exchanges, marriage-gifts, feasts and so on as related only in a “metaphorical” way to the “exchange of women”, which alone has “real substance”. Such economic exchanges, he is able to claim, function only on a symbolic plane. By this means, virtually the entire economic aspect of exogamic rules is successfully denied or overlooked. The entire field of human social existence is bisected into “ways of doing things” and “ways of saying things”. As far as concerns “ways of doing things”, exchange is said to boil down to the sexual aspects of exogamy, which provide the “basis” for all other forms of culture and exchange. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, the implication runs, has said in principle everything which needs to be said on that subject. If Lévi-Strauss is to say any more about anything, therefore, he must turn to “ways of saying things”. And if this is to be done, it is best to leave ritual aside and go straight to the heart of matters. Lévi-Strauss turns to myths and the world of the mind.

Why did Lévi-Strauss have to do this? Why did he have to violate so insistently not only the unity of the evidence of ethnology itself but also the conceptual unity at first promised by *Les Structures*? It is perfectly clear that Lévi-Strauss glimpsed the reality of the “own kill” rule, and glimpsed the possibility of treating this rule – as he had treated the incest rule – as the expression of an exchange-principle through which an immense mass of seemingly-irrational “taboos” and “customs” could be reduced to an intelligible system. So why did he fail to take advantage of this clue, fail to follow up the logic which he himself had revealed and fail to link his studies of myths with the study of kinship systems which he had already begun? Why did he have to violate so insistently not only the unity of the evidence of ethnology itself but also the conceptual unity at first promised by *Les Structures*? It is perfectly clear that Lévi-Strauss glimpsed the reality of the “own kill” rule, and glimpsed the possibility of treating this rule – as he had treated the incest rule – as the expression of an exchange-principle through which an immense mass of seemingly-irrational “taboos” and “customs” could be reduced to an intelligible system. So why did he fail to take advantage of this clue, fail to follow up the logic which he himself had revealed and fail to link his studies of myths with the study of kinship systems which he had already begun? Why did he refer to examples of the “own kill” rule only to forget them, or to describe their effects as purely “symbolic” or “imaginary”?



The answers seem clear. Had this course not been taken, the study of mythological beliefs would have been tied in inextricably with the study of structures of ritual, economic and sexual exchange. The whole of Lévi-Strauss's argument about the existence of a general human "mind" acting independently and determining, almost god-like, the structures discernible beneath human beliefs, customs and institutions – this whole argument might have risked seeming unnecessary or even absurd. For once it had been conceded that kinship-structures could be accounted for without need of this supposition, any assimilation of ritual and mythological structures to the same basic mode of explanation would have made it appear unnecessary to appeal to the independent contribution of an innate logic of "the mind" at all. The most powerful arguments of *Les Structures* – those taking exchange as such as the basic fact from which its various manifestations (mental or otherwise) can be explained – could simply have been extended to cover the remaining ground. Instead of being abandoned for other things, these basic arguments could have been shown to be as valid for the analysis of one kind of exchange as for the analysis of other kinds which are based on the same principles. The rupture in Lévi-Strauss's life's work would not have been required.

### **The phoenix 'totemism'**

Goldenweiser's complaint about "totemism" – the complaint taken up by Lévi-Strauss in his attempted elimination of the concept – was that there was no unitary principle underlying it. The conclusion of his famous 1910 essay was, we may recall, that "we must regard the groups of phenomena which in various areas have been termed 'totemic' as conglomerates of essentially independent features" (Goldenweiser 1910: 226). This is how Goldenweiser criticized his predecessors' procedure in developing the concept of "totemism":

"On the basis of material furnished by some one area or a number of areas, a definite group of features is called 'totemism'. Another totemic area is discovered where an additional feature is found, or where one of the old ones is missing. Immediately the questions arise (and here we are on historical ground), Is *this* totemism? or Was *that* totemism? or Is *this true* totemism and *that was incompletely developed*, totemism *im Verden*? or Was *that true* totemism and *this is a later development*? In the light of the foregoing discussion, any definite answer to these questions must needs be arbitrary" (pp. 267-8).

Or again:

“If totemism includes, roughly speaking, everything, is totemism itself anything in particular? Is there anything specific in this phenomenon, or has the name ‘totemism’ simply been applied to one set of features here, to another set there, and still elsewhere perhaps to both sets combined?” (p. 287).

It is easy to appreciate how valuable this scepticism later appeared to Lévi- Strauss when – on the verge of embarking upon his *Mythologiques* – he was seeking theoretical justification for his decision to avoid analysing (to use Goldenweiser’s words) “roughly speaking, everything” intermediary between kinship systems and myths. If the unity of principle underlying the entire spectrum of “totemic” phenomena could be declared an illusion, then Lévi-Strauss could feel justified in denying any need to discuss this unity or account for it. He could proceed without further ado from the study of kinship systems to the study of myths. “Roughly speaking, everything” in between could be equated with “totemism”, and this in turn – thanks to Goldenweiser – could be treated as an illusory phenomenon.

Lévi-Strauss’s denial of the reality of totemism is so emotionally-charged as to indicate extraordinary depths of feeling on the issue – feelings which the surface problematic of Totemism in no way equips the reader to expect. Not only is totemism described – in its native, material manifestations – as a “fake usurpation”, an “empty form” and so forth. As an anthropologists’ category, it is also said to be “like hysteria”, in that it is an invention of bigots aiming to contrast themselves with “savages” just as late nineteenth century doctors and psychologists contrasted themselves with the “insane” (1969b: 69). Lévi-Strauss seems so hostile to totemism as to indicate that real anxieties are involved, as when he cautions against even mentioning the subject without due precautions being taken:

“To accept as a theme for discussion a category that one believes to be false always entails the risk, simply by the attention that is paid to it, of entertaining some illusion about its reality..., for in attacking an ill-founded theory the critic begins by paying it a kind of respect. The phantom which is imprudently summoned up, in the hope of exorcising it for good, vanishes only to reappear, and closer than one imagines to the place where it was at first” (p. 83).

Such anxieties indicate the real significance of Lévi-Strauss’s encounter with the problem of totemism. The concept, “totemism”, simply had to be eliminated

or at least neutralised (“exorcised”). Lévi-Strauss’s entire grand system and project depended upon it. Unless the unity of principle underlying all totemic phenomena (including food taboos, economic exchanges etc.) could be denied, it would not be possible to maintain that myth-structures belonged to a realm having “no direct links” with the demands of economic and sexual life. The unity underlying totemic phenomena had to be broken into fragments, leaving as a common residue only the fact that all systems of human belief and ritual are in some sense products of one and the same kind of human brain. Yet the very vigour of this “exorcism” indicates something else as well. It indicates just how much damage would be done to Lévi-Strauss’s entire system if, after all, it could be shown that the unity of principle which he was struggling against had some life and force in it still. If it could be demonstrated convincingly that a few simple principles or rules in fact suffice to generate the world-wide dimensions of variability of kinship structures, ritual structures and myth structures alike, then the genuinely bogus “phantom” in all this might at last have been laid to rest. The illusion of the human mind as an independent, world-governing force, its patterns of motion emanating directly from the arrangement of cells and connections given genetically in the brain – this most bizarre of delusions might no longer seem required.

Let it be conceded at once: Goldenweiser was correct. It is impossible to classify the varieties of ritual action in a satisfactory way by assuming that there is a “thing” called “totemism”, another “thing” called, say, “sacrifice”, another called “rituals of atonement” and so on. The borderlines between these supposedly distinct phenomena will always be confused. To take a particular form of ritual prohibition and try to decide whether it constitutes “totemism” or not (which is, ironically, precisely what Lévi-Strauss does when he declares certain food-prohibitions to be “not of a totemic character”) is an exercise of limited value. Is this totemism, or is that totemism? – the question, as Goldenweiser understood, will usually admit of no very satisfactory answer. But this is not because there is no unity of principle underlying the dimensions of variability of totemic ritual in traditional cultures. It is, on the contrary, because the unity of principle is far more fundamental and universal than can possibly be consistent with the various arbitrarily-drawn distinctions between what is “totemism” and what is not, what is “sacrifice” and what is not, what is an “atonement ritual” and what is something else.

In *The Savage Mind*, Lévi-Strauss (1966: 224) goes to great lengths to explain the “fundamental differences between the system of totemism and that of sacrifice”. He is adamant that “the two systems are mutually exclusive” (p. 223). He is insistent that while “totemism” is only an illusion, “sacrifice” is an “institution” and perfectly real (p. 223). It is possible to show, on the contrary, that rituals of sacrifice constitute not a separate “system” characteristic of countless cultures and religions but only so many other ways of expressing the principle that one’s own kills are for others to consume or enjoy. They constitute only one portion of a continuous spectrum of rituals relating to animal or human “meat” or “flesh”, other portions of this spectrum corresponding to “totemism”, “atonement rituals”, “hunters’ taboos”, “increase rites”, blood-avoidances, “menstrual taboos”, cooking rules, “the couvade”, “male initiation rites” – and so on almost indefinitely. “Totemism” is not an institution – any more than “sacrifice” is. Both concepts correspond to realities embodied in almost countless religious and cultural institutions which grade into each other smoothly when classified. The separation of the concepts themselves into fixed immutable “ideas” imagined to correspond to real “things” – this is no more than an ideological phenomenon. It is a faulty characteristic of academic thought – a characteristic which in this case has inevitably arisen from the failure of anthropologists to recognize the “own flesh” principle of exchange.

### **The Nuer, sacrifice and the own kill rule**

“The flesh of this animal is as my flesh, and its blood is the same as my blood”, says a Shilluck king in making a sacrifice (Oyler 1920: 298; quoted in Evans-Pritchard 1956: 280). This statement expresses with accuracy what sacrifice typically “is”. It is a way (or rather, an immense variety of ways) of expressing the principle that one’s own flesh, blood and life – that these things, which are the essence of the personal or social “self”, must be made into the form of a gift and “offered up”.

In his work on Nuer religion, Evans-Pritchard (1956: 279) writes:

“All gifts are symbols of inner states, and in this sense one can only give oneself; there is no other kind of giving.”

It is a concept – he continues – which has often been expressed:

“But the idea is a very complex one. When Nuer give their cattle in sacrifice they are very much, and in a very intimate way, giving part of themselves. What they surrender are living creatures, gifts more expressive of the self and with a closer resemblance to it than inanimate things, and these living creatures are the most precious of their possessions, so much so that they can be said to participate in them to the point of identification.”

Why Lévi-Strauss (1966: 223) should consider this kind of identification and principle of “self-giving” to be “contrasting and incompatible” with identifications of a “totemic” kind is, however, difficult to understand. In each of the two cases, – “totemic” and “sacrificial” – we have a renunciation of a certain kind of “flesh” which is identified as in some sense “one’s own”. In each case, a principle of exchange is involved, displayed or concealed (“sacrifice” being, of course, an exchange with the gods). And in each case, the “flesh” which is exchanged, respected or avoided by ordinary mortals acquires, in being so treated, the characteristics of something “set apart”, “sacred” or “divine”.

The Nuer abide rigidly by the “own kill” rule. That is, they will not kill cattle in order to eat the meat themselves. Evans-Pritchard writes, in fact, that “an ox slain simply from desire for meat may *cien*, take ghostly vengeance on, its slayer....” (1956: 265). Life is taken only when it is really necessary, and then the reason is explained carefully not only to God but (as in “the bear cult” and countless rituals of hunters) often to the ox itself. The Nuer

“address the ox and tell it why it is being killed – not that they think it understands. They are justifying themselves in taking its life” (p. 266).

To take life for oneself is not a sufficient reason. The life-taking must be for a higher good.

When the Nuer are compelled to kill their cattle in times of famine, they make an invocation over the animals asking God that “the meat may be soft In their stomachs and not bring them sickness”, Evans-Pritchard writes that this is not exactly sacrifice – the people are, after all, killing for the meat – “but it shows that there is a feeling of guilt about killing animals for food even when hunger compels it, and we can say that all cattle, and also sheep and goats, are reserved, or set apart, for sacrifice and their lives should not be

taken, except in the special circumstances I have mentioned, for any other purpose” (p. 266). The taboo here is not merely against killing. It is a rule or feeling against killing-and-eating, or killing-to-eat. Killing in itself is perfectly moral, provided it is for the higher good. In fact, life-taking or life-exchange is absolutely essential as a means of partaking in this higher good. The fact that cattle are reserved for sacrifice means that they are in a special way reserved to be killed – provided only that the killing involves self-sacrifice, renunciation and exchange (pp. 223-4; 266-9). Moreover, there is nothing wrong with eating the meat of the sacrificial victims:

“People show their desire for meat without reserve and it is the festal character of sacrifices which gives them much of their significance in the life of the Nuer.”

In an aside indicating once more the reality of the own kill rule, Evans-Pritchard immediately adds:

“This is perhaps most noticeable at weddings, when, moreover, those who get the flesh are not those who sacrifice the animal....” (p. 263).

There is nothing wrong, then, with eating following a killing. The stipulation is simply that an exchange should first occur. The flesh should be consumed only after the “life” of the animal has been received by God, and only on condition that those involved in the actual killing were acting upon motives transcending mere self-interest or desire for meat.

Writing of the relationship between “totemism” and “sacrifice”, Lévi-Strauss (1966: 22) states that the two systems (“so-called” totemism in the first case, plain sacrifice in the second) are “contrasting and incompatible”, “mutually exclusive” and the “opposite” of each other. In a similar way, Evans-Pritchard (writing six years earlier) goes out of his way to deny significant parallels between Nuer “sacrifice” and the “totemism” of the same people. For him, Nuer “sacrifice” is a very definitely-demarcated thing, a basic ritual of the Nuer and “an enactment of their most fundamental religious conceptions” (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 197). Other forms of flesh-giving or renunciation among the Nuer are quite different things.

Some things are sacrifice, and other things are not, according to Evans-Pritchard, and it is important to distinguish which things are which. The Nuer,

when no ox or other suitable victim is available for sacrifice, sometimes treat a cucumber as if it were an ox, and “sacrifice” that. This, according to Evans-Pritchard’s definition of the term, is the institution of “sacrifice”. But the Nuer also cast away lumps of tobacco, beads and other small pieces of property in minor troubles or anxieties “when there is a sudden danger for which immediate action is to be taken and there is no time for formalities, or when a man is in the bush and cannot lay his hands on a beast or even a cucumber” (p. 197). This is not “sacrifice”, although the intention is evidently similar (the suppliant “asks God to take the offering and spare him”) and although it is only for lack of an animal or cucumber that substitutes have to be found. When a cucumber substitutes for an ox, it is sacrifice; when something else in turn substitutes for a cucumber, it is not. Evans-Pritchard continues:

“I exclude also the offering of beer or milk, poured in libation, often at the foot of a tethering peg to which a beast dedicated to some spirit is tied, by a very poor person who cannot afford animal sacrifices” (p. 197).

So when a person is too poor to afford an animal and has to make an offering of something cheaper instead – in association with an animal – this still does not count as “sacrifice”, even though clearly the poverty-stricken suppliant hopes or imagines that it does count.

To the Nuer, cattle are regarded as “sacred”. But according to Evans-Pritchard this has nothing to do with the fact that the Nuer regard other animals as “sacred” for reasons of a “totemic” kind. We are dealing with two different things – not with the contrasting applications of a unitary principle to two different categories, domesticated cattle on the one hand, wild game on the other. Cattle, explains Evans-Pritchard, “are regarded as sacred only because they are reserved for sacrifice and in the sense defined by that purpose” (p. 266). This is to be distinguished from the fact that Nuer “have friendly feelings towards all birds” (p. 80), or with the fact that their “totemism” leads them to “respect” beasts such as the lions, crocodiles, tortoises, snakes, ostriches, durra-birds and various fish which are included among their “totems”. For Evans-Pritchard, “totemism” is one thing, “sacrifice” quite another, and Robertson-Smith (1914) – who was one of the first thinkers to suggest an intimate connection – was mistaken to relate the two (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 273-4). Curiously enough, Lévi-Strauss (1966: 223) makes a very

similar attack on Robertson Smith's view (which is described as "a matter of astonishment").

In Chapter Two of this thesis, it was noted that apologies to killed game animals have been reported from many parts of the world. Fears of the avenging "souls" of the killed animals have been typically found in association with an array of "rites of atonement" or "propitiatory ceremonies" designed to avert possible retribution. Cherokee hunters asked pardon of the deer they killed, believing that if they failed to do so, the immortal Little Deer – the chief of the deer tribe – would track the hunter to his home by the blood-drops on the ground and would put the spirit of rheumatism into him (Mooney 1890: 45; cited in Fraser 1912, 2: 241). Before they went out to hunt for elk, antelope or deer, the Apaches used to resort to sacred caves, where the medicine-men propitiated the gods of the animals they were about to kill (Bourke 1891: 436; cited in Fraser 1912, 2: 242). The bear-cult which has already been mentioned was almost always associated with fears of being haunted by the "soul", the "Manido" or "Master" (or "Mistress") of a killed bear. The distinctions drawn by Evans-Pritchard may have some validity in their place, but to treat them as absolute would destroy rather than assist full understanding. To appreciate this, let us return, momentarily, to the fact that Nuer feel tempted to apologise to an ox before killing it, fearing its "ghostly vengeance" on a man who kills "simply from desire for meat...." (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 265). Can it really be that this is entirely distinct from those hunters' taboos and propitiatory ceremonies discussed above and recorded from every continent? Evans-Pritchard does not view Nuer attitudes toward oxen as "totemic", and perhaps there is no reason why he should. Yet can it really be that his informants' fears of angering the "souls" of oxen are wholly unconnected with their fears of angering the "spirits" of their totems which "are with God in the sky" (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 78)?

### **The Ojibwa revisited**

In relation to sets of meat avoidances of this kind we can ask: Is all this "totemism" or not? The question may not be very meaningful, but any definition of "totemism" which excluded such rituals and beliefs would always seem somewhat arbitrary. It seems clear, in any event, that to the Chippewa and



Ojibwa from whose language the term “totemism” has been derived, belief in animals’ avenging spirits was very much a part of the same cosmology as that which inspired “respect” for animals considered to be “relatives”.

Let us return, as Lévi-Strauss does, to the original account by James Long (1791: 86-7) in which the term “totamism” first appeared in print. A man whose “totam” was a Bear (according to Long) “accidentally” killed a bear while on a hunting trip. He was later (according to the Indian’s own account) accosted and scratched by an avenging bear who knocked him down and demanded an explanation for the crime. The bear accepted the explanation, promising that the Master of Life would not be angry with either the hunter or his tribe. But the Indian himself, on returning home, was filled with remorse and anxiety. He told Long:

“Beaver, my faith is lost, my totam is angry, I shall never be able to hunt any more.”

Tylor (1899: 140) and Fraser (1910, 3: 52) accused the unsophisticated interpreter and trader, Long, of having naively confused together two quite separate “things”, and Lévi-Strauss, (1969b: 90-2) follows them in this accusation. Lévi-Strauss, accordingly, insists strenuously that the Ojibwa “system of totemic names” must have been “entirely distinct” from the system of guardian spirits of individuals – the “manido system.” This enables him to make his crucial point: “All the food tabus reported from the Ojibwa derive from the manido system”, not the totemic system. In other words, it was only a men’s guardian spirit (manido) – something entirely distinct from a “totem” – which he was forbidden to kill or eat. Contrary to Long’s story, there was nothing to prevent a man of the Bear totem from killing and eating a bear.

Such is Lévi-Strauss’s assertion. Yet despite his attack on “the confusion between the totem and guardian spirit into which Long fell” (Lévi-Strauss 1969b: 92), Lévi-Strauss himself lets slip enough information to confirm the substance of Long’s position. If we ignore the emphasis in the following sentence and simply concentrate on the facts, it can be seen that hunters had to be very careful about killing and eating their totems. Lévi-Strauss (1969gb: 89; citing Landes 1937) writes:

“The totem was freely killed and eaten, with certain ritual precautions, viz., that permission had first to be asked of the animal, and apologies to be made to it afterwards”.

To say that a man can eat his totem “freely”, and also to say that he can only eat it if he asks permission beforehand and apologizes afterwards, is to say two opposite and mutually exclusive things at the same time. If “certain ritual precautions” were required before killing and eating a totem, then the statement: “All the food tabus reported from the Ojibwa derive from the manido system” is simply not true.

In a eulogistic Introduction to Lévi-Strauss’s *Totemism* (the English Pelican edition), Roger Poole (1959: 17-18) once again cites Tylor and Frazer in support of the accusation that Long “wrote that the Ojibwa refrain from killing their totems, when in fact what he should have said was that they refrained from killing their manitoo”. Yet, somewhat inconsistently, he continues:

“The interesting thing to notice, however, is that both Tylor and Frazer are so sure about what ‘totemism’ is: they can even correct direct observers like Long from the wisdom of their researches. If Long gave a unitary version of what ‘totemism’ is, and if Tylor and Frazer pulled his single definition into two separate bits, it does not exonerate Tylor and Frazer from holding to another unitary conception of totemism themselves.”

The difficulty for Poole, of course, is that if this pointed criticism applies to Tylor and Frazer, it must equally apply to Lévi-Strauss himself. Poole does not pursue this thought.

### **Conclusion: totemism, sacrifice and the “bear cult”**

It is a fruitless endeavour to keep trying to pull definitions of portions of a reality which is continuous into neat and tidy separate bits. The “bear cult” is not a separate “thing” from “totemism” or “rites of atonement”, any more than these are separate “things” from beliefs in the immortality and supernatural efficacy of animal “souls”. It is not definitions which we need if we are to succeed in accurately describing such things and cataloguing and classifying them in an intelligible way. It is a grasp of underlying principles – of abstract formal structures.

But if this applies to the relations between “totemism” and “atonement rites” etc., it also applies to the relations between all of these things and “sacrifice”. Leach (1975: 83) has expressed rather neatly the logical connection between animal-sacrifice and the assumption that animals have immortal souls. He begins with the assumption that a man on death releases his soul into the world beyond. From this, the rest follows:

“If we want to make a gift to a being in the Other World, the ‘soul’, that is to say the metaphysical essence, of the gift must be transmitted along the same route as is travelled by the soul of a dead man. We must therefore first kill the gift so that its metaphysical essence is separated from its material body, and then transfer the essence to the Other World by rituals which are analogous to those of a funeral.”

\* \* \* \* \*

We conclude with two part-totemic, part-sacrificial, part-atonement-rite cases – one from the Aino of northeast Asia and Japan, the other from the Australian Aranda.

The Aino practise a local form of “the Bear cult”. Like all “Bear cult” rituals (although in this case, perhaps, more obviously), it seems to merge quite imperceptibly into what, by almost any definition, would have to be termed “sacrifice”.

“The Aino of Saghalen”, writes Frazer (1912, 2: 188-9; citing Labbe 1903: 227-58), “rear bear cubs and kill them with... ceremonies....” The animal is kept for about two years in a cage, and then killed at a festival which always takes place in winter and at night. The day preceding the sacrifice is devoted to lamentation, old women taking turns in the duty of weeping and groaning in front of the bear’s cage. Then in the middle of the night an orator makes a long speech to the beast, reminding him how they have taken care of him, and fed him well, and bathed him in the river, and made him warm and comfortable:

“‘Now’, he proceeds, ‘we are holding a great festival in your honour. Be not afraid. We will not hurt you. We will only kill you and send you to the god of the forest who loves you. We are about to offer you a good dinner, the best you have ever eaten among us, and we will all weep for you together. The Aino who will kill you is the best shot among us. There he is, he weeps and asks for your forgiveness; you will feel almost nothing, it will be done so

quickly.... Remember', he cries, 'remember! I remind you of your whole life and of the services we have rendered you.... tell the gods to give us riches, that our hunters may return from the forest laden with rare furs and animals good to eat; that our fishers may find troops of seals on the shore and in the sea, and that their nets may crack under the weight of the fish.... Ye have given you food and joy and health; now we kill you in order that you may in return send riches to us and to our children'.

The basic principles of "sacrifice" – the notion of communing with the gods through the taking of life, of gift-giving to the divine powers in expectation of blessings in return – are here being expressed as clearly as among the cattle-owning Nuer.

It will be recalled that Lévi-Strauss (1986: 224) went to great lengths to explain the "fundamental differences between the system of totemism and that of sacrifice", the former being illusory and the latter real. But can the Aino attitude towards the bear really be counterposed so starkly to the Australian Aranda attitude towards, say, the *inarlinga* or spiny ant-eater? This animal was especially reserved for the pleasure of the old men. It had to be killed considerably:

"If the animal's nose bled when it was killed, they recited a short speech to it, asking its forgiveness. They believed that if they neglected to do this, the soul of the *inarlinga* would tell the stones of the hills to make the hunter's toenail come off and cause him to fall when he next hunted the euro" (Röheim 1974: 43-4)

Or to take an example more clearly "totemic" in character, an Aranda hunter

"...may kill his totem, but in doing so he must proceed humanely: a kangaroo man must not brutally attack the kangaroo 'so that the blood gushes out', but is only permitted to hit it on the neck. Having thus killed the animal, he may eat its head, feet and liver: the rest he must leave to his friends. The emu man must exercise similar caution. A man belonging to a specific fish totem can eat only a few fishes of that species; but if the fish stink, he may eat of them to his heart's content. The wild-turkey man, on the other hand, may kill his totem, but the eating of any part of it is forbidden to him. The same applies to the eagle man" (Goldenweiser 1910: 196-7; citing C. Strehlow).

These examples may not be of "sacrifice". But in all this, it appears that a man's respect for his totemic species constitutes a self-denying ordinance limiting his right simply to kill and eat. It is true – as Lévi-Strauss stresses – that to identify an animal species as "one's own flesh" is a

cognitive act. But whatever the intellectual, cognitive aspects at work here, a moral, social, and economic dimension is also implied. And in discussing materials of this kind, it seems difficult to determine where “sacrifice” ends and “totemism” begins. In every case which has been examined in this chapter, there are certain species to which certain rules apply. These rules are rules of “avoidance”, “renunciation” or “giving”. They involve an offering up of “one’s own flesh” – flesh one has made one’s own through an intimate act of identification – the gift flowing in some cases to animal souls, in others to the gods, in others to in-laws or other “respected” social powers. Blessings in the form of approval, well-being, fertility, abundance and/or hunting-luck are expected in return. The common core concept is that you may kill animals of the species concerned (or allow others to kill them), but not greedily, not without a conscience, and not merely to eat the meat yourself. To violate such an ethic is to invite fearsome retribution from the spirits and powers, however these may be conceived.

“Totemism”, then, is only one of a number of partial, inadequate and misleading concepts which have been developed by anthropologists. Like all of these concepts, it corresponds only in the most crude and clumsy way to anything which exists or has ever existed in the real world. In that sense, like such concepts as “the family”, “marriage” or “descent”, totemism is an illusion existing in the imagination of certain thinkers and anthropologists. But “totemism” is by no means the worst of these concepts, or the most misleading. And the fact that it creates certain illusions does not mean that behind and beyond its limitations, nothing more substantial is there. Lévi-Strauss may well be correct in criticizing a feature of anthropology’s history as a discipline: the nineteenth century inventors and supporters of the notion of “totemism” were indeed – as he alleges – for the most part ethnocentric bigots. These thinkers delighted in presenting examples of the irrationality of the “uncivilised” mind. They were mistaken – at least if it was implied that “savages” are any more irrational than ourselves. But this does not mean that the founders of anthropology were mistaken to suspect a unity of principle underlying the various phenomena which they took to be “totemic”. Quite the reverse: the unity of principle underlying “totemic” phenomena is more real, more astonishing and more significant than even the most ardent champions of totemism in the nineteenth century could ever have known. The “own kill” rule

is not just a way of thinking or a magical belief; it points to a way of life pursued by humanity for millennia before the concept of private property was permitted to gain a hold. The unity of principle underlying totemism” links sex with food, kinship with economics, ritual with myth and thought with life with a simplicity too stunning to be attributed to chance or the random coming together of separate “features”. And, when all is said and done, the old-fashioned word, “totemism”, with all the connotations, meanings and ambiguities which have been lent it by literary or anthropological usage over the years, still evokes this unity more tellingly than any other of the traditional expressions we have. The “phantom” which Lévi-Strauss (1989b: 83) feared his own work might, despite himself, re-awaken to life – this phantom may indeed be impossible to exorcise. Von Brandenstein (1972) in a prophetic passage likened it to “the old Egyptian Bennu bird which burned itself to death only to emerge from the ashes in the old form but with a new life essence”.

**Chapter 4: The sex-strike**

*“In ancient times, a long time ago, the men lived by themselves, a long way off. The women had left the men. The men had no women at all. Alas for the men, they had sex with their hands”.*

Opening lines of Mehinaku myth:

*“The Women Discover the Songs of the Flute”*

Gregor (1985; 112).

The preceding two chapters have focused on an unexamined assumption with roots deep in the history of western anthropology. It has been noted how hunters’ “totemic” and other avoidances have been mistakenly viewed as departures from an assumed base-line in which hunters appropriated their own kills.

In a similar way, we could examine other features of the hidden agenda of western anthropology’s research-programme. We could investigate, for example, the manner in which kinship-studies have assumed as base-line the “elementary” or “nuclear” family, unilineal descent, exogamy and classificatory forms of kinship being seen as “distortions” or “deviations” from such a supposed norm (Malinowski 1930: 100-03). It would certainly be instructive to examine the consensual “origins” assumptions of the main twentieth-century western traditions of social anthropology. These assumptions have been all the more insidious for being covert and unexamined. They have been shielded from interrogation by an almost universal refusal to treat research into social origins as a legitimate field of scientific study. Malinowski helped establish this dual pattern by (a) professing a complete lack of interest in theories of “origins” – whilst (b) basing his own theories of kinship on the assumption that its origins are to be found in the nuclear family ( 1930: 100-03; 1932: xxiii-iv). He was thus able to pour scorn on “theories” of origins whilst slipping in his own assumptions as unquestionable axioms. The precedent has been widely followed.

However, to pursue such themes would take us beyond the scope of this thesis. The aim here is to focus our criticism upon the refreshingly explicit

origins-theories of Lévi-Strauss, and in the course of this criticism, to construct an alternative.

\* \* \* \* \*

In *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Lévi-Strauss (1969a) presented his “exchange of women” model as a picture of the origins of human culture. It was a good model – at least in the sense that it inspired a work which remains (despite all the criticisms) the most comprehensive and coherent cross-cultural study of kinship-systems which social anthropology has achieved. Beginning with the simplest conceivable system of “restricted exchange” – a system in which two groups of men exchange their sisters and daughters between themselves – Lévi-Strauss showed how an immense variety of more elaborate systems can be conceptualised as systematic permutations and transformations worked upon this model.

The novelty of Lévi-Strauss’s approach was that instead of merely examining the internal structure of descent groups, he visualised streams and currents of precious valuables – above all, women – flowing between groups in often-immense cycles. A current of women would flow in one direction, while another current of bridewealth valuables (treated by Lévi-Strauss as less essential or merely symbolic) usually flowed in reverse. In the more open-ended, “generalised” structures of sexual exchange, an extraordinary amount of inter-male trust was involved, as men in one group surrendered their most precious sexual and reproductive assets to another or several other groups, knowing or hoping that some time, some day, the system of reciprocity would ensure repayment in kind and the restoration of the temporarily-forfeited imbalance. Eventually – after in some cases many generations – the wheel would have turned (theoretically and assuming stability) full-circle, each formal category of men and women occupying their initial positions. Where the periodicity was slow and the number of male groups linked in each cycle large, the stress of women functioned as continuous threads binding together into one coherent fabric groups of men dispersed widely over the landscape and stretched across several generations.

\* \* \* \* \*



It is not intended here to survey the numerous criticisms which have been levelled at Lévi-Strauss's work on kinship. At this point, we will simply return to Lévi-Strauss's point of departure – his “exchange of women” model – and ask some questions posed by our previous discussion.

The most basic point is that Lévi-Strauss takes as his starting point not mixed human social groups but specifically groups of men. These all-male groups establish the incest rule through an act of trust and generosity toward one another. The men in each group surrender those women who are biologically “their own” (sisters and daughters) to other men, hoping and trusting to receive back other women in return. Lévi-Strauss is at pains to emphasize in this context what he terms

“a universal fact, that the relationship of reciprocity which is the basis of marriage is not established between men and women, but between men by means of women, who are merely the occasion of this relationship” (1989a: 116).

It is widely agreed that this is a fair description of what seems to happen in portions of the ethnographic record. Where rules of exogamy apply to patrilineal, patrilocal bands, lineages, clans or moieties, the effect is that men in each group seem to be forging inter-clan relationships by exchanging women between themselves. Lévi-Strauss richly illustrates this model with examples from every continent, and declares it to lie at the basis of all culture.

The “value of exchange”, writes Lévi-Strauss (1969a 480),

“is not simply that of the goods exchanged. Exchange – and consequently the rule of exogamy which expresses it – has in itself a social value. It provides the means of binding men together, and of superimposing upon the natural links of kinship the henceforth artificial links – artificial in the sense that they are removed from chance encounters or the promiscuity of family life – of alliance governed by rule”.

A number of features characterise this model. Firstly, it is assumed that links of “blood” or kinship are “natural”; it is only marital alliances which establish the realm of culture. Culture is based neither on the biological family, nor on links – however extended – through brothers, sisters or parents and offspring. It arises exclusively out of the “artificial” marriage-links

forged between biological units – links which are produced by the incest taboo and consequent need for each family to exchange its sisters and daughters.

Secondly, each marital union, once produced, remains intact as the basis of social order-: there is little room in the model for divorce, re-marriage, promiscuity or extra-marital liaisons. While Lévi-Strauss does not assume monogamy (1969m: 37), marriage, whether polygamous or not, is theoretically a permanent bond: a woman, once yielded by a “wife-giving” group, remains ideally with her husband’s group for life.

The model fits reasonably well with an image of patrilocal, patrilineal bands or lineages, each organised around a male core of kinsmen who bring in wives from other similar groups. It is less able to cope with alternative arrangements, especially where (as in most hunter-gatherer cultures) residence-patterns are flexible and/or “marriage” is established tenuously with a long period of bride-service and initial uxorilocality. Neither does the model fit very easily with a matrilineal, matrilineal bias, which may be pronounced in some systems and a dimension or component in many others, in Lévi-Strauss’s eyes, indeed, a “matrilineal society, even though patrilocal”, has “peculiar problems to resolve” because of the difficulties of cementing the marital union and incorporating the wife firmly in her husband’s group (1969a: 116-17). Yet Lévi-Strauss’s key concept of “generalised exchange” – exchange extending beyond the mere to-and-fro reciprocity between two lineages or moieties – assumes the existence of “disharmonic regimes” in which either the descent-rule is matrilineal or the residence rule is matrilineal (1969a: 266-73, 438-55). Given Lévi-Strauss’s point of departure – masculine primacy and the centrality of male marital control – it is unclear how such rules could have come to establish their force.

Thirdly, whether a woman is sexually available or non-available is – according to Lévi-Strauss – a matter decided by the application or non-application to her of male-imposed rules of exogamy or incest-avoidance. The model leaves little room for other possible factors determining women’s sexual availability/non-availability. In particular, periodic taboos – on sex during menstruation, before and after childbirth, while preparing a trap, making hunting-nets or organising a collective hunting expedition – these and similar

restrictions are not accounted for by the theory. Given an underlying assumption that sexual availability is a married woman's normal and permanent state, such things inevitably appear as anomalies.

Even more anomalous are institutionalised elements of marital instability, whether or not these stem from a matrilineal and/or matrilocal bias. Levi- Strauss (1969a: 116) insists that for human culture generally, "patrilineal institutions" have "absolute priority" over matrilineal ones. Furthermore,

"...it is because political authority, or simply social authority, always belongs to men, and because this masculine priority appears constant, that it adapts itself to a bilineal or matrilineal form of descent in most primitive societies, or imposes its model on all aspects of social life, as is the case in more developed groups" (1969a: 117).

In this context, the model's emphasis on the absolute cultural primacy of marital alliance would make factors such as female-initiated separation or divorce appear anomalous in the extreme. The implication is that marriage is final and permanent. Women with their kin can have no say in restricting or terminating sexual access to a spouse after marriage – as frequently happens for example, when a "lazy" or "unlucky" hunter in a hunter-gatherer society is rejected by his wife and/or in-laws unless or until he can restore his reputation with adequate presentations to them of game (see below).

Finally, although it claims to present an image of the origins of human culture as such, Lévi-Strauss's model is in fact much more restricted. Despite the wider claims of structuralism generally, the "exchange of women" has implications only for kinship-studies in a somewhat narrowly-defined sense. A theory of the origins of culture ought to be additionally testable in the light of evidence from other domains – such as those of technology, economics, ritual, politics, ideology, mythology and much else.

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If we take as our starting point, not "the exchange of women" but an exchange of services between men and women, a model can be produced without these drawbacks. We may retain Lévi-Strauss's insight that in the process of cultural origins, a vital step must have been the establishment of sexual taboos. But in

what follows, our point of departure will be the notion that women (the supportive role of their kinsmen in this will be discussed later) have themselves some role to play in determining whether they are sexually available or not. A model will be presented within which the “incest taboo” arises as an inescapable aspect of a more basic reality: the capacity of the human female to say “yes”, and her equal capacity to say “no”.

The existence of female power in male-dominated societies has been recognised and given due attention in numerous studies of gender relations (Holy 1985: 186). Analytically, it has usually been presented as part of women’s strategy to subvert all-pervasive male dominance or as a defence-mechanism against it (see Cronin 1977; Ullrich 1977). More generally, women’s refusal to cook or to cohabit sexually with their husbands has been pointed out as “a usual strategy to which women resort to gain their way in the face of men’s dominance or as a sanction against men’s actions or conduct which they consider inappropriate” (Holy 1985: 186, citing Faulme 1963; Cohen 1971; Strathern 1972: 27, 45-6; Ronaldo 1974: 37; Lamphere 1974: 99). Holy (1985: 186) writes that in the case of the Berti (Northern Darfur Province, Sudan),

“The woman’s favourite stratagem in the case of a dispute with her husband or when she feels that she has been maltreated by him is to refuse him sexual access and to refuse to cook for him.”

In Lévi-Strauss’s model, there is no room for women who can indicate “yes” or “no” in sexual terms themselves. Women are spoken for in this respect by men. While this may be a relatively accurate picture of what happens in numerous male-dominated societies, as a model of the “norm” – against which to measure elements of female autonomy as “deviations” or “anomalies” – it is unsatisfactory. Simplicity in a model may be a virtue, and Lévi-Strauss’s model of culture’s “initial situation” certainly excels in this respect. But the advantages are lost if the outcome is that a vast range of “anomalous” findings remain unaccounted for, leading to the need for various additional models and theories which may serve their own purposes but meanwhile complicate the field. In this connection, we need only mention that Lévi-Strauss’s model of incest-avoidance attributes the taboo’s origin not in part to mothers and sisters but exclusively to the self-denial of fathers and brothers; it is men in positions of responsibility, not humans of both sexes, who are attributed with the power to say “no”. The extraordinary cross-cultural

strength of the mother-son incest-taboo as compared with the notoriously poor record of dominant males in keeping away from their daughters/younger sisters seems in this light anomalous; it is not discussed by Lévi-Strauss.

The ethnographic record provides a mixed picture of relations between the sexes. Although male dominance may be universal or nearly so, it is offset by numerous factors in different cultures to a greater or lesser extent. Women after marriage are not always totally isolated from their own kin, fully incorporated into their husband's group, totally lacking in autonomy and deprived collectively of a sphere of power of their own. Where decisions on sexual availability are concerned – to take only one aspect of decision-making – they often have some say themselves. Within the intimate sphere of marital relations, this is surely no less “normal” (on any definition) than the situation in which a wife must always be sexually ready for her husband.

But it is not only private intimacies which are at issue. Where – as in most hunter-gatherer societies – a man's marriage for many years gives him no absolute or unconditional sexual rights in his spouse, a woman can draw on the support of her mother, sister, brothers or other kin as a lever to secure advantages for herself within the relationship. An unsatisfactory husband or lover (particularly if he is not well-established or is a lazy, inept or selfish hunter) may be unceremoniously told to go. The hunter who values his relationship and wishes to keep it will therefore make strenuous efforts to succeed – much greater than would be the case if his sexual rights were unconditional and secure. Landes (1938: 131) writes of the Ojibwa of Western Ontario:

“A married man who is too lazy to hunt can be supported by his wife for a time, but her tolerance will be changed for scorn, then to indifference, and finally she will desert him. A man who is unsuccessful on the hunt, and who goes with his wife to her parents' wigwam, can expect to be rejected and left to die of starvation. In one case the parents' scorn was so great that they took their daughter in to feed and lodge her, but refused their son-in-law. Folk-tales are concerned with the same theme”.

Among hunter-gatherers, some such pattern is not unusual. Women under these circumstances can use a measure of control over their own sexuality as a means of insisting on economic security for themselves. Young men are motivated to

prove themselves in the hunt, presenting gifts of game to their wives and/or wives' kin, as a condition of their sexual status. Among the Brazilian Shavante indians, women receive an unsuccessful hunter "with a marked coldness", while a successful hunter "flings down his game for the women to prepare" and basks in the resulting glory (Maybury-Lewis 1967: 36). Among the Peruvian Sharanahua, to whom we will turn in the next section:

"Both the pleasures and the pains of hunting are related not only to the actual activity but to the implication that a good hunter is a virile man... Virility implies a positive response from women. Further, the culturally structured idea that a successful hunter is a virile man carries a sting: the unsuccessful hunter is by social definition not virile" (Siskind 1973b: 232).

Far from being unusual, men's need to ply their wives and/or in-laws with meat as the test of their virility and the condition of the marital tie may indeed be regarded as the norm – certainly among hunters and gatherers and probably much more widely (Collier and Rosaldo 1981).

#### **A case-study: the Sharanahua**

Much of the literature on sexual politics in bride-service societies (Collier and Rosaldo 1981) indicates a complex interplay between male influences and female ones, as well as a subtle dialectic between economics and sex. In this connection, one of the most sensitive pictures is Janet Siskind's (1973a, 1973b) account of life in the village of Marcos, among the Sharanahua of Peru (located on the Upper Purús River just west of the Brazilian border). Their cultural heritage is that of interfluvial hunters, and their society is still strongly focused on meat, although the women's contribution through gathering is substantial and some gardening is nowadays practised, too. Residence is matrilineal, a son-in-law contributing meat to his wife's kin. The special value of Siskind's account is that it shows us a mechanism of exchange through which women can gain strength in a hunting context – even though here as almost everywhere, it is the men who kill the animals.

The Sharanahua have two basic patterns of hunting. In the first, each man decides for himself whether or not to go hunting. He usually hunts alone and brings the game back to his own household. Men in this mode are "reluctant and

unenthusiastic”, however, since the relative privacy makes it difficult for even a good hunter to gain the widespread female acclaim and sexual prestige for which every man yearns. “At times”, however,

“when there has been no meat in the village for three or four days, the women decide to send the men on a special hunt. They talk together and complain that there is no meat and the men are lazy” (Siskind 1973n: 96).

In contrast to the first pattern, during a “special hunt” – the second pattern – the young men go hunting as a group:

“The special hunt is started by the women. Early in the evening, all the young women go from house to house singing to every man. Each woman chooses a man to hunt for her, a man who is not her husband nor of her kin group, though he may be her cross-cousin, her husband’s brother, or a stranger. The men leave the following day and are met on their return by a line-up of all the women of the village, painted and beaded and wearing their best dresses. Even the older men will not face this line without game, but, if unsuccessful, they beach their canoes and slink to their households by a back trail. The choice of partners is usually a choice of lovers, and many partnerships are maintained for years” (1973b: 233-4).

There is, then, a collective hunt, initiated by the women, at the conclusion of which the face-painted women form a kind of “picket line” at the entrance to the village, warmly welcoming the hunters if they carry meat but rejecting and shaming them if they have been unsuccessful.

In motivating the men to go on such a hunt, the women use a mixture of sexual enticement, teasing and potential threat. While the men are away, the women talk and laugh among themselves as to which of the men each is “waiting for”. A short time before the men are expected to return, the younger women pick *nawawakusi* (stinging nettles) “ready for later use against the men”. The men can be heard coming upriver when they are still half an hour from the village, and all the women “who are taking part in the special hunt” line up in front of the main house. Assuming a successful hunt, it is at this point that the women take the game animals from the men:

“The men walk solemnly up from the port, and silently each man drops the game he has shot on the ground before the waiting women and walks to his own house. Each woman picks up the animal that her partner has dropped and takes it to her own house and begins to prepare it” (1973a: 96-98).

The meat is skinned, cut up and put to boll by the women, and then eaten in a general process of feasting and reciprocal visiting. Siskind (1973a: 98-100) continues:

“Everyone has barely finished eating when the young women burst into action with stalks of *nawawakusi* in their hands, trying to corner a young man. The men laugh, but they run, staying out or reach, hiding behind a house, until they are caught. Then they stand still, letting the girls triumphantly rub their chests, necks, and arms with the stinging nettle, which is said to give strength. The men finally seize some *nawawakusi* from the women and the chase becomes two sided with small groups of men and women in pursuit and retreat, laughing and shouting”.

It is clear that sex is in this society one of the economic forces of production – it is the major factor motivating men to hunt. For men, the threat of female ridicule and withdrawal is very real. A woman wants to “eat” a man; but she finds male flesh unaccompanied by the requisite animal flesh simply unexciting:

“The prestige system carries a sting; The good hunter is the virile man, but the hunter with little skill or bad luck does not find sympathy. When children scream at their mothers, ‘*Nami pipai!*’, ‘I want to eat meat!’ their mothers’ reply, ‘*Nawi yamai*’, ‘There is no more meat’, is a goad that women aim at their husbands, provoking them to hunt again, implying that they are less than men since there is no more meat.

A man may spend hours in the forest. One day Basta returned empty handed, tired, muddy from wading through swampy ground and picking ticks off his body. No words of sympathy were forthcoming, and I asked Yawandi why she and Bashkondi were painting their faces. She replied in a voice that carried to the hammock where Basta rested alone, ‘We want to paint, there’s no meat, let’s eat penises!’ On other days as well I have suspected that women paint their faces as an unspoken challenge to the men....” (1973a: 105).

The special hunt usually results in more meat in the village than a normal day’s hunt. The social pressure of the special hunt, the line of women painted and waiting, makes young men try hard to succeed. And this kind of hunt breaks across any tendency of society to coalesce into small self-interested biological family groups – a tendency which would be very risky given the chancy nature of hunting. Referring to hunting generally, Siskind (1973a: 88) writes that a system involving many men, and in which meat is widely shared,



“provides some insurance against the bad luck, illness, or lack of skill of a single hunter providing for a single family” (1973a; 88).

Meat from a special hunt is not just brought by a hunter to his wife, mother-in-law or other relative within the household but to a variety of households depending on the choice of partner on each occasion. The women in each household, receiving meat from their chosen lovers, then issue invitations to eat to their sisters and cousins in addition to many others. And since a basic requirement of the special hunt is female solidarity against men, in which as far as possible none of the women allows marriage or a lover to come between them, the result is an extended network of relationships and households. As Siskind (1973a; 109) puts it, the “combination of same sex solidarity and antagonism to the other sex prevents the households from becoming tightly closed units”.

At this point it is perhaps worth recalling an implication of the models of Lévi-Strauss – who counterposes kinship to alliance as nature to culture (1969a: 480). Such models would lead us to see little more than “nature” in the pre-marital and non-marital sisterly solidarity described by Siskind. “Culture”, in these terms, would depend upon male intervention in securing marital control over each wife. Here – it need hardly be stressed – we are looking at matters from a contrasting standpoint.

The teasing and the provocation of the special hunt games are symbolically sexual, coinciding with the partnerships formed by the hunt:

“Neither husbands nor wives are supposed to be jealous of the love affairs involved in the special hunt. In general, jealousy is considered to be a bad trait in a wife or a husband, and I have heard both men and women complain that they are unlucky to have a jealous spouse...” (1973a; 105).

Put at its crudest, comments Siskind (1973a; 103—04),

“the special hunt symbolizes an economic structure in which meat is exchanged for sex, This is neither a ‘natural’ nor ‘rational’ exchange since women produce at least as much of the food supply at Marcos, and a rational exchange would consist of viewing the economy as an exchange of women’s production for men’s. Certainly there is no evidence that women are naturally less interested in sex or more interested in meat than men are. This is a culturally produced socio-economic system in which sex is the incentive for hunting, and a man who is known to be a good hunter has a better

chance of gaining wives or mistresses... The special hunt gives an opportunity for men to demonstrate their hunting skill to women other than their wives. It is a dramatic portrayal of the exchange between the sexes, which structures daily interactions between men and women”.

Siskind (1973b: 234) sees all this as a point along a continuum among South American tropical forest peoples:

“One can see variations on a single theme from the crude gift of meat “to seduce a potential wife” among the Siriono (Holmberg 1950: 166); the elaboration of the special hunt among the Sharanahua; to the young Shavante’s provisioning his father-in-law with game after the consummation of his marriage.... (Maybury-Lewis 1967: 92). Whether men prove their virility by hunting and thus gain wives or offer meat to seduce a woman, the theme is an exchange of meat for sex”.

Finally, It is worth adding that Siskind sees a connection between gardening among the Sharanahua and the development of more stable marital relationships. “Agriculture”, she writes (1973a: 116-17)

“... demands a synchronisation of the work of men and women. In addition, agricultural work is an investment of time and effort; a man will not work hard for two months clearing land without the security of knowing that women will harvest and prepare the food. The sexual incentive for hunting is logical since hunting is a brief but recurring task as sex is a brief but recurring need. The ease with which marriages are established and broken at Marcos fits well with the basic economy, but a more stable relationship is essential for the responsibilities of agriculture”.

### **Unconditional marriage as anomaly**

It was noted earlier that Lévi-Strauss’s notion of the absolute primacy of marriage produces some theoretical problems. Let us, then, invert the norm or base-line position assumed by Lévi-Strauss. In doing this, we will be following the methodology introduced in the previous chapters. There – it will be remembered – the assumption that hunters eat their own kills was inverted, as a result of which “totemism”, “sacrifice” etc. appeared in a new light – not as anomalies to be separately explained but as residual expressions of a common “own kill” norm. The “anomaly”, from this standpoint, became any practice of eating one’s own kill without guilt or without attempts at averting the consequences of breaching a norm.

In what follows, inverting the usual assumptions, the situation in which a man has absolute rights of access to his wife will likewise be treated as anomalous. Features such as extra-marital relations, menstrual and postpartum taboos, in-law avoidances, taboos on sex prior to hunting, the separation of spouses at meals, the “ritualisation of male solidarity in antagonism to female solidarity” (Siskind 1973a: 109) etc. etc. will then appear in a new light. They will present themselves no longer as peculiar anomalies to be explained, but as residual expressions of a common underlying norm according to which wives are as a matter of course set apart ritually and in other ways from their husbands, simply because they belong in the opposite gender-camp. Features of kinship such as the avunculate and unilineal descent – which again may be seen as the ritual “setting apart” of the male parent (with kin) from the female parent (with kin) – will also by the same token appear as normal. The “normal” state is for a woman to remain, even after marriage, indestructibly attached in solidarity with her own gender group and her own kin.

To avoid possible misunderstanding, two points must be stressed at once. Firstly, none of the above implies that “absolute” or “permanent” marriage – the normative merging of husband and wife into an indestructible unit which claims primacy over sibling-unity and other kinship links – does not occur. Like the situation in which a man claims absolute rights in his own economic produce, it can occur and may even form the basis of certain social structures. The point is simply that if it is treated as the “initial situation”, the models and equations do not work. If absolute marriage is treated as the norm, there is a price to be paid in terms of theoretical understanding – the “anomalous” character of a vast range of features of traditional societies, ranging from menstrual taboos to the avunculate, from unilineal descent to bullroarer cults, from bride-service customs to “rule of women” myths.

Secondly, it should be clear that no attempt is being made to fault Lévi-Strauss simply by citing empirical “exceptions” to his models. Such a methodology would quickly rebound – in this case, on the arguments of this thesis itself. No “universal” can be discerned empirically – not even incest-avoidance. And although we have claimed universality for the own kill rule, the ethnographic record in this respect provides, as we have seen, only a very mixed picture. The rule is at least as often denied or evaded as it is

observed. In terms of average frequency, eating one's own kill may be as "normal" as not eating it. As a descriptive generalisation, therefore, it is not true to state that the rule is universally observed. But science – as Levi Strauss recognises – is not a matter of describing first one feature of reality, then a different one, then another and so on, norms or generalisations being derived by averaging out the differences. The results, in any event, would be uninteresting. Science involves getting beneath surface appearances to a deeper formal structure from which testable models of reality can be generated and which may be presented as an equation, law, principle or theorem. This formal structure, which is "pure" or "perfect", operates in this form not in reality but only under idealised "pure" conditions which have to be specified. Subsequently, account may be taken of the factors responsible for altering the findings which pure theory would predict. Since all real science proceeds by producing formal structures or models in this way, our criticism of Lévi-Strauss cannot be that his models are not empirical descriptions. It can only be that he proceeds from the wrong models – "wrong" in the sense that they can be supplanted by other models from which a more complete picture of reality can be built up.

In this thesis, sexual segregation is taken as the norm. We assume an "initial situation" in which women can give themselves sexually because they have something to give – their bodies are not completely owned or spoken for by others in advance. Viewing the same feature in the context of a hunting and gathering economy, it is assumed that women do not hunt, but use a measure of control over their own sexual availability to induce men to hunt for them. An implication is that women (supported by kin) have the capacity to withdraw themselves sexually. In effect, they go "on strike". Naturally, this does not imply that women do not enjoy sex or that sex seldom happens. It simply means that when sex occurs, it takes place as a release from the basic cultural constraints of the model – not in obedience to them. In this sense, no matter how joyfully celebrated and woven into the meanings and symbols of all cultural life, sex in human society is forever being delayed, postponed, harnessed to other ends, sublimated and transferred, its actual consummation always taking place just beyond, behind and in a sense "in spite of" culture. Sexual coupling, as something tending to undermine wider forms of solidarity, is for the public cultural domain always something of an embarrassment – in

a sense, it “should not” occur. When it does occur, the public, collective assembly either dissolves temporarily and happily for the occasion, or – if it remains in session throughout – it turns to one side, as if pretending not to know.

In the next few chapters, as we follow through the implications of this model, It will be seen that women’s “normative” state of relative autonomy, in limiting men’s rights in their wives, simultaneously and by the same token limits hunters’ rights in their kills, Within the model’s terms, the logic, the mechanisms and even the symbolic conceptualisations are identical for each level. Women periodically assert control over their own sexuality and thereby enforce the own kill rule.

We begin, then, not with male sexual self-restraint – as in the origins-models of Freud (1965’) and Lévi-Strauss (1969a) – but with a female sex-strike. This “initial situation” cannot be perceived, and has little directly to do with “the facts”. It is a theoretical construct located in imaginary time – at a point conceptualised as the origin of all human culture. Attempts to date this moment within the context of hominid evolution or prehistory may be valid and necessary, but they are exercises of a different order from that being undertaken here.



### **Chapter 5: The revolution**

*“Little as we know of the origins of human culture, it is not difficult to believe that the forms through which it transforms and renews itself are related to the way in which it first came into being” (Wagner 1972: 173).*

Our alternative model, centred upon gender-solidarity and the own kill rule, will now be delineated. To this end, the present chapter will bring together into one conceptual framework categories of evidence from a number of widely separated fields of enquiry. We begin with some general considerations on the subject of economics.

#### **Humans, animals and economics**

The economic anthropologist Thurnwald (1932: xi) was emphatic that

“The devouring of newly killed beasts....certainly cannot be called economics. More than this is implied in the term. If there ever was a time when man, or his ancestor, lived from moment to moment on what he killed or caught, it was a time without economics.”

Or as Braidwood (1957:122) put it, a man who followed animals “just to kill them to eat” would be “living just like an animal himself.”

An implication is that to be human is to go beyond foraging – it is to engage in relations of “production”, a position linked firmly with the names of Engels and Marx (1947: 7):

“Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion, or by anything else one likes. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence

But what is meant by “producing” in this context?

One possible argument might be that foragers are not producers. Humans – according to this conception – would only have begun “producing” when they learned how to domesticate animals and plants. This would imply that in

earlier periods – when all humans had merely killed And gathered what they found – our ancestors were not radically differentiating themselves on an economic level from monkeys or apes.

Much recent theorising on human origins has been based on notions of this kind. It is assumed that there is an essential evolutionary continuity linking human hunter-gatherers with non-human higher primates. Pfeiffer (1977: 28), for example, has asserted that until the appearance of “civilisation”, members of the human family “foraged as animals among animals”. More authoritatively, the primatologist Hladik (1975: 26) argues that chimpanzee “hunting and meat-eating behaviour could be compared with what is known about primitive human tribes of hunter-gatherers”, while Itani’s (1985: 595) aim is “to demonstrate the existence of culture” in primates and humans alike. Other primatologists have argued that chimpanzee hunting “blurs the line dividing human and non human behaviour” (Harding 1975: 256) and that these apes possess economic institutions (food-sharing, sexual division of labour etc.) not radically different from their human hunter-gatherer counterparts (Teleki 1981: 340).

In the light of our knowledge of the economic, social and symbolic systems of human hunter-gatherers, statements of this kind appear astonishing. Primate predation patterns are variations on a theme. Whatever the differences in such respects between one primate species (or one local community within a species) and the next, they pale almost into insignificance in the light of the contrast between the norms of human hunter-gatherers generally on the one hand – and those of non-human primates in general on the other.

The contrast is expressed in the fact that when a baboon or chimpanzee kills a small animal for food, the killer typically eats – or attempts to eat – the resultant meat. “The young antelopes that baboons sometimes kill”, writes Kummer (1971: 59),

“are almost exclusively eaten by the adult males, and fighting over such prey is frequent. The inability of baboons to share food is a behavioural characteristic that probably prevents them from shifting to hunting as a way of life.”



Suzuki (1975: 262-6) describes some Budongo Forest chimpanzees who had just killed a subadult blue duiker. Ten minutes after the victim was first heard screaming,

“I found the four big males in a tree crying and struggling with one another for the spoils of the duiker.... Several furious struggles....took place between the four animals; these were followed by silent periods of eating the meat.”

The victim was killed through being bitten, mauled and eventually torn limb from limb in the struggles of each chimpanzee to obtain a share; Suzuki could “hear at thirty metres the sound of tearing meat and bone.” Anxious to see parallels with the sharing-behaviour of human hunter-gatherers, Suzuki asserts that all this can be interpreted “as a case of cooperative working for the division of the spoils”.

Baboons and chimpanzees, then, occasionally hunt – but when they do, each animal lays immediate claim to its own killings. Strum (1981: 263) observes that when baboons (at Gilgil, Kenya) start eating, the victim is typically still alive. Because of such immediacy in eating, it can be stated emphatically that baboons and chimpanzees have no economic institutions whatsoever. In the light of the own kill norm, it also becomes clear that whereas neither baboons nor chimpanzees enter into “relations of production”, human hunter-gatherers (even those with the simplest of technologies) do. Unlike other primates, humans, whether using tools or not, obtain food explicitly and systematically for others to enjoy.

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*It is the dimension of systematic social exchange which defines food-procurement as “production”.* Marx (1875: 18) writes:

“....although isolated labour (its material conditions presupposed) can also create use-values, it can create neither wealth nor culture”.

Or again:

“Production by isolated individuals outside society... is as great an absurdity as the idea of the development of language without

individuals living together and talking to one another” (Marx 1971: 17-18).

“Hunger is hunger”, observes Marx (1971: 25) In comparing animal with human food-procurement,

“but the hunger that is satisfied with cooked meat eaten with fork and knife is a different kind of hunger from the one that devours raw meat with the aid of hands, nails and teeth”.

The isolated human animal, outside society, feeds itself on what it finds. “in society, however”, Marx (1971: 27-8) continues,

“the relation of the producer to his product, as soon as it is completed, is an outward one, and the return of the product to the individual depends on his relations to other individuals. Nor does the direct appropriation of the product constitute his purpose, when he produces in society. Between the producer and the product distribution steps in, determining by social laws his share in the world of products; that is to say, distribution steps in between production and consumption”.

Returning, now, to our discussion in previous chapters, we may state that if hunters in traditional cultures “produce”, it is on account of the own kill rule. It is this which determines that “the relation of the producer to his product, as soon as it is completed, is an outward one....”, so that “the direct appropriation of the product” cannot be the hunter’s purpose.

In the absence of the own kill norm, all “hunting” activities would amount to no more than animal-like feeding-behaviour, however complex or developed the techniques involved. Since non-human primates show no signs of adhering to such a norm, its centrality within human hunter-gatherer cultural traditions indicates that before the hominisation process was completed – bringing with it the establishment of “economics” for the first time – an inversion of primate hunting behavioural norms had to be achieved.

In this chapter it will be argued that the establishment of systematic distribution constituted a revolutionary innovation which must be attributed in the first instance to those standing most directly in need of it. The law of distribution – it will be suggested – was in the first instance feminine inspired. Codified in a language of blood, it first “stepped in between

production and consumption” in the form of the “own kill” rule, and in doing so established the cultural realm.

### **Background to revolution**

In a discussion of early hominid meat-eating, Isaac and Crader (1981:93) persuasively argue that the activity of carrying food constituted a crucial step to be achieved in the hominisation-process, and in this context comment that meat

“is a highly concentrated, highly portable form of nourishment. Portions of a carcass are readily carried and are an important food prize when consumed at the destination.”

But the phrase “when consumed at the destination” requires pause for thought. It implies that already the killers are delaying consumption until the “destination” has been reached. It implies some factor inhibiting the consumption of the meat on the way. But our chimpanzee and baboon examples (and many others could be cited) show that following a non-human primate kill, there is no delay in starting to eat. Consumption, indeed, may even precede the kill. There are no signs of even the most rudimentary or prefigurative inhibitions or taboos delaying consumption until a predetermined destination has been reached. And if, following the kill, portions of the victim are carried away, the reason is likely to be the reverse of that motivating such transport among human hunter-gatherers. Far from carrying away the meat for others to consume, the animal will typically be scampering off with a portion up into a tree (Suzuki 1975: 262-6) or into the distance to escape from others’ demands.

Such behaviour stems inescapably from the logic governing primate social life. This logic is appropriately termed “dominance”; “to dominate”, as Wilson (1975: 287) has defined matters, “is to possess priority of access to the necessities of life and reproduction.” “The term ‘dominance’”, explains Kummer (1971: 58—9),

“... is widely used to describe a particular type of order in organized groups. Its most general criterion is the fact that an animal consistently and without resistance abandons his place when approached by a more dominant group member, a sequence called ‘supplanting’. In primates, older and stronger individuals supplant the weaker ones, and males are generally dominant over females of the same age. Each group member has to learn his rank of dominance,

at least within his own sex and age class. The ultimate means of clarifying positions is fighting.”

Males compete for dominated females, females compete for dominant males, and all compete – between groups and also internally within each social group – for gathered food-items, space and the other necessities of life. Where hunting becomes practised by primates, some co-operation in the hunt may develop, and the resultant meat may be less easily monopolised by individuals than are small items or patches of gathered food. But whatever the food-source, individualistic competitive eating enters into the picture as a matter of course.

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In referring to “carrying”, Isaac and Crader have in mind the cultural requirement that meat must be transported by the hunters to a “home base”, so that it can be made available to all, including women and children. Few would dispute that hominisation at some point involved the establishment of a “home base” arrangement along with some means of ensuring female and juvenile access to meat secured by males. But it remains to be understood how this could have been achieved without a radical inversion of the norms of primate “dominance”. Female primates move with the dominant males: there is no possibility of their remaining behind while the males go away to hunt (see below). This is linked (a) with the dominant males’ need for continuous access to and control over “their” females and (b) the females’ own demands for protection – often against other males of their own species in addition to external predators. Embedded in the same complex is the fact that when hunting is practised, it is almost invariably the males who (a) do the killing and (b) eat the meat.

“In baboons and chimpanzees”, notes Harding (1975: 253), “the killing of small animals appears to be an activity carried on only by adults and almost exclusively by males.” Since the killers are also the eaters, and since the eating begins on the spot, the result is a foregone conclusion. Even should a female manage to make a small kill, she will typically be robbed of it by some dominant male very soon. Among chimpanzees (Hladik 1975: 28) as well as baboons (Harding 1975: 249; Strum 1981: 276), meat-eating is therefore largely confined to dominant males. While few would doubt that sociable and “sharing” impulses exist among such males – perhaps particularly among chimpanzees – it

is clear that dominance as a system rewards behaviour of a competitive kind. A generous, self-denying male with the kind of personality normatively validated in human hunter-gatherer cultures would not be rewarded in chimpanzee society and would not easily survive.

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While primatologists usually assume that “dominance” was the prevailing logic on the basis of which human culture evolved, it seems that the contrary was the case. It can be shown that any supremacy of “dominance” principles would have proven a major obstacle to the development of efficient, systematic big-game hunting among early hominids. Difficulty in overthrowing the legacy of primate dominance may well have been the main factor responsible for the apparent lack of any breakthrough in developing big-game hunting as a way of life until well into the Middle Pleistocene (Isaac 1975: 883).

To appreciate this, we may begin by examining one of the major limitations of a “dominance” system in connection with hunting-behaviour. “The negative or anti-social aspect of sex”, writes Service (1966: 29) in a classic comparison between “ape” and human hunter-gatherer patterns,

“... is created mostly by male competition in the quest for mates. Ape society is limited in scope and in the kinds of things it can do because this omnipresent disruptive factor is curbed only by the ephemeral victory of one of the contestants.”

As well as causing endless internal friction and disruption, sexual competition also immobilises potential hunters. In a primate dominance system, the competition for access to and control over females “ties down” the dominant males, releasing only those least successful in the dominance hierarchy. Given that each dominant male – once successful – is afraid to leave “its” female(s), for fear of being displaced during its absence by some rival male, the males most likely to roam at a distance (that is, those who – within a pre-human hominid population – would have been in the best position to hunt) are those of least potential value or relevance to the females.

In the case of baboons:

“There is... evidence from field studies of geladas... that all-male groups tend at crucial periods to wander separately from one-male groups and to exploit rather different ground....

...in the gelada case sub-adult males from all-male groups, by reasons of faster foraging rates and a less nervous disposition, range well ‘inland’ from a gorge edge, while females and juveniles with their male overlords keep closer to the cliff and descend first to safety when danger threatens....

The all-male groups move over a range that is three to four times larger than that of a bisexual group, entry to which is denied by the usually successful aggression of the single male” (Crook 1973: 398).

Reynolds (1966: 445) makes a comparable point in relation to gorillas and chimpanzees:

“One can deduce that if new habitats were to become available to gorillas, it would be the roaming males that found them first. A rather similar social pattern is found among chimpanzees. Adult males tend to form small, actively mobile bands of two to five individuals, which travel fast over long distances through the forest and are often to be observed many miles from other chimpanzees. These male bands are real explorers, for they are the first to discover trees newly in fruit, whereupon they call and drum loudly in excitement thus attracting other groups to the area...

...in both chimpanzees and gorillas, the females are much less adventurous. Gorilla females are almost never alone, and chimpanzee females, in particular the mothers, are most frequently found in small groups which tend to remain in the same feeding area for days at a time while the adult males are forever moving around. But, as among gorillas, some adult male chimpanzees prefer to remain with the females, and do not seem to move very far”.

To the extent that dominance prevails, in other words, the most mobile males are likely to be the “unattached” ones. These are the relative “failures” in the struggle for sexual access and dominance – individuals threatened with being excluded from the breeding-system altogether.

It can be seen that at its most extreme – given a dependence on hunting in order to survive – the result would be a crippling contradiction: those males in possession of females would be immobilised by their attachments and thereby prevented from hunting, whilst those in possession of meat would be mobile but excluded from female contact.

For the females, too, the choices would be stark. Females would have to choose between attachment to a dominant male (or males) unable to hunt for them, or attachment to groups of hunters whose ability to hunt would be crippled by that attachment itself. Either way, to evolving protohuman females, the advantages offered by any suggested “hunting transition” might have seemed obscure. Heavy meat-dependence would in fact have been maladaptive for females to the extent that no mechanisms existed to ensure (a) their ability to release males to go hunting and (b) their own and their offspring’s access to the resultant meat.

This is not to deny that female chimpanzees and baboons can gain meat under the logic of “dominance”. They can. But not only does the supply of meat obtained by females represent only a small proportion of the total; a further difficulty is that the very female stratagems involved in soliciting meat – which may include those of pronounced oestrus-behaviour – are far from conducive to effective hunting on the part of males.

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A female chimpanzee “is more likely to obtain a share (in meat) when she is in oestrus than when she is not sexually attractive”, writes Goodall (1976: 91). The female tactic is to “present” sexually to a male in possession of a kill; the more sexually-attractive the female, the more likely is the male to permit her to share. Such tactics are particularly well-developed among many baboons; but as Strum (1981: 269) strikingly points out, this can cause problems for the males:

“For example, when a male was in sexual consort with a receptive female and then conflict occurred between maintaining proximity to the female and eating meat, the male chose to continue consortship. At times the male appeared to be deliberating, looking back and forth between the meat and the female, but finally chose to follow the female”.

Thirty-five times in one year, Strum observed dominant males apparently torn between meat and sex, reluctant to decide between the two but eventually abandoning the meat. Resolution of such conflicts ranged from males “entirely ignoring meat-eating opportunities” to their simply allowing associated females to keep and eat the carcass. “Even males with very high predatory scores chose

oestrous females over meat.” The general problem is simply that it is not possible to guard or chase a female and chase a prey animal at the same time; a dominant male is in a strong position provided it does not have to be in two places at once. “The trouble with that system”, as Lovejoy (cited in Johansson and Edey 1981: 338) puts it,

“... is that the alpha male’s authority is enforced only by his presence. If he goes down to the river for a drink, he loses it. Some other watchful fellow is always hanging around. By the time the alpha male gets back, his chance for having any offspring may be gone.”

To avoid losing its females, the animal cannot move. And so, regardless of whether the missed opportunity is “going down to the river for a drink” or the chance to pursue fast-moving prey, the dominant male is immobilised precisely by its power. “If a similar system existed among early hominids”, Strum (1981: 299) comments, “a major change in reproductive strategies would have been necessary before males could give predation the priority it needed as a prelude to further division of labour between the sexes.”

This “major change in reproductive strategies” must have been central to the emergence of human culture. Specifying its features, however, has long presented a problem. We know how primates tend to interrelate sexual strategies and the obtaining of meat. We also possess information – surveyed in previous chapters – on the interrelationships between these two among human hunter-gatherers. To understand the changes involved in the process of becoming human, we require a model which clarifies how the second set of strategies might first have begun diverging from the first.

The probability that protohuman females adopted an entirely different meat-acquiring strategy from that of other primates is indicated not only by the ethnographic record itself (see previous chapters), but also by a crucial feature of human female physiology and anatomy. Far from accentuating genital swellings and displays during ovulation, human evolution has produced the reverse effect – to the point at which the moment of ovulation is almost completely concealed even from women themselves (Burley 1979).



### **The human revolution**

“In the evolution of society”, wrote Washburn and DeVore (1962: 99) when discussions of this kind were just beginning, “...the crucial customs are those that guarantee the services of a hunter to a woman and her children.” This has remained one of the few axioms acknowledged by students of cultural origins to this day. Human culture is based on the sexual division of labour, including the concept of a “home base” from which males depart on hunting-expeditions and around which women tend fires, cook food, care for offspring and go out food-gathering. Lévi-Strauss (1985: 52-4) argues cogently that the sexual “division” of labour might well have been termed a “prohibition” of labour between the sexes: as if to enforce each gender-group’s continuous state of dependency upon the other, women and men are prohibited from performing one another’s (culturally-defined) tasks. One of the few seeming universals of hunter-gatherer comparative studies is that “women do not have established roles or equipment for hunting” (Hayden 1981: 419).

Given that in hunting men do the actual killing, whereas women and offspring need the meat, the question arises as to how women ensure that they receive a proper share. Given that the evolutionary point of departure was presumably some form of primate “dominance” arrangement, and that human hunting presupposed transcending this, it is necessary to pose the question in basic, elementary terms – in terms not of the possibilities available to women once the cultural level has already been achieved, but of the logical possibilities available to large-brained hominid females without presupposing culture. We know that sex and meat are interrelated – that is part of the primate base line position once hunting starts; it is a structural fact which can be altered or even inverted, but not simply ignored. The question, then, is this: what changes in the interrelationships between sexual activity and meat-gaining were involved in the hominisation process?

For the females in need of male-secured meat, there appear to be two logical possibilities – two strategies involving the utilisation of sexual appeal. One strategy is inseparable from “dominance”; the other presupposes its complete transcendence.

The first strategy – that associated with dominance – is the technique of competitive sexual soliciting. For baboons, this involves going to a male in possession of a kill and “presenting” sexually in the hope of a share. The female presents her rump – preferably with pronounced genital swellings – to the meat-possessing male. The more desirable the female – and the more effectively she can signal her oestrus condition or her availability for mounting – the more likely is she to succeed. A modified version of this appears to be practised by female chimpanzees (Goodall 1976: 91). This is an exchange of sexual favours for meat which would appear to be very much on male terms: the female has to come to the male, who can choose whether to take any notice or not, and who may well still eat most of the meat.

The other logical possibility is to make the males come to the females.

If the females are to adopt the second strategy, then it would seem that they have only one course open to them. Males must not be allowed to approach for sexual contact unless they bring meat. This strategy would be completely undermined if, within a group of females, there were always one or two who were ready to accept males anyway. In other words, exceptions – females willing to accept a male on any terms – would have constituted a threat. This being the case, the strategy required building upon whatever elements of female-to-female solidarity already existed. In the event of non-cooperation on the part of one or more males, all the females had to be united in sexual refusal. Whenever meat was not in evidence, the females had to signal “no” regardless of individual inclination or hormonal state; when meat was brought home, the collective female attitude to sex was transformed. All of this implies a profoundly significant logical consequence, for it must have required a complete inversion of the primate female norm of competitive, hormone governed oestrus-signalling. Every female must have been able to say “no”, no matter what her personal hormonal state happened to be.

We have seen in previous chapters that meat among human hunter-gatherers is not eaten on the spot where the animal was killed. It is brought back to the home base. At this point, females gain access to it. Moreover, males within a

human hunting band have little incentive to fight amongst themselves in order to gain access to females. Women are attracted towards good hunters – men who through qualities of co-operative ness, skill and/or leadership gain esteem from their fellow-hunters. In fact, as if to deprive sexual quarrelling of any basis, in human hunter-cultures – to the extent that collective hunting is practised – there is often a complete ban on sexual relations (a ban which it is in large measure women's responsibility to enforce) until the hunting- party returns laden with meat. Some examples of this practice will be discussed below.

In this context, an important conclusion can be drawn. It appears that the accomplishment of human females in the course of cultural origins was to follow through one principle: never to go to the meat; always to make the meat come to them. Groups of females stood their ground, refusing sex to all males unless or until they arrived at the home base with a kill. It was on the basis of this feminine insistence – it is suggested – that humanity's distinctive social-evolutionary pathway was determined. By refusing sex until meat was brought, females released the male population for hunting, removed the grounds for inter-male sexual insecurities and motivated male hunting-efforts all at the same time.

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On the basis of this model, we might expect to find in the ethnographic and/or archaeological record traces of a regular female sex-strike preceding the hunt and linked to a collective harmonising of hormonal states. In the form in which they have hitherto been constructed, "the facts" do not confirm this expectation. In this thesis, however, an aim is to restructure our field of view so as to combine into a coherent picture findings from various sources which have not previously been thought to be connected with one another. In the process, it is hoped to show not only that a feminine sex-strike of the kind specified is compatible with the evidence, but that the model suggested here generates and accounts for a greater proportion of the generally-acknowledged "facts" than does Lévi-Strauss's or any other model.

### **Sexual taboos as a condition of hunting-success**

At this point we may usefully turn to a familiar ethnographic finding. It should be considered in the light of our discussion in Chapter 2, in which we noted an extremely widespread pattern linking hunting-luck with meat-eating taboos. We now come to an equally widespread pattern of beliefs linking hunting-luck with the avoidance of sex. It is as if, in the period preceding and during the hunt, men were not allowed either to consume meat or to enjoy human female flesh. During this period, the two avoidances were in some sense reducible to one.

Hammond and Jablo (1975; 7), in a cross-cultural survey of traditional women's roles, comment: "It is an extremely widespread belief that men should refrain from sexual contacts when engaging in, or preparing for, important masculine activities." More specifically: "Taboos on sex are common before the hunt". Although anthropologists have almost always interpreted such beliefs from a male standpoint, accepting native male ideological statements to the effect that women are simply harmful to hunting, in the light of the previous arguments of this thesis it would be difficult not to suspect that women themselves may at some point have played a role in imposing the taboos.

In any event, like mother-in-law avoidances, "totemic" avoidances and menstrual taboos, pre-hunt sex bans are or were sufficiently recurrent features of traditional cultures to have been exhaustively commented upon by early writers. For example, Crawley (1927, 1: 65-66) notes the frequency with which male success in the hunt is felt to be secured through the observance of various ritual taboos and regulations. "Among these regulations the most constant is that which prohibits every kind of intercourse with the female sex...." And writing of primitive cultures in general, Frazer (1911: 196) likewise comments; "This practice of observing strict chastity as a condition of success in hunting and fishing is very common...."

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Some examples from Africa will illustrate the pattern. The Lele of the Kasai (Douglas 1963: 207) will undertake no hunting expedition "without one night of

continence being imposed first on the whole village.” Those directly concerned with the hunt, such as the makers of pit traps, may have to abstain from sex “for several months”. In Zambia, among the matrilineal Bisa (Marks 1976: 114- 115), an informant explains:

“We don’t have sexual intercourse before a hunt because when we are hunting we are helped by the spirits of dead hunters. These spirits... have no sexual intercourse. When we have sexual intercourse before a hunt, we get out of tune with the spirits who will help us in the bush.”

An elephant hunt among the Bisa may last for weeks or even months, during which time the hunters’ wives – remaining in the village – have to maintain “behaviour beyond reproach” to ensure success.

Among the Central African Tumbuka, when hunters set off to kill an elephant, after all preparations had been made and sacrifices had been offered to the spirits of the dead,

“The chief hunter charged the villagers who remained that there must be no quarrelling or immorality indulged in within the village. None were to leave their homes to visit other places, but all were to remain quiet and law-abiding lest the game disappear, or turn in anger and rend the hunters” (D. Fraser, quoted in Frazer 1936: 21)

In the case of the Wachamba (also Central Africa), while a hunter was away In the forest his wife at home was bound to observe all the magical restrictions which were incumbent also upon him. She remained alone for weeks. She was forbidden to receive visits from men in her hut. Only her closest relations could feed with her. If she did not observe these restrictions, it was believed that her husband would fall ill or perish in the forest (Frazer 1936: 23).

Among the Banyankole, in the south of Uganda,

“...when a man was out hunting, his wife refrained from sexual intercourse with other men.... She might let no man pass behind her back, but warned him to keep in front of her. Should she neglect any of these precautions, her husband’s chances of obtaining game in the hunt would be ruined” (J. Roscoe, quoted in Frazer 1936: 20).

Junod (1927, 2: 62) makes a similar point about the Thonga of Mozambique: “Old Makhani assured me that incontinence on the part of the wife at home would

have as a consequence that the husband would be attacked and killed by wild beasts far away in the desert....”

The function of such taboos would appear to be the temporary removal of sex as a potential source of conflict and tension – between hunters, between women and between the sexes. In some cases, it is this aspect – the stressing of kinship-solidarity, rather than the banning of sex – which is emphasised in the ethnography. Among the Hadza, for example, an epeme dance is held once a month:

“The dance stresses kinship and joint parentage and seeks to reconcile the opposed interests of men and women which are so manifest in many other contexts. Failure to hold the dance is believed to be dangerous. Performing the dance is believed to maintain and promote general wellbeing, above all good health and successful hunting” (Woodburn 1982: 190).

Such a dance “usually continues for two or three nights in succession in every camp in which there are enough head-dresses, leg-bells and dance-rattles” (p. 190). The dance

“... is, in the ordinary way, held every month and can only be held at the time of the month when there is a period of total darkness without moonlight....” (p. 191).

The possible significance of this link with the moon will become apparent as we proceed.

An indefinite number of other examples of pre-hunt rituals – usually linked with taboos on sex – could be cited from almost all parts of the world, but we will conclude this section with a passage from Sigmund Freud (1965: 98):

“When the men of a savage tribe go out on an expedition to hunt, to fish, to fight or to gather precious plants, their wives left at home are subjected to many oppressive restrictions, to which the savages themselves ascribe a favourable influence, operating at a distance upon the success of the expedition. But it requires very little penetration to see that this factor which operates at a distance is nothing other than the absent men’s longing thoughts of home, and that behind these disguises lies a sound piece of psychological insight that the men will only do their best if they feel completely secure about the women whom they have left behind them unguarded.”

### The model

The feminine meat-gaining strategy hypothesised earlier would lead us to infer a tradition of pre-hunt sex-bans linked to a collective harmonising of female hormonal states. In restructuring our field of view in accordance with this expectation, a pattern of traditions linking hunting-success with sexual abstinence has been reviewed. As we extend the restructuring, several further areas and levels of enquiry can usefully be linked up:

- (a) Women's sexual and/or menstrual condition is frequently linked with men's hunting luck;<sup>1</sup>
- (b) Menstrual taboos are common; in effect, the menstruant is on sex-strike;<sup>2</sup>
- (c) Given close female solidarity and proximity, human female menstrual cycles tend to synchronise;<sup>3</sup>
- (d) Meat is felt culturally to be "raw" when the blood is still visible in it; there are often taboos against eating meat thus "polluted";<sup>4</sup>
- (e) It is common for symbolic equations to be drawn between the menstruating vagina and the animal wound, and between menstrual and animal blood;<sup>5</sup>
- (f) It has been inferred that time-scheduling among Upper Palaeolithic hunters may have centred on the periodicity of the moon;<sup>6</sup>
- (g) Traditional beliefs link menstruation to the periodicity of the moon;<sup>7</sup>
- (h) Bunting is or can be a periodic activity.<sup>8</sup>

It is suggested that protohuman females played a decisive part in the origins of culture by collectively resisting sex once a month, and that this expressed and engendered a degree of feminine solidarity sufficient to bring their menstrual cycles into synchrony. This entailed, in effect, a periodic sex-strike conducted under the colour of blood.

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Before turning to the evidence in favour of this hypothesis, the postulated consequences and nature of this sex-strike must be further elaborated. We may best appreciate the logical elegance and internal coherence of the resultant social system if we ask a preliminary question at this point. Why – it might be asked – was bleeding selected as a signal? Why did the female collectivity use bleeding – rather than, say, turning the back, hissing or shouting – to signal “no” to males? Compared with other primate females, the human female loses a large quantity of blood during each menstrual period;

“The reproductive physiology and behavior of *Homo sapiens* have... undergone extraordinary evolution.... Menstruation has been intensified. The females of some other species experience slight bleeding, but only in women is there a heavy sloughing of the wall of the ‘disappointed womb’ with consequent heavy bleeding” (Wilson 1975; 547).

Of what conceivable value could such an accentuation of blood-loss have been? A possibility to be considered is that once the breakthrough to the cultural level had been achieved, the blood-loss became accentuated under cultural selection-pressures because of its symbolic value. But if so, what could this symbolic function have been?

One inference is certain. Regardless of any ethnographic evidence, it can be seen on purely logical grounds that bleeding would have meshed neatly with certain requirements and characteristics of the hunt. Had women chosen bleeding as their prototypical no-signal, they would have stumbled upon a means of keeping men not only away from themselves – but also from any meat taken in the hunt. One and the same symbol could have served both functions at once.

Here, the crucial point is that it is not only women who bleed in menstruating. Game animals also bleed in being hunted and killed. It is only necessary for an analogy to be drawn between these two processes – only necessary for one kind of blood to be equated or confused with the other – for there to be achieved a radical simplification of the symbolic codes necessary to ensure the proper circulation of both sexual partners and meat food.

In short (and this will lead us back to the subject of “totemic” thought by another route), it is suggested that through a perceptual merging of one kind



of blood with another, bleeding became perceived as a kind of “language uniting women with game. Menstruating women on the one hand, bleeding game animals on the other – both these categories of desirable flesh equally and in the same language periodically signalled their tabooed condition to men.

Men hunted and killed an animal. Parts of the meat were covered in blood. To the extent that blood as such had been established as indicating non-availability, this meant that the animals were in effect marking themselves as unavailable for consumption. The meat had to be taken back to the home base – to the cooking fire (see below) – before it could be released from the taboo. At this point, it came into contact with the female sex. The heat and flames removed all visible blood, so that the flesh became available for the first time (rather as women emerging from menstrual seclusion become available).

Returning now to the comparison with primates, it is therefore suggested that in contrast with those primate females which use above all the oestrus portion of their cycles as a means of sexually acquiring meat, the human female innovation was to use both the menstrual period and the fertile period – the first to repel the males and the second to attract them. The males were repelled to make them concentrate on the hunt and its preparing; they were attracted to induce them to bring back the meat. On a physiological level, the corresponding primate/human contrast can be simply described; whereas the typical primate pattern is one in which an intermittent yes-signal (oestrus) is superimposed against a background of continuous “no” (absence of genital display), in the human female a periodic no-signal – menstruation – is superimposed upon a background of continuous “yes” – “attractive” bodily features and receptivity which are operative at all times, regardless of the moment of ovulation.

The outcome of this inversion – it is suggested – was the most elementary possible cultural system. At the culminating point of the hominisation process, there was glimpsed the possibility of a harmonious social logic linking menstrual cycles with the periodicity of hunting expeditions, maternal blood with the blood of game animals, cooking and feasting with sexual enjoyment – and all of these with the periodicity of the moon. So internally

coherent and emotionally meaningful was this logic that it inspired generations of our ancestors in the course of a “human revolution” which took millennia to consummate, and – as will be demonstrated in later chapters – has continued to dominate traditional myths, rituals and fairy-tales up into recent times.

### Testing the model: the raw and the cooked

“Women, fish, and raw meat from all animals share the characteristic of being *asuntané*. This refers to a specific smell and feel: It is a quality attached to the gluey stuff on the back of fish, to animal blood, and to menstrual blood. Women are said to be especially *asuntané* at puberty, when menstruating, and immediately after giving birth. Contact with women during these periods is considered dangerous for men, since it would result in *awapa*, an illness which makes one vomit all one’s food. Fear of the same illness is also the explanation Cuiva give as to why men are always quick and careful to wash any animal blood from themselves and why hunters usually leave the preparation of raw meat to women.”

Arcand (1976: 3-4), on the Cuiva Indians  
of the eastern plains of Columbia.

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An adequate theory of human cultural origins should make specific predictions and be testable. Because what is needed is a theory of cultural origins, It should prove testable in the light of (amongst other things) the symbolic levels of the archaeological, ethnographic and other evidence available.

The hypothesis suggested here should be easy, In principle, to disprove. This is because its logical consequences compel us to outline a rather detailed origins-scenario – a set of suppositions and predictions which will have to be tested and whose formulation involves a number of obvious risks.

Archaeologists might attempt to test the hypothesis in the light of findings concerning the range of variability of hunting-techniques and associated social patterns during the Late Pleistocene. In this context it would be damaging if it could be shown that the notion of a collective big game hunt organised once a month were inherently improbable or incompatible with the relevant archaeological evidence (although this would have to be demonstrated with regard even to those hunters along the initial frontiers of expansion of

*sapiens sapiens* populations into game-rich new zones – North America, northern Eurasia, Australasia etc. etc. – where conditions for hunting might at first have been maximally favourable<sup>9</sup>).

Prehistorians, archaeologists and students of comparative religion might attempt to falsify the hypothesis in various ways. An obvious route would be to seek indications of the relative significance of the moon in religious history or in the inferred symbolic systems of Upper Palaeolithic cultures. Damage would be done to the hypothesis (and to the ‘lunar’ interpretations of Upper Palaeolithic notches and markings outlined by Marshack 1972a, 1972b) if it could be shown that in fixing the moment for a big-game hunting expedition – including one likely to last into the night or to take several days – no consideration need have been given to the presence or absence of moonlight. Did hunters just go out for meat when they felt hungry or when prey were thought to be in the vicinity? Or were shamans or others involved in determining the most propitious moment on cosmological/astrological grounds? And if there were “good” and “bad” times for inaugurating a collective hunt, would the matter of women’s menstrual condition have been felt to be relevant or irrelevant?

If menstrual synchrony were a factor of importance in Ice Age cultures, we might expect to find indications including (a) special symbolic significance attached to the colour red; (b) a concentration of symbolic attention upon the human female reproductive organs and (c) evidence that time was structured by the periodicity of the moon. Damage would be done to the hypothesis if it could be shown that red was no more important than any other colour, that the female reproductive organs were no more important than the male, and/or that the moon was no more important than the sun or any other celestial body in regulating the periodicity of the ritual calendar. In fact, in all three instances, the reverse is recurrently found to have been the case. Red ochre was of exceptional importance as a symbolic marker almost throughout the Upper Palaeolithic (Leroi-Gourhan 1968: 40; Shimkin 1978: 271; Klein 1969: 226; cf. Flood 1983: 46), female figurines and vulva symbols dominate much of Upper Palaeolithic art (Leroi-Gourhan 1968: 137, 174, 201; Marshack 1972b: 283, 313, 335, 335n; Shimkin 1978: 278) and rhythmic patterns of notches have been found carved on mammoth-tusks and other objects, these having been interpreted as

early “calendars” (Leroi-Gourhan 1968: 40), probably lunar (Marshack 1972a, 1972b: 27, 283, 314). The expectations generated by the model, in other words, are all confirmed – if not always incontrovertibly in the material evidence itself, then at least persistently and recurrently in the attempts of archaeologists and prehistorians to interpret this record. Interestingly, both Leroi-Gourhan (1968: 173-4) and Marshack (1972b: 274-5, 313-4, 335) in their different ways detect in Upper Palaeolithic cave art a symbolic connection between game animals and “mother” or “goddess” imagery. Leroi-Gourhan (1968: 173-4) detects in addition a connection between killing or wounding imagery and images of the vagina and its blood.

The number of predictions made by the hypothesis is, in fact, rather large and the predictions are precise. This is not out of choice. It is because the model is “improbable.” Examination of it quickly demonstrates that on purely logical grounds very few permutations or combinations could possibly “work”. If females are to obtain meat by refusing sex until it is brought, and if this is not to have disastrous consequences in terms of survival through reproductive strategy, then the only solution is for hunting-behaviour and the female reproductive cycle to come into harmony. In short: at the actual moment of ovulation (regardless of any awareness of it), meat must have been brought. The species could not have evolved on the basis of females refusing sex during ovulation whilst accepting males during menstruation. This, then, determined that the moment for any period of sexual withdrawal was marked by menstrual onset.

This is an initial prediction of the hypothesis – women avoid sex with adult males during menstruation. Two further predictions must follow: (a) they continue to avoid sex until meat is brought home some time later; (b) before the moment of ovulation, the meat should have arrived. This leaves a period of at most fourteen days (and perhaps more realistically ten or so) between the onset of the sex-strike and its end – a period during which a number of tasks must have been accomplished: (1) all adult heterosexual relations must have been severed; (2) preparations for the hunt must have been completed (weapons, traps etc. must have been made, repaired and/or set in place); (3) the hunters must have located and killed prey; (4) meat must have been cut into portable pieces and brought back to a home base, perhaps from a considerable distance.

We would, then, expect menstrual seclusion to last “ideally” for ten or more days.

A further prediction concerns fire and cooking. Since men bring meat in expectation of sexual rewards, the logic stipulates that cooking occurs not during the menstrual period but during ovulation or the period immediately afterwards. On logical grounds, then, it would be predicted that no woman should be cooking during her menstrual period; no blood should be pouring forth when the whole point was that the cooking-fires should be removing blood from consumable flesh.

Our argument can now be summed up. If the hypothesis were correct, we would expect evidence not only for a very ancient tradition of menstrual taboos, but also for a specific interrelation between these observances and rules concerning cooking, fire, blood in animals, incest, exogamy and the distribution of meat. The source of this tradition would be the following model. Once per lunar month, women go into menstrual seclusion, with their offspring and juvenile male kin. The moon is now dark. With all sexual distractions removed, the women re-establish their solidarity while the men concentrate their attentions on a future goal. The men are made aware that they cannot regain sexual access until they have proved themselves in the coming hunt. After perhaps a few days of mental preparation including singing, dancing and ritual, both men and women have put aside sex-related quarrels and tensions, and preparations in earnest begin. Traps are put in place and set, weapons sharpened or made. As the moon waxes, the time for the hunt itself draws near. The model as such involves no specific predictions regarding hunting techniques, but fire-drives, battue techniques and comparable collective methods resulting in multiple kills may be presumed (cf. Ingold 1980: 56-66). If women are involved as beaters or to help encircle game, they must still be in seclusion as far as sex is concerned. Towards full moon, when nights are light, the hunt itself gets under way. The closer to full moon, the closer to the most propitious time for killing animals. The animals are killed. Meat is brought home; fires and earth-ovens are prepared; the meat is ceremonially cooked. The killing-to-cooking (blood-to-fire) transition coincides with the transition from waxing to waning moon. Cooking, lunar transition, the removal of blood in meat and the lifting of the blood-spell cast over women are all

symbolised by the same light and fire. The collective, sex-striking community of women and the disciplined hunting-band both now dissolve: from now on comes feasting, celebration and sex. Couples are left free to enjoy one another's bodies, just as they are free to partake of cooked meat. This lasts for anything up to thirteen or fourteen days – in principle until the polar opposite spell-casting transformation-process occurs at the next dark moon. Following a few days of pre-menstrual build-up and tension, the power of the sex-strike (against heterosexual relations) is once again organized and unleashed. The cooked-to-raw (fire-to-blood) transition occurs during the interlunium – the moon's three-day period of absence from the sky. The menstrual flow then puts a stop to all feasting and love-making, boys, youths and men are reclaimed by their mothers and sisters, discipline and solidarity once more prevail over sex – and the cycle is set in motion for a further round (see Figure 1).

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Before discussing what relationship, if any, all this bears to the evidence as to what early *sapiens* populations actually did, a note on a material prerequisite may help set the scene. The crucial technological step forward – the control of fire for use in cooking – could not have been achieved without its social prerequisite in the shape of some means of preventing immediate male consumption of raw meat. But the causal arrow was two-way, for it was not until fire was conquered that “own kill” principles could have been given consistent force. “The use of fire”, writes Gould (1981: 424), “changed the ground rules for survival, enabling early humans for the first time to bring their kill to camp and share it there without undue risk of predation.” Without fire, it would have been dangerous to have brought kills back to any home base, since this – argues Gould (citing Schaller 1973: 275) – would have attracted dangerous carnivores and scavengers to the vicinity of the females and young. Before fires were acting (e.g. at cave entrances) to scare away rival predators such as wolves, It would also have been dangerous for the men to have left the home base unprotected whilst hunting. The establishment of a home base and the control of fire were, then, inextricably linked.

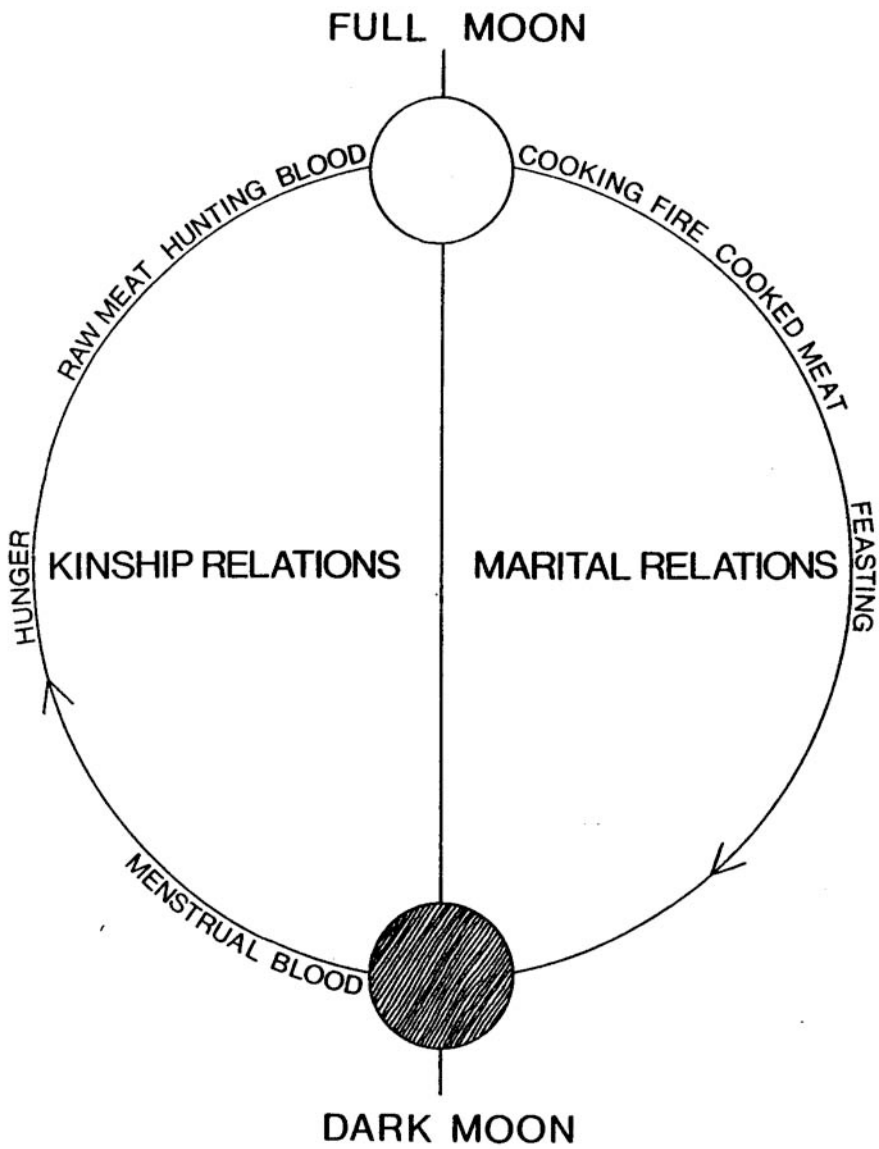


Figure 1. The model. Lunar-scheduled alternation between hunting and feasting, menstruation and sex

These two in turn were linked – we can now see – to the “own kill” rule. The cultural stipulation that meat had to be cooked in fact functioned to ensure that it was circulated between the sexes. Given female control over cooking (or rather, given the mere fact that the necessary fire remained at the home-base, not being readily transportable), It followed that to eat their own kills, men would have had to face the blood-polluted nature of their food. Eating one’s own kill would have meant eating meat raw. Getting the meat cooked – obligatory to the extent that blood was to be avoided – implied taking it home, where it came under the influence of the opposite sex. The avoidance of blood, in other words, acted in inhibiting men’s consumption of their own kills in the bush.

Almost as important, fire freed humans to migrate into northerly latitudes and eventually into periglacial and circumpolar zones in which reindeer and large game – including mammoths – were relatively abundant. From the perspective of the present hypothesis, this may have been important for two reasons: (1) In regions of scarce vegetable food, human groups could become relatively meat-dependent without undue risk; (2) in the cold climate, frozen meat could be stored, reducing the need to hunt more frequently than about once per month.

Furthermore, fire could be used as a light-source, a combination of moonlight and torches or other fires adding to the possibilities of extending hunting time (and also dances, ritual etc.) beyond nightfall.

### **The hunter’s moon**

This last factor – the value of firelight – invites us to consider the degree to which early human cultural activity may have included a nocturnal dimension. To the extent that it did, many of the relevant activities would have presupposed light either from fires or from the only other possible source of visibility at night – namely the moon.

The significance of the moon in hunting traditions presents a particularly interesting problem. It is perhaps not sufficiently appreciated how many mammalian species are nocturnal (Martin 1977: vii-viii; Leakey and Lewin 1979: 17, Harako 1981: 267; Gould 1969: 42), nor how frequently traditional hunters



maintain the option of being able to extend the chase where necessary beyond nightfall, even to the point, in some cases, of going on entirely nocturnal hunts.

“Most hunting”, writes Gould (1981: 433) of the Australian Western Desert Aborigines, “is done by stealth, from behind simple brush blinds, rock crevices, or tree platforms close to a water source. It is frequently a night time activity, because most of the marsupial prey is nocturnal”.

Woodburn (cited by Isaac 1968: 259-80)

“... reports that the Hadza people of north Tanganyika normally hunt singly but occasionally band together to surround a baboon troop at night, while the animals are asleep. The baboons are dislodged by arrow shots and clubbed to death as they attempt to break out.”

In addition, Woodburn (1968: 51) writes of the Hadza:

“Occasionally animals are shot at night from hides over water and are tracked the following morning.”

Isaac (1968: 259-60) draws on such information to suggest an interpretation of a Middle Pleistocene archaeological find – at Olorgesailie in Kenya – of over fifty large baboon remains. He suggests that they may have been killed by hominid hunters who massacred an entire troop at once. Although this particular interpretation cannot be tested, Isaac makes a general observation of relevance to our argument:

“It is hard to imagine how hunters on foot and without bows could kill large numbers of baboons except by surrounding them at night.”

A similar inference – it would seem – would apply to other species of game.

For the purposes of the model, however, it is not necessary to assume nocturnal hunting as such. We need only suppose that hunters who usually hunted during daylight hours embarked on expeditions which took them far enough away from the home base to involve them in overnight stays. Such hunters would have been at a disadvantage had they not been able on occasion to risk travelling through the night or in other ways extending the chase or associated tasks beyond nightfall. The question, then, is whether prolonged hunting expeditions would have had increased chances of success when timed to

take place when the moon was visible in the sky. We can with reasonable safety infer that the scheduling of extended hunting-expeditions would have tended to take the moon into account, the days of maximum travel coinciding with the period of the month when the moon's light was sufficient to enable the hunters to see, follow and aim at their prey. Such an inference might usefully be considered in conjunction with Marshack's (1972a; 1972b) findings concerning the importance of possibly-lunar notation-systems among Upper Palaeolithic hunters.

In any event, although very little attention appears to have been devoted to the question by anthropologists, there are hints from a variety of sources of a widespread tradition linking hunting success with the moon. We may leave aside familiar motifs such as that of the Greek moon-goddess Diana, goddess of the hunt, and concentrate here on ethnographic findings.

"Hunting is undertaken only by men, usually at night-time when there is a good moon", write Strathern and Strathern (1968: 196) of the Nbowamb of Papua New Guinea, The Daribi, too, (also in Papua New Guinea) think of the moon "as a boon to man, for it provides clear, well-lit nights for hunting" (Wagner 1972: 109). Writing of the Khoikhoi Bushman tribes of southern Africa, Hahn (1881: 131) notes that the moon's visibility in the sky is a condition of hunting:

"...on the dying or disappearing of the moon, especially if there be an eclipse of the moon, great anxiety prevails.... Those prepared for a hunting expedition, or already hunting in the field, will immediately return home, and postpone their undertakings."

The G/wi Bushmen of the Kalahari throw the bones of a game animal towards the new moon when it first appears and recite the following formula:

"'There are bones of meat, show us tomorrow to see well that we not wander and become lost. Let us be fat every day' (i.e., show us where there are plenty of food plants and game animals) this ceremony is believed to bring good luck in hunting and gathering" (Silberbauer 1981: 108).

We have already noted that in the case of the Hadza – among whom women's menstrual cycles are supposed, normatively, to synchronise (Woodburn pers. comm.) – the *epeme* nocturnal medicine-dance, which is linked with future hunting-luck, takes place every month during the two or three days of total darkness when there is no moon in the sky (Woodburn 1982: 191). A different

kind of nocturnal celebratory dancing is reported among the !Kung; it is held “usually when the moon is full after a successful hunt or when visitors arrive or about to depart” (Woodburn 1982: 201, citing Marshall 1969).

In North America, the Osage Indians pray to the moon “to give them a cloudless sky, and an abundance of game” (Hunter 1957: 226). Similar links between hunting and the moon are suggested in Australian Aboriginal myths: one, from the Ooldea region of South Australia, tells of an old man who used to sit down by himself and sing at night. “When he sang meat came falling from the sky, sent to him by the Moon” (Berndt and Berndt 1945: 233).

We can only guess at the extent to which early human hunters used the moon in maintaining the option of extending the chase, where necessary, into the night. We do know, however, that almost all man’s rival predators prefer to make their kills in the half-light or by night. Referring to the Southern Kalahari Desert, Binford (1983: 64) writes:

“The ungulates certainly rule the water sources at high noon; but as the sun begins to kiss the western horizon, they begin gradually but deliberately to move back towards the valley margins and climb the dunes out of the valley. The abandonment of the daytime domain of these animals is striking, as they disperse out into the vast rolling landscape away from the water and disappear. In the slanting light of sunset, the predators, lords of the night, move into the valley to occupy the waterholes and exercise dominion over the land.”

Hyenas, lions and leopards come to drink in the early evening, before setting off and making their kills through the night. As the morning sun rises, “the vultures are already soaring, searching for the previous night’s carnage.”

Binford (1983: 68) continues:

“Primates, ourselves included, are creatures of the daylight. Our eyes are daytime organs and we are ill-adapted to killing, foraging or even protecting ourselves at night. One wonders how a creature so poorly fitted for activity in the dark could safely maintain a sleeping place immediately adjacent to a water source in the sort of African landscape I have just described.”

It is here suggested that to the extent that early humans did succeed in competing successfully with rival animal predators (although not necessarily in quite the type of environment Binford describes), it was (a) because they

possessed fire and (b) because at night they did not venture far from the protection afforded by firelight around each home-base or cave-entrance – except when the moon’s light made it safe for them to do so.

A final note on this subject may be left to Malinowski. On the basis of his Trobriand experience, he long ago (Malinowski 1927: 206) concluded that “moonlight is of the greatest importance” wherever artificial illumination is primitive; it “changes night from a time when it is best to be at home around the fireplace” to a time when “It is most pleasant to walk or play, or to indulge in any outdoor exercise”. It is difficult to conceive of any traditional circumstances in which something comparable would not have applied. Upper Palaeolithic hunters embarking on extended expeditions would have been well-advised to choose a period when the moon at night was visible in the sky. It will be appreciated how this meshes in, logically, (a) with Marshack’s (1972a, 1972b) findings on the importance to Upper Palaeolithic cultures of the moon and (b) with the notion of a collective ritual hunt organised normatively once per lunar month.

### **Eclipses and “the moons blood”**

As stated, the model makes certain predictions. Some of these are more testable than others. Some refer us not to archaeological inferences but to already-familiar phenomena within the ethnographic record. Menstrual taboos, for example, are a prediction of the hypothesis, yet have long been known about. Much the same applies to ritual avoidances of blood in meat. Again, the hypothesis would predict bride-service – the surrender of game to women and their kin, motivated by men’s need for social and sexual “prestige” of a kind which can only be gained by success in hunting. But this, too, has long been a commonplace of hunter-gatherer studies (see Chapter 4). It is more satisfactory when the model predicts something of which we had no previous suspicion. When this happens, the more “improbable” the prediction, the better. The hypothesis then stands or falls on the basis of an investigation whose outcome is unknown.

One such prediction, noted already above, is that cooking should occur at full moon. Despite Malinowski’s Trobriand Islands finding that in “all festivities,

all enterprises, and on all ceremonial occasions, the climax is reached at full moon” (1927: 206), no anthropologist, to the author’s knowledge, has ever suggested that cooking is traditionally most propitious at full moon. It is indeed a somewhat inconvenient consequence of the hypothesis, since it is hard to imagine any real human community restricting its cooking activities to within only a few days of each month. Contemporary hunter-gatherers are not prominently known to pay the slightest attention to the moon’s condition when they need to cook a piece of meat.

A negative test, however, would be to see whether the sudden or unexpected absence of a full moon would involve throwing the cooking-process into reverse. Such an expectation can be formulated more concretely. Were the hypothesis correct, a lunar eclipse should appear in tradition as the sudden and unexpected intrusion of a dark-moon episode into what was supposed to be a full moon – an inversion, in other words, of time. Fidelity to the logic would imply that menstrual blood “must” be flowing, and that therefore all cooking should cease forthwith.

This expectation is confirmed. Referring to a widespread Amerindian myth linking incest (“excessive” blood-unity) with eclipses, Lévi-Strauss in *The Raw and the Cooked* (1970: 298) remarks that the mythological connections also include “culinary utensils, food, and domestic fire.” In South America, in Guiana, “the Lolaca and Atabaca Indians... were convinced that, If the moon really died, all domestic fires would be extinguished.” In North America, in the lower Yukon region, it is believed “that a pervasive essence, a maleficent influence, spreads across the earth when an eclipse of the moon occurs, and that if by chance a small particle happens to get inside some utensil or other, sickness will ensue. So, as soon as an eclipse begins, the women hurriedly turn all their pots, pails, and dishes upside down.” The Alsea Indians of Oregon threw out their reserves of drinking water – “bloodied” by the eclipse. The Californian Vintu “would throw out all their food, and even water, In case they had become polluted by the blood of the sun or moon”. The Serrano forbade all food, since feasting would only assist the spirits of the dead to “eat” the celestial body.

Two further examples – both Amazonian – may clarify the nature of the blood in pots and pans. It will be noted that it makes little difference whether the eclipse is lunar or solar: either way, the alignments of both moon and sun are involved in causing the eclipse, and the crucial point is that the sudden plunging of earth and sky into darkness indicates the presence of “blood”:

1

“Pirà-paranà mythology says the moon copulates with menstruating women and that during an eclipse of the moon, called the ‘dying moon’, the moon becomes a small red ball of menstrual blood which comes to earth and fills the house and its objects” (C. Hugh-Jones 1979: 156).

2

“On 24 December 1973, I was startled by a tremendous shout from the men of the village. They had just noticed that the sun was gradually being eclipsed. Dropping all their activities they rushed back to the village in a state of genuine fear and alarm, for Kama (Sun), one of the important male spirits and culture heroes, was ‘menstruating’.... Blood from the sun, like menstrual blood, is very dangerous. Each drop can penetrate the skin, causing sickness and leaving moles and blemishes. Quickly the villagers smeared themselves with ashes and manioc flour to ward off the blood. Carrying pots of porridge and stacks of manioc bread, the women threw large quantities of food into the bushes. Contaminated by the blood of the sun, just as a house’s food may be contaminated by a menstruating woman, it was no longer fit for human consumption. In the late afternoon of the day of the eclipse, the villagers scarified themselves with scrapers (*piya*) set with dogfish teeth. Opening long cuts on their bodies, they ‘menstruated’ so that the sun’s blood could flow out...”

Gregor (1985: 193), on the Mehinaku.

When the moon or sun suddenly becomes dark, then, cooking is inappropriate; people “ought” to be menstruating – and food ought to be thrown away.

\* \* \* \* \*

But it is not the argument of this thesis that throughout the Late Pleistocene, people only cooked meat when there was enough light in the sky. The suggestion that this was an ideal does not imply that it was consistently achieved. If a mammoth should have happened to be caught while the moon was dark, no doubt the shamans might have found some valid reasons to grant dispensation and

allow it to be cooked. Neither is it suggested that women's menstrual cycles always synchronised – merely that, as among hunter-gatherers such as the Hadza today (Woodburn, pers. comm.) – this was normatively the case. The argument of this thesis is that women obtained meat through the capacity to deny sexual access to males who refused to provide it, and that it was in consummating this strategy that the three million year long hominisation process was finally completed. Given such a strategy, the logical tendency would have been towards a set of norms – auspicious moments for killing and eating, love-making and menstruating, cooking and butchering – which included harmonies and synchronies of the kinds described. The “periodic rise and fall of erotic life” – a curve of love-making games and celebrations which “rises regularly at full moon” (Malinowski 1932: 221) – may be an ancient pattern; yet this need not have precluded sex at other times. A society rarely lives up to all its ideals on the level of everyday practice, and it may well be that a good part of religious sophistication consists in the accumulation of good reasons why “in the given circumstances” the strict norms may safely be set aside. Yet it is the norms which provide the formal structures of kinship, ritual, art and myth. Our newly-acquired knowledge that humanity's symbolic systems at a deep level share a common grammar (Lévi-Strauss 1970, 1973, 1978, 1981) presents prehistorians with a problem which cries out to be solved. It is here suggested that this grammar derives from the high-point of our ancestors' achievements in sustaining cooperative hunting as a way of life.

### **The totemic illusion**

It can be shown that the “own kill” rule manifests itself in the forms predicted by the model, and that it underlies much of the cultural heritage of symbolic structure which has been preserved for us by hunting and gathering peoples down to this day. Hunters' atonement rites and some aspects of “totemism” were discussed in Chapter 2; they will here be briefly re-examined in the light of the model of origins proposed.

The high-point for the “own kill” rule must have been the Late Pleistocene, when all humans were hunter-gatherers, and when game – including very large species – was in greater abundance than it has ever been since. Some 9,000 to 12,000 years ago, with the end of the Pleistocene, climatic and other

conditions changed world-wide. For reasons still controversial (Martin 1967; Webster 1981), not only mammoths but other giant mammals or marsupials had become extinct in all continents. The warmer climate led to the shrinkage of the previously vast periglacial plains of Eurasia and North America, much of which now became forest land unsuitable for the great herds of reindeer and other game on which human subsistence in these zones had to a large extent depended. It may be supposed that with diminished possibilities for very large or multiple kills, there was now little chance of being able to afford leaving an interval of a month between one hunt and the next. Hunting became more sporadic and opportunistic, and gathered wild foods more important a resource. This necessitated dispersing widely over the landscape within small family-based bands, and with men now more reliant on their wives' gathering labours, "dominance" principles – however muted and wrapped in the language of culture – reasserted themselves on a new plane. The possibilities of female menstrual synchrony and solidarity in many regions collapsed. Men clung to their wives even during their menstrual periods (albeit observing residual taboos), and the meaning of the traditional sex-strike became inverted. Menstrual avoidances and pollution-beliefs – persisting in the absence of much real feminine power – now turned inwards to rebound against women themselves. The mode of production, in short, changed, and all the norms appropriate to the earlier mode could no longer function in the traditional way. The old ideals – including even the "own kill" rule itself – became increasingly difficult to observe.

One way of conceptualising what used to be termed "totemism" is to see it as a logical outcome of the model presented here. Two aspects are relevant. In the first place, the identification of animal blood with menstrual blood – potentially conceptualisable as "female ancestral blood" – is central to the model already. This gives us an important aspect of "totemism" as traditionally understood – as, namely, the belief that it is possible for human groups to be descended from, or to be of the same "blood" or "substance" as, a species of animal. Secondly, the model provides us with a situation in which game animals and women are "respected" or "avoided" on account of this shared blood. Men avoid their own kills for reasons which, symbolically, are the same as those motivating avoidance of blood-polluted sisters, mothers or wives.



Totemism as “respect” for animal flesh and as the equation of this flesh with that of human kinship-groups therefore appears wholly understandable. The base-line position, as was argued in Chapter 2, is that all masculine-hunted animal flesh is “totemic” – related as “kin” or “blood” to the hunter. All of it is to be respected, regardless of the particular species involved. In the forms in which it is empirically found, however, totemism can be seen as a residue left when such a generalised “own kill” rule is evaded on the level of everyday practice whilst becoming attached on a ritual level to just a few remaining select categories of game. Some differing ways in which this process may occur have already been surveyed in Chapter 2.

\* \* \* \* \*

Our argument on totemism can now be summed up. Gell (1975: 109) succinctly refers to the “own kill” rule among the Umeda of Papua New Guinea as “a kind of incest taboo on meat.” The essential point here is that one is prohibited from appropriating flesh which is “one’s own” in the sense that it has emanated from one’s own action. “Totemism” in this context is no different: it is the insistence that “own offspring” and “own produce” are of the same substance as oneself and must therefore be “avoided” or “given away”. Kinship avoidance-relationships are applied to human and non-human flesh-produce alike. In hunting traditions, the relevant “incest-avoidances” apply in particular to meat; the act of killing an animal produces an intimate relationship with it – a relationship of kinship or “blood” – and it is this which precludes its consumption as food. As a Gnau informant puts it (Lewis 1980: 174):

“No man may eat anything that he has shot himself because by shooting it he has put something of himself into it. What they say is that his own blood is in it... His own blood is in the kill, and therefore it must not be eaten. People should never eat their own blood.”

### **The own kill and own offspring rules**

But it is time to return to the theme with which this chapter began. The chimpanzee pattern of immediate consumption is not simply different from the traditional hunter—gatherer norm. It is its inverse. The traditional human

norm, as we saw in Chapter 2, goes beyond a mere preparedness to share. It involves a principle of active renunciation and exchange which diametrically opposes the “natural” primate tendency for meat to remain in the killer’s hands.

Numerous authors have noted that an effect is to even out inequalities and ensure that children, the elderly and women gain predetermined shares in hunted game (Clastres 1972: 168-70; Gould 1969: 17; Yengoyan 1972: 91). Yet it seems important to recognise that these groups are not necessarily the passive recipients of meat provided through benevolent institutions. An element of struggle and will is involved. The womenfolk of the Peruvian Sharanahua, as we saw in Chapter 4, periodically send out their men on a collective “special hunt”, giving or withdrawing themselves sexually in strict accordance with whether or not the men bring game. Women emphatically enjoy sexual variety and enjoy male sexual flesh – but only when it is accompanied by the requisite animal flesh as well. It is Siskind’s (1973a: 234) insight to have understood that bride-service more widely exemplifies a logic of a similar kind. Almost all hunter-gatherer groups are “brideservice societies” (Collier and Rosaldo 1981: 286); the game killed by men is taken from them by their wives, lovers or affinal relatives as the condition of their sexual rights.

The proposed model of origins takes this kind of exchange as its point of departure. And It explains not only the “own kill” rule but also the occurrence of incest-avoidance in exogamic form – as the female community’s “own offspring” counterpart to men’s avoidance of their own kills.

This can be seen by returning to the model’s starting-point. To the extent that women express solidarity, they are “on strike”. They are blood-polluted and therefore exclude all adult heterosexual sex. This is all we require. The entire configuration of human sexual avoidances is contained already within this situation. For the women’s young male offspring are logically and within the model’s terms included in their shared blood-pollution and meat-gaining solidarity. Precisely such a combination of caring intimacy, sharing and exclusion of adult heterosexual sex is characteristic of kinship-solidarity in traditional cultures. To the extent that such solidarity exists, sex is excluded. This is neither a prediction of the model, nor an addition to it. It

is the “sex-strike” hypothesis as such: the essence of the model as it stands, included on every level but the sexual, and associating all mothers and sisters with their own solidarity and therefore with the presence of their own blood, the women’s male offspring, on reaching maturity, must seek sexual relations elsewhere.

To obtain sexual access to these “other” females, the sons must, on reaching maturity, hunt and surrender the meat. We now have, then, a group-to-group relationship of sexual and economic exchange. This is exogamy. What happens – given that the solidarity involves sharing in meat gained from outsiders (from men who are in fact collectively “husbands” and “fathers”) – can now be further defined. The young males as they mature seek lovers and wives but remain their mothers’ sons. They retain their solidarity, returning to their female kin with each menstrual flow. They continue to receive kinship rights – including rights to distribute and share in incoming food – from these female kin. On the other hand, when they hunt and bring back the meat, it is not to their female kin that they return – for that would mean stepping into the “alien” sexual identity of their fathers, switching loyalties in order to gain sexual rights in women who had always been “unthinkable” as sexual partners before. Instead, they look elsewhere – to females as distant from their own blood-solidarity as are their fathers. In effect, then, while hunting bands “expel” their own kills as food consumable only by others, matrilineally-defined groups of women “expel” their male offspring as flesh sexually “consumable” only by the women of other similar groups. Male kin – to turn now to the symbolic level – are associated by women with their own menstrual blood. It is for this reason that they cannot be enjoyed as full moon or “honeymoon” (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 157) partners. Matrilineal clan incest – as the West African Ashanti put it – would be “the eating up of one’s own blood” (Rattray 1929: 303).

In order to underscore how exogamy, cross-cousin marriage, rules against sex prior to hunting and menstrual avoidances all arise as so many aspects of a single simple logic, we may express all the above in another way. If the females are “on strike” along with their offspring, the young males among these offspring must find themselves in a peculiar position. On the one hand, they are males – and so in a sense “should” be in the opposite gender-camp. On

the other hand, they have since infancy been included within the sex-strike solidarity of their mothers/sisters. To the extent that they remain maternally attached, so that their mothers exercise some power over them, these males must inevitably become used by such females in buttressing feminine resistance against potentially-dominant male sexual partners. In their capacity as sons and younger brothers, then, these males are in effect participants in the sex-strike, supporting their kinswomen in resisting approaches from dominant or would-be dominant males (who would include their fathers). Since such solidarity is expressed during menstruation (during the time when some of the women in the group – those who are not pregnant or menopausal – are signalling “no” by bleeding), this sex-strike intimacy must be associated with blood. Intimacy in association with menstrual blood, then, must mean not only “no sex” it must also mean that any females associated with such blood seem “like” mothers or older sisters in being sexually “taboo”. The model would lead us to expect a structure of associations of some such kind rooted at a very deep level cross-culturally in the ethnographic record, with blood-kin combining during the menstrual period at dark moon and affines combining during the full moon (Figure 2).

To see the consequences in terms of exogamy, let us take the case of a group of females, with their offspring, beginning to resist sexual relations because of a shortage of meat. Now if a particular adult male were proving difficult – attempting to secure sexual relations through intimidation, dominance or violence – a pattern of consequences would follow. It can at once be seen that such a structure possesses its own logic, within which a number of basic features of typically-human sexual morality are already contained. On the one hand, the potentially-violent male would be perceived as a threat by the other adult males: If he were allowed his way, these males might fear becoming sexually expropriated (in a relapse, we might suppose, into something like the “harem” system of baboons – in which the bulk of the male population are excluded from the breeding system by a few dominant “overlords”). On the other hand, all the females would feel threatened by the intimidation or rape of any one among their number. This would be because the females in a group would have an interest in maintaining the collective value of their sexuality. Even a single case of rape would undercut this value, not just for the immediate victim but for all the women in the group. If one male could gain sexual

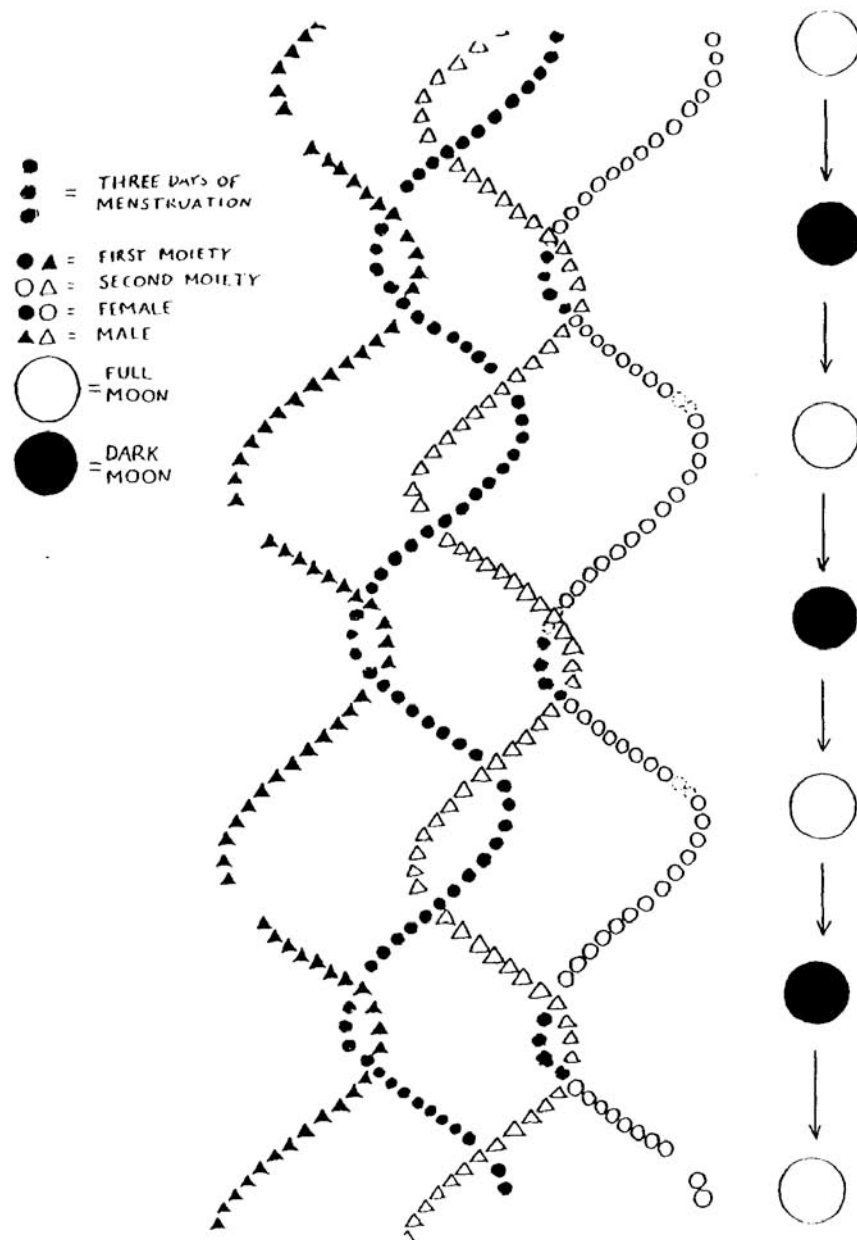


Figure 2. The model: kin conjoin at dark moon, marital partners at full

access by direct violence or pressure, it would be that much more difficult to maintain any effective sex-strike against the others. Finally, the younger male offspring of the females would feel equally threatened, being included within their mothers' solidarity and depending for their meat-supplies on the strength of feminine resistance to sexual intimidation. Given even the very briefest hegemony of feminine sexual solidarity, in other words, it would rapidly have found itself buttressed from all sides by collective groups of males.

We have pictured a situation in which the males as a group are departing from the home-base to go out hunting. Should one among their number attempt to break ranks and return to the home-base, he would at once be perceived as a sexual threat to the other hunters, as well as to the females and young. The group of hunters – it can be seen – would be unable to leave for the chase unless reassured that there would be no sex (and certainly no male sexual dominance) in or around the home-base during their absence. This would in turn mean that those juvenile males left behind with their mothers would have to be strictly under the control of their mothers – participating in the sex-strike solidarity of the feminine community and for that reason “unthinkable” as potential sexual partners themselves. This would be not merely a question of the avoidance of incest between individual females and their biological offspring. Biological distinctions, indeed, would have little relevance. The avoidances would of necessity extend to all those participating in the “strike”. A “classificatory” structure of kinship-avoidances would be the result. The penalty for infringement of these sexual taboos would be not simply “bad hunting luck” (although the internal conflicts aroused would no doubt preclude effective hunting) but the threatened collapse of culture.

A further point is relevant; consideration of it will help us in understanding certain recurrent features of traditional ritual and myth – features suggesting a periodic, transient inversion of gender-roles as an essential dimension for ritual power. The situation just described would preclude sex occurring within or around the home-base during the absence of the group of hunters. These hunters would have to know that intercourse between the womenfolk and the young males left behind (as these grew up and matured) was unthinkable. For such hunters, however, the important point would be reassurance regarding

control. Physical intimacies between mothers and offspring or between women themselves would pose no particular threat, provided only that the sex-strike held solid against the possibility of any dominant male's gaining control at the absent hunters' expense. This being the case, the model would suggest that even a measure of "incest" – physical closeness between those of the same "blood" – would have been tolerable on condition that it was under female dominance, was limited to the menstrual period and took the form only of diffuse, undeveloped eroticism as opposed to exclusive attachments between adults. On this reading, the only kind of intimacy between blood kin definitely excluded would have been adult, mature, heterosexual coupling. Other kinds of "sex" during menstruation would have been acceptable and – perhaps particularly from the women's point of view – no doubt exciting and desirable. In later chapters, it will be seen that menstruation is indeed frequently linked with ritually-potent forms of collective "incestuous" eroticism under the symbolic authority of women.

Finally, it should again be emphasised that the model is not intended to provide a picture of what is actually found. It provides a starting-point. As such, it can easily be distorted, pulled or twisted to produce a range of ritual, kinship, mythological and other structures corresponding to those actually discerned in the ethnographic record. For example, although the model as such specifies a matrilineal, matrilocal dual-system, It Is only necessary to introduce a patrilocal residence-rule – retaining local exogamy and the initial (matrilineal) exogamy at the same time – for an Australian-type four-section ("Kari era") system to be formed. Or again, although the model specifies that women menstruate and take responsibility for society's periodic "sex- strike", it is only necessary to assume a shift of power from female to male to produce the "male initiation" and "male menstruation" rituals characteristic of numerous male-dominated traditional cultures (see Chapters 6 to 15 below). We therefore have not a static model but a template from which a variety of structures can be generated. It can be described as a "transformational template". From this template we can in fact, by successive formal operations, generate the full range of social and other structures known to social anthropology.

## Notes

- 1 Driver & Massey (1957: 255); Marks (1976: 62); Frazer (1936: 20-22); Wagner (1972: 69).
- 2 Delaney, Lupton & Toth (1977: 19); Durkheim (1898); Lévi-Strauss (1978: 404).
- 3 Buckley (1982); Shostak (1983: 88); Woodburn, J. (pers. comm. on Hadza belief in synchrony); Burley (1979); McClintock (1971); Graham & McGrew (1980); Kiltie (1982); Russel *et al.* (1980); Quadagno *et al.* (1981).
- 4 Adair (1775: 117, 134); Huxley (1957: 145); Lévi-Strauss (1970: 151, 152n); McKnight (1975: 85); Warner (1957: 286).
- 5 Arcand (1978); De Heusch (1982: 144-86); Lévi-Strauss (1981: 239); McKnight (1975: 85); Schapera (1930: 98-100); Simmons (1942: 426-8).
- 6 Marshack (1972a, 1972b). For contemporary hunter-gatherer moon-scheduling of medicine-dances linked with hunting success see Barnard (1979: 73) on the Nharo, Woodburn (1982: 151) on the Hadza, and Marshall (1969: 356) on the !Kung.
- 7 Levi-Strauss (1981: 274); Shostak (1983: 17?); Shuttle & Redgrove (1978). For supporting medical and scientific evidence, see Buckley (1982); Dewan *et al.* (1978); Menaker & Menaker (1959); Menaker (1967). For a fuller treatment see Chapter 7.
- 8 Siskind (1973b); cf. Lee (1968: 3?); Sahlins (1974: 23).
- 9 See Kosimann and Martin (1975) for the concept of a moving “front” of intensive hunters constituting the first wave of early human immigration into each game-rich new continent or climatic zone. As each previously- uninhabited region was reached, it seems likely that hunting-conditions would have been at first almost ideal. Once the frontier had moved on, those left behind may have settled back into a more broad-range subsistence mode in which smaller game and gathered produce became more important. One possibility to be considered is that the menstrually synchronised, once-per-month ritual hunting model presented here applied in its “pure” form only for a relatively brief period along the frontier itself; the rest of humanity would then have preserved this model only as a memory, tradition and base-line position from which departures were subsequently made.



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*Part II: Blood, ritual and myth*

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## **Chapter 6: The rule of women**

The remainder of this study will focus on rituals and myths. This is not because the symbolic level of culture is credited with any special importance over and above economics, social organisation or kinship (although the underlying structural conservatism of the mythico-ritual level is certainly distinctive and relevant to the choice). It is because the study of ritual and mythology has remained a particularly perplexing area of social anthropological study; it is within this area that the benefits of using the model may seem most immediately apparent. It should perhaps be emphasised that when the research-programme underlying this thesis was begun, the model of cultural origins outlined in the previous chapter had been developed independently of any interest in mythology. It was only in the course of following through the predictions of the model that a surprising discovery was made – namely, that it facilitated an immediately-compelling and intellectually-satisfying way of decoding numerous fairy tales and magical myths. It was in the excitement of making this finding that the research programme changed course, resulting in the emphasis on mythology which is a feature of the thesis in its present form.

The present chapter will focus on myths of matriarchy as posing a general theoretical problem for social anthropology – a problem, that is, which transcends particular ethnographies or culture-areas. The aim will be to substantiate in a preliminary way the general hypothesis proposed here as a solution, a hypothesis which links “rule of women” myths with (a) feminine menstrual synchrony and (b) male rites of imitative “menstruation” and “childbirth”. Once this broader theoretical framework has been established, it is proposed to turn to the myth of the Two Wawilak Sisters in its ritual context (see Chapters 8—11), then to some familiar “fairy tales” (chapter 12)

and finally (in Chapters 13-15) to some of the key myths of Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologiques*.

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## V. Propp: the morphology of the folktale

The major forerunner of Claude Lévi-Strauss in pioneering the structural study of myth was V. Propp. His book "Morphology of the Folktale" first faced folklorists with the problem of explaining what the author called "the total uniformity in the construction of fairy tales" (1968: 105-06), a finding which later fascinated Lévi-Strauss (1977, 2: 115-45). In looking for "that one tale with respect to which all fairy tales will appear as variants", Propp (1968: 89) was drawn towards "those tales in which a dragon kidnaps a princess" and in which the hero "meets a witch, obtains a steed, flies away" and "vanquishes the dragon", returning back home to become involved in new adventures such as being pursued by she-dragons.

Having discovered and to an extent demonstrated "the total uniformity in the construction of fairy tales", Propp (1968: 112) stressed that the finding – which "appeared quite unexpectedly" – "ought to be studied by anthropology and the contiguous disciplines which alone are capable of shedding light on its causes". The problem was this: "if all fairy tales are so similar in form, does this not mean that they all originate from a single source?" (1968: 106). A "single source", he continued, need not mean that all the tales come, for example, from India. "The single source may also be a psychological one". But – Propp points out – there are problems here, for it is only fairy stories (stories with a "magical" content) which conform so strictly to the rules:

"If the limitation of the tale were to be explained by the limited faculties of human imagination in general, we would have no tales other than those of our given category, but we possess thousands of other tales not resembling fairy tales."

It is only within a context of witchcraft or magic that the human brain seems to be constrained rigorously with regard to the tales it creates, Propp (1968: 87) therefore concludes that general psychological constraints cannot adequately account for the structure of fairy tales (a position contrasting

fundamentally with that of Lévi-Strauss – see Chapter 15). The tales – he writes – must stem, rather, from a universalism at the level of tradition and culture:

“The tale at its core preserves traces of very ancient paganism, of ancient customs and rituals. The tale gradually undergoes a metamorphosis, and these transformations and metamorphoses of tales are also subject to certain laws” (Propp 1968: 87).

In short:

“A way of life and religion die out, while their contents turn into tales” (Propp 1968: 106).

In this thesis, the possibilities suggested by Propp are further explored. However, Propp himself gives no suggestion as to what it might have been in “ancient paganism” or “ancient customs and rituals” which might have given rise to such things as dragon-legends. What elements might there have been in the social, institutional realities of an “ancient way of life” which are reflected in the recurrent motifs of fairy tales?

### **Menstruation and *Mythologiques***

In the light of our model of culture’s “initial situation”, an answer suggests itself. For a woman to menstruate – given seclusion rules – is for her blood in reality to “carry her away”, if not to “the sky” or into the jaws of a “monster”, then at least to a place beyond her husband’s reach. And, in a world where everyone is either an affine or kin, related through marriage or through “blood”, to be divorced from one’s husband’s people is to be that much nearer one’s own: menstruation conjoins those related through “blood”. As Lévi-Strauss (1978: 404) puts it:

“...a menstruating woman, who has to remain in temporary seclusion, keeps her husband at a distance, so that during this period, metaphorically at least, it is as if she had gone back to be near her own people.”

The blood in effect carries her away. In this context, a husband unavoidably

“...recognises that a wife is never given without some hope of return: each month, during the space of a few days, menstruation deprives the husband of his wife, as if her relatives were reasserting their rights over her” (1978: 400).

From the standpoint of conjugal relations, moreover, the menstruating wife is “dead”; her husband is periodically “a widower” (1978: 404). Yet if this is “death”, it is only of a temporary kind: the wife re-emerges from her seclusion to join marital “life” again.

It would seem that this menstrual alternation between phases or roles provides us with a possible source of those tales about magical “journeys” of the kind Propp describes. In the case of the “Ivan tales” discussed by Propp (1968: 105-07), such things as flying steeds, birds, flying boats or flying carpets – magical potencies obtained from a witch – transport the hero between home and a distant land, *this to-and-fro movement linking in with the periodic availability/non-availability of a bride*. In Lévi-Strauss *Mythologiques*, the key “bird-nester” myth tells of the hero’s successive journeys between home and another world, the youth clinging to a rock face in the sky (in the fourth and final journey) by means of “a magic wand” obtained from his grandmother (Levi Strauss 1970: 36). In geographically-distant but clearly related variants, the “bird-nester” loses his wife or wives and then regains them, just as he loses contact with the earth (being propelled into the sky by means of magically-growing stalks, trees, cliffs etc.) and returns back to earth again (Levi Strauss 1981: 31, 564-61). In Arnhem Land, Australia, we find virtually identical “bird-nester” myths (Barney 1959: 73-9 Robinson 1966: 159-61), in which the earth/sky alternation (associated with a Rainbow which is also a snake) forms a counterpoint to an alternation between availability and non-availability on the part of a bride or brides (see below, Chapter 15).

In this thesis, our key myth – like Propp’s hypothesised basic “dragon” – is about a woman-swallowing monster – the Australian Aboriginal Rainbow-Snake – as well as about witchcraft, magical travel and a male conquest of sexual power (see Chapters 8 and 9). In this case it can be shown that this relates directly to the menstrual cycle as an endless alternation between opposite phases or states. Like the Rainbow Snake, Propp’s “dragon”, which “kidnaps” a princess and is then “vanquished”, represents the power of blood in the context of menstrual synchrony and seclusion-rules – factors which dictate that even the most desirable “princess” may be withdrawn from marital circulation as if “swallowed up” in a larger whole.

Likewise, Propp's magical Journeys" between "home" and a "distant land" are analysable as reflecting the alternation between marital availability (being "at home", "in this world") and complete inaccessibility ("in a distant land", "in the world beyond"). This is not to claim that such are the only meanings of these and similar motifs, it is to suggest that a concealed and for the most part forgotten core-tradition of menstrual spell-casting provides the pan-human shared generative logic of an immense family of magical fairy tales and myths. This lays down at the deepest level the formal, structural constraints within which the unlimited variety of themes and meanings must be expressed. Magical Journeys between "home" and a "distant land" may mean anything, depending on the story, but if our hypothesis is correct they will always betray a connection with the "magical" social distance travelled when menstruation casts its spell.

A similar interpretation can be placed on stories about the exchange of "masks" or "skins". This motif pervades *Mythologiques*, Just as it pervades magical myths and fairy tales probably everywhere. There is the "false" bride and the "true" bride, the "false" husband or suitor and the "true" one, the antagonists exchanging places with one another or exchanging clothes, masks or skins just as they move from role to role, world to world.

In a study of the Barasana Indians of northwest Amazonia the links between "skin-changing", role-exchanging and menstruation are made explicit. One myth describes a certain "Frog-Wife" whose married life "is divided into cycles of alternation between her husband's and her own natal community (C. Hugh-Jones 1979: 166). The ethnographer in a valuable commentary notes that the "Frog Wife" is "metaphorically menstruating", her "journeys home" being periods of menstrual seclusion. When she is with her own kin, she is "dangerous" to her husband, and is, in fact, a "Snake Woman" (1979: 166). In this state, we may compare her, then, with the "false wife" of other myths and tales. No human woman really turns into a "Frog" or "Snake": these are code-terms for a wife who, in menstruating, has "changed her skin" – changed her status, social identity or role. Hence among these Indians, womankind is felt to resemble snakes, spiders and other "skin-changing" creatures. She "renews" herself by menstruating, Menstruation being "an internal changing of skin" (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 183). In one "skin" she is "old", while in the other she is "young" (S.

Hugh-Jones 1979: 264). Menstrual alternation, then, is metaphorically an exchanging of one skin for another, one life for a new one.

### The “bird-nester” stories

The key myth of Lévi-Strauss’s *Mythologiques* concerns a “bird-nester”. The “bird-nester” stories and their numerous variants – such as those concerning the “Wives of the Sun and the Moon” (see Chapter 14) – are about journeys between earth and sky, the near and the far, life, death and new life, one kind of “spouse” and another. Expressed in a different code, these alternations are movements between kinship and marriage, or (for men) between woman as “wife” and woman as “sister/mother”. The tales are magical, and in a number of cases it is explicit that the magical/transformational agency is menstrual blood. Menstrual synchrony is a persistent theme (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 221-2).

Lévi-Strauss in fact culminates his investigations by extracting “the quintessential mythic formula” from the following Coos Indian (southern Oregon) version of the “bird-nester” story, in which the hero alternates between earth and sky and between opposite kinds of wives – one kind being “nocturnal”. These “nocturnal” wives act as the synchronising regulators of all women’s menstrual onsets:

An old man aimed to seduce his son’s wives. He placed his blood stained faeces at the top of a small conifer tree, and arranged for a red-feathered woodpecker to peck at them. Attracted by the red colouring, his son was successfully tricked into climbing the tree, which was then made to rise magically higher and higher into the sky. The wicked old man changed his skin, assuming the appearance of a young man, and seduced his daughters-in-law. Meanwhile, marooned up in the sky, the young man copulated first with a “Sun Woman”, who had to be approached with a penis made of ice, and then with the opposite kind of spouse, namely two sisters. “They were nocturnal travellers, and the elder, a nice, kind girl, explained that they had come from another country: ‘Whenever we get anywhere’, she added, ‘the women have their monthly periods....’” The women produce this effect by regularly travelling between one “country” and another, staying in each for the same length of time (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 565).

In this myth, the sun’s fire is followed by the night sky as one kind of “wife” is supplanted by her opposite. The old man who becomes “young” again is involved in a “skin-change” associated with an exchange of sexual roles and of positions in relation to the earth and the sky. The “false husband” and the



“true husband” change places. The title of Lévi-Strauss’s fourth volume of *Mythologiques*, “The Naked Man”, is a reference to this motif: the Klamath “bird-nester” has his clothes taken away from him by his deceitful father, who sends the youth into the sky, dresses up in his clothes and takes on his son’s physical appearance in order to seduce the youth’s wives (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 31). That menstrual or lunar “skin-changing” is involved is noted by Lévi-Strauss (1981: 72), who comments that the bird-nester’s mother in this story “appears alternately either as a ravishing young girl or as an old hunch backed woman, two characters one is tempted to interpret as being the full moon and the crescent moon”.

In this thesis – particularly in Chapter 15 – such alternations will be traced back to their lunar/menstrual generative source on the basis of the following argument. A woman’s “false” marriage is her monthly seclusion. In secluding herself, she is leaving her true husband and returning, metaphorically at least, to her own kin, her own “blood”. Her menstrual bond, her menstrual “marriage”, being with kinsfolk, is necessarily “incestuous” (the different myths range between every conceivable variety of incestuous connection in encoding this; in the Bororo “bird-nester” myth with which *Mythologiques* begins, the hero copulates with his own mother – Lévi-Strauss 1970: 35). In menstrually withdrawing and then, after a period, emerging as available wives, women are in effect alternating between kin and affines, one category of men gaining wives as the other loses them, the process being repeated every month. This is coded as a “struggle” between “opponents” who “die” and “come alive” again, just as they travel to “another world” and return again, and just as they exchange roles, identities or “skins” (see Chapter 15). In the context of menstrual synchrony of the kind assumed in the Coos myth, such role-exchanging processes would involve the whole community in a harmonised rhythm of regular structural metamorphosis. Simultaneously, all wives would be turned into sisters/mothers, while all husbands would be turned into maternal uncles and brothers. Men would lose their wives but gain their sisters; women would exchange husbands for brothers, altering their social identities accordingly in a collective changing of “skins”. This collective periodic re-establishment of blood-bonds would correspond to the model of cultural origins set out in Chapter 5, and would be the precise inverse of the process said by Lévi-Strauss (1969a: 3-83) to have marked the establishment of human culture – the

process, namely, in accordance with which every man renounced his sister in order to gain a wife.

### **Menstruation and women's "rule"**

Up to this point, in this chapter, some evidence has been presented indicating that traditions of menstrual seclusion are relevant to an understanding of the structural constraints apparent when comparisons are made between magical folktales and myths. It is now proposed to turn from the formal structure of myths to the question of their ideological and political functions.

Matriarchy myths tell of an "original" period of supposedly disastrous "women's rule" which came to an end when men gained power. The theme is known in many parts of the world. It is particularly prominent in those areas in which men seek a monopoly of ritual power through secret male initiation rites. Such areas include much of tropical South America, Africa, Melanesia and Australia. In the societies concerned, men organise an apparent conspiracy against women, using an array of theatrical devices, sound-making instruments, blood-shedding operations and ritual songs, dances and other performances in order – it seems – to intimidate women and separate them from their male offspring as these come of age. The success of these endeavours varies from place to place, but in general the logic which men follow and the myths and symbols through which it is expressed are so stunningly alike in such widely separated regions of the globe that anthropologists have long sought an explanation for the parallels (Bachofen 1973: 69-201; Bamberger 1974; Dundes 1976; Gourlay 1975; S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 127). In this thesis, following a suggestion made by Lévi-Strauss (1978: 222) in a more limited context, it will be argued that women's "rule" refers, in fact, to *les règles* – to women's periods, which can be synchronised with one another and phase-locked to the periodicity of the moon.

Myths of matriarchy, writes Joan Bamberger (1974: 249), Justify male dominance "through the evocation of a catastrophic alternative – a society dominated by women". The final image of womankind which emerges from such myths, she continues (p. 280), "is that she represents chaos and misrule through unbridled sexuality." In terms of the model presented in the previous chapter, Bamberger's observations may be reformulated as follows. In these myths, women

are accused of being unable to restrain their natural urges and sexual appetites – unable, as it were, to achieve cultural self-discipline in the form of a “sex-strike”. When it comes to resisting the temptations of sex, then, women are failures. In the myths which we analyse below, they leave their legs open or their “sacred enclosures” unguarded, allowing their privacy to be invaded by men. The conclusion – we will see – is that in the interests of culture, men must organise the necessary “sex-strike” for themselves.

In the myths, woman-dominated society is envisaged not only as excessively sexual. It is seen as a world ruled by mysterious forces emanating in a more general way from nature. These are forces of “evil”, “witchcraft” or “medicine” bound up with darkness and the changing moon (as opposed to the Sun) and intimately linked with both reproductive and sexual aspects of female physiology. In a number of myths it is the “Sun-man” or “Sun-father” who finally overthrows “women’s rule” (Bamberger 1974: 269, 273). Few specialists in comparative religion or mythology have doubted that such myths are assuming or alleging woman’s governance by the moon (Cf. Eliade 1958: 154-63, Lévi-Strauss 1978: 221-2, 506). The Oglala Indian saying that woman’s power “grows with the moon and comes and goes with it”, women secluding themselves monthly in their menstrual huts “to keep their medicine effective” (Powers 1980: 62, 57) provides a good example. Beliefs of this kind, while varied in their specific forms, occur virtually throughout the traditional world. Through their bodies and, in particular, through their reproductive organs, women are felt to have a peculiar and privileged mode of access to “medicine”, “magic” or “witchcraft” of a kind which is all the more dangerous for being linked with the moon, rooted in nature and therefore ultimately beyond male cultural artifice or control.

Against this background, we may examine some typical “primitive matriarchy” myths, several of them featuring a women’s Lodge or Hut suggestive of a communal menstrual hut:

*The origin of the Nain. Tierra del Fuego: Selk’nam-Ona.*

*In the beginning, witchcraft was known only by the women of Ona land. They practised it in a Lodge, which no man dared approach. The girls, as they neared womanhood, were instructed in the magic arts, learning how to bring sickness and death to those who displeased*

*them. The men lived in abject fear and subjection. Certainly they had bows and arrows with which to hunt. "Yet", they asked, "what use are such weapons against witchcraft and sickness?"*

*The tyranny of women bore down more and more heavily, until at last one day, the men resolved to fight back. They decided to kill the women, whereupon there ensued a great massacre, from which not one woman escaped in human form. The men spared their little daughters and waited until these had grown old enough to become wives. And so that these women should never be able to band together and regain their old ascendancy, the men inaugurated a secret society of their own and banished forever the women's Lodge in which so many wicked plots had been hatched (Bridges 1948: 412-13; quoted in Bamberger 1974: 270).*

The essence of this myth is the allegation that women once "banded together" in some way connected with a "lodge" from which emanated death-dealing supernatural powers.

Our next myth adds to these themes that of a special "paint" used by women to change their apparent identities. The "Great Kina Hut" is the hut in which men carry on their rituals today:

*The origin of the kina. Tierra del Fuego: Yamana.*

*In the beginning, women had sole power. They gave orders to the men, who obeyed just as women do today. The men took care of the children, tended the fire, and cleaned the skins, while the women did no work in the hut at all. That was the way it was always to be. The women invented the Great Kina Hut and everything which goes on inside it, and then fooled the men into thinking they were spirits. They stepped out of the Great Hut, painted all over, with masks on their heads. The men did not recognise their wives, who, simulating the spirits, beat the earth with dried skins so that it shook. Their yells, howls and roars so frightened the men that they hastened into their huts and hid, full of fear.*

*But one day, the Sun-man, who supplied the women-spirits in the Kina hut with an abundance of game, overheard the voices of two girls while he was passing a lagoon. Being curious, he hid in the bushes and saw the girls washing off painting which was characteristic of the spirits when they appeared. They had also been practising their imitations of the voices of the spirits. Suddenly, the Sun-man confronted them, insisting that they reveal to him what went on in the Kina hut. Finally, they confessed to him: "It is the women themselves who paint themselves and put on masks; then they step out of the hut and show themselves to the men. There are no other spirits there, It is the women themselves who yell and howl; in this way they frighten the men." The Sun-man then returned to the*

*camp and exposed the fraudulent women. In revenge the men stormed the Kina hut, and a great battle ensued in which the women were either killed or transformed into animals. From that time on, the men have performed in the Kina hut; they do this in the same manner as the women before them (Bamberger 1974: 269; citing Gusinde 1961: 1238-49).*

In this myth, men are associated with the Sun. The women, by contrast, are associated with the waters of a lagoon, in which they used to wash off “paint” which acted as a “disguise”. When painted all over, the women inspired terror as they impersonated “the spirits”. They organised their sexual power in a fearsome great “hut”, but men eventually stormed this, taking it over for their own use and performing in it exactly the same rituals as the women had done before them.

A further myth introduces (a) the theme of flutes and bullroarers and (b) the theme of sexual dominance as expressed in the capacity to rape. It is narrated by a man:

*The origin of the bullroarer. Amazonia: Mehinaku*

*In ancient times the women occupied the men's houses and played the sacred flutes inside. We men took care of the children, processed maniac flour, wove hammocks, and spent our time in the dwellings while the women cleared fields, fished and hunted. In those days, the children even nursed at our breasts. A man who dared enter the women's house during their ceremonies would be gang-raped by all the women of the village on the central plaza. One day the chief called us together and showed us how to make bullroarers to frighten the women. As soon as the women heard the terrible drone, they dropped the sacred flutes and ran into the houses to hide. We grabbed the flutes and took over the men's houses. Today if a woman comes in here and sees our flutes we rape her. Today the women nurse babies, process maniac flour and weave hammocks, while we hunt, fish and farm (Gregor 1977: 255).*

\* \* \* \* \*

In the next myth, women's sacred flutes are associated with the waters of a lagoon. These flutes needed “feeding with meat” – that is, the women when in possession of them were able to compel men to hunt for them:

*The origin of the sacred flutes. Amazonia: Mundurucu.*

*Three women were walking through the forest long ago when they heard music coming from a lagoon. They investigated and caught three fish, which turned into three sacred flutes. The women played these to produce music so powerful that they were enabled to occupy the sacred Men's House, forcing the men to live in ordinary dwellings. While the women did little but play on their flutes all day long, they forced the men to make manioc flour, fetch water and firewood, and care for the children. The men's ignominy was complete when the women visited the men's dwellings at night to force their sexual attentions on them ("Just as we do to them today").*

*However, the flutes needed feeding with meat. One day, the men – who were the hunters – threatened to withhold what they caught unless the women surrendered the flutes. Frightened of angering the fertility-spirits contained in the flutes, the women agreed, and the men seized the flutes and the power, which they have held to this day (Murphy 1973: 21 7-18).*

In this myth, the men gain power by organising what may be termed (in the light of the arguments of Chapter 5) a male counterpart to women's menstrual "sex-strike" – a collective "hunting-strike". They then base their power in what was formerly the women's sacred "House", monopolising now the "flutes" which "needed feeding with meat". In this as in so many similar myths, the implication is that every collective, solidarity-engendering strategy which women once resorted to against men, men are nowadays justified in practising against women – and in a form as close as possible to the feminine-inspired original.

We now come to a myth which replaces "flutes", "bullroarers", "masks" and "paint" with a strange power-conferring garment: a skirt made of fibres stained with the world's first menstrual blood:

*The origin of royal dress. West Africa: Dogon.*

*A woman stole a fibre skirt which was stained with the world's first menstrual flow. Putting it on herself and concealing her identity by this means, she reigned as queen and spread terror all around. But then men took the fibres from her, dressed themselves in the royal garment, and prohibited its use to women. All the men danced wearing the reddened fibres, and the women had to content themselves with admiring them (Griaule 1965: 170).*

The statement that the woman had “stolen” the power of menstruation expresses a male stance typical of myths of this kind. While many of the myths frankly acknowledge that men “robbed” women of a power which was “naturally” theirs, in other cases the possible implications in terms of male illegitimacy seem to be deliberately blurred through a paradoxical assertion. It is claimed that women’s power – even when taking the form of the potency of the menstrual flow – had been “stolen” by women in the first place!

The following myth is called “The Origin of the Bullroarer”; it might have been called “The Origin of Menstruation”, however, since it simultaneously accounts for the first appearance of the menstrual flow. In contrast with the previous myth, this one depicts women’s menstruation in negative terms:

*The origin of the bullroarer. Papua New Guinea: Kwavuru.*

*Tiv’r, the Originator, was puzzled to hear a faint sound – like that of a bullroarer – whenever his wife moved. He asked her what the sound was, but she pretended not to know. Eventually, Tiv’r felt sure that it was coming from her vagina, and he commissioned various birds to steal the object responsible. A number of birds swooped down on her while, with beaded back and legs spread wide apart, the woman was engaged in sweeping the village. But each time, she frustrated them by abruptly sitting down. Only the parrot got near enough to draw blood: this is why parrot’s feathers are red. Eventually, Tiv’r called upon the little bird, Serekute, and threatened him with death if he failed to obtain the sound-making instrument. Tiv’r shouted to his wife to show a little more rigour in her sweeping, and as she bent down and the point of the bullroarer protruded from her vagina, the bird swooped down and snatched it away. The woman lay streaming with her first menstrual flow, while Tiv’r hugged the bullroarer to his breast and declared that henceforth it would belong to man alone (Williams 1936: 307-08).*

Womankind, then leaves her vagina exposed, losing her power as a result.

The next myth features a “sacred enclosure” which seems to correspond to the “lodges” and “huts” of many of the other myths. It is similar to the above story in saying that womankind lost her power when she opened her legs too wide, leaving her vagina exposed:

*The origin of Ida. Papua New Guinea: Umeda*

*One day the women – who alone held the secrets of Ida – were preparing for a ceremony as usual, asking and storing the materials, paint, masks etc. in the sacred enclosure. But this time, the men had decided to set a trap for them. They went hunting and killed so many pigs that, when the women had eaten, they lay about in postures of repletion, with their knees spread and their skirts out of place. The men copulated with the women, who “died” (slept, fainted). While the women slept, the men broke into the sacred enclosure, stole the masks, etc. and began to perform Ida for the first time. “We’re no good”, said the women when they woke up; “We fell asleep. From now on Ida belongs to the men” (Gell 1975: 172).*

The image of women lying “with their knees spread and their skirts out of place” conveys – to use the language of the previous chapter’s arguments – womankind’s abandonment of cultural duty, her surrender of the weapon of the sex-strike. The men seize their opportunity to strike-break, taking advantage of the sleeping pickets, invading women’s sacred enclosure and in this way stealing the sacred power.

Two more myths in this vein are worth citing. In what follows, it is acknowledged not only that the flutes were originally women’s, but also that they functioned much more spontaneously and naturally in women’s hands:

*The origin of the sacred flutes. Papua New Guinea: Wogeo.*

*Two women invented the sacred flutes following a dream. The flutes played of their own accord. But then a man stole the flutes and started blowing into the holes. When the women tried to explain that blowing was not necessary, he kicked them out of the way. “Very well”, shouted the women in anger, “you males can keep the flutes. But flutes won’t sing by themselves again. You decided to blow this one, and that’s the way it shall be. And learning what to do won’t be easy – no, you’ll have to work hard and sweat.” (Hogbin 1970: 101).*

The interest of this story lies in the notion that women’s flutes “played by themselves”, whereas when men possess them, an artificial effort has to be made.

The following myth stresses the genital, menstrual associations of the sacred flute, comparing and contrasting female menstruation in huts with male ceremonies in the Men’s House:



*The origin of the sacred flute. Papua New Guinea: Gimi.*

*A woman kept the sacred flute under her bark-string skirts until, one day, it was stolen by her brother. On putting the blow-hole to his mouth, however, his sister's pubic hairs attached themselves to the man's face: this is why men today have beards. The loss of her flute caused the woman to menstruate for the first time; ever afterwards, she was secluded each month in a menstrual hut. The men, meanwhile, began playing the flute inside the Men's House, and have held power ever since (Gillison 1980: 156).*

The final myth in this set falls into a slightly different category, since it says nothing about ritual or the transfer of sound-making instruments or ritual adornments to men. Nevertheless, something is transferred from female possession to male. The myth was given, writes Lewis (1980: 121), "in answer to my question why, exactly, the moon was connected with menstruation..."

*The origin of the moon. West Sepik, Papua New Guinea: Gnau.*

*A woman caught the moon in her net while fishing in the river. Calling it a turtle, she hid it in her house under a pile of firewood, intending to cook and eat it later. She began to prepare the necessary sago, leaving her house each day with the moon in its hiding-place inside. As she left, she barred her house, and each evening as she returned she refused to let her husband come inside, instead asking him eat his sago outside, always outside. He wondered why.*

*One day, while the woman was out, her husband peered through a crack in the wall and saw the light of the moon under the firewood. Calling to his brothers in secret, he obtained their help in breaking in to the woman's house. They stole the moon. Singing, they pushed it up on a pole until it stuck fast to the sky. At this point, the woman was at work and saw the moon's image reflected in the red-leeched sago washings in her vat. Desperate, she rushed back. Discovering her loss, she cursed her husband. The men hunted by night, killing phalangers and feeding them to the woman until her jaws ached. At last, she made it up with the hunters and demanded no more meat. "My grandchildren", she said, "I was cross over my loss. I took all you hunted. From now on, you may eat the phalangers" (Lewis 1980: 122-3).*

Much of the interest of this story lies in the manner in which it echoes various themes touched on in the previous chapter – the link between cooking and the moon, woman's "ownership" of the moon and the effects of this in enabling women to compel men to hunt for them, the practice of hunting "by night" and many others. Two points in particular should be noted: (a) the menstrual connotations of the moon "reflected in the red-leeched sago

washings” of the woman’s vat; (2) the fact that men’s gaining control over the moon and their trick in over-feeding the woman enabled them for the first time to eat their own kills. This seems reminiscent of men’s gaining control over- the flutes which “needed feeding with meat” in the Mundurucu myth discussed above. It will be remembered that womankind’s possession of menstrually symbolised, lunar-scheduled solidarity and power was the factor which – according to the arguments of Chapter 5 – enabled her to compel male hunters to provide her with meat.

### Discussion

It is not intended to dwell individually on each myth, or to detail in any depth its ritual context. In terms of their logic, such myths are all sufficiently similar to be dealt with – following Bamberger (1974) – as a set.

If it is accepted that the fisherwoman’s “moon” in the Gnau myth symbolises womankind’s lost ritual power, then it may be said that in the case of all these different narratives, the formula remains consistently as follows:

- (a) women possess ritual power
- (b) they lose this power to men.

Since we are dealing with a set of variations on a theme, we may suspect that the myths are transmitting a message of some kind which remains constant despite the variations in coding. A relatively simple task is to arrange the components of the superficially—different narratives within a grid which brings out the consistencies which we suspect to be involved. In the case of the set selected here, the women – it has been seen — begin with ritual power. This power is coded in the following ways:

<b>Myth</b>	<b>Code-term(s) for ritual power</b>
Selk’nam-Ona	Witchcraft in Lodge
Yamana	Paint, masks in Great Hut
Mehinaku	Flutes in houses
Mundurucu	Flutes/fish in lagoon and in house
Dogon	Skirt/disguise of menstruation-stained fibres
Kwavuru	Bullroarer in vagina



Umeda	Masks, paint in sacred enclosure
Wogeo	Self-playing flutes
Gimi	Flute under skirts
Gnau	Moon in house

Turning, now, to the men's seizure of power, the code-terms may be listed as follows:

**Myth**

**Code terms for men's seizure of power**

Selk'nam-Ona	Murder of woman by man; replacement of women's lodge by men's
Yamana	Unmasking of woman by Sun-man. Women's murder and transformation into animals. Seizure of paint and masks by man; performance of former women's ceremonies in Great Hut
Mehinaku	Terrorization of woman with bullroarers, gang-rape; seizure of flutes
Mundurucu	Withdrawal of meat from women's flutes; seizure of flutes and power
Dogon	Seizure of women's menstrual skirt/disguise; men's dance wearing this
Kwavaru	Theft of bullroarer from vagina; woman left to menstruate
Umeda	Seduction of overfed women whose legs are left open; invasion of women's sacred enclosure. Men's seizure of paint, masks etc., and performance of

dances

Wogeo	Theft of flutes, which no longer play of their own accord
Gimi	Theft of flute from woman's house. Playing of flutes in Men's House while woman is left to menstruate
Gnau	Theft of woman's on trick (overfeeding) to make her surrender moon-linked rights in men's kills of phalangers

From these myths, it seems clear that the “flutes”, “bullroarers”, “masks” etc. are code-terms for something which is naturally to be found in womankind’s “lagoon”, “hut”, “enclosure” or “vagina”. This can be stolen when Woman abandons her menstrual sex-strike – when she loses her ability to “band together” with her sisters in menstrual seclusion, or (to put matters another way) when she leaves her legs apart or her enclosure unguarded. But what is this “something” which is then stolen?

At this point it may be useful to glance at some aspects of the ritual contexts to which these myths refer. It will then be seen that in some cases, male genital bleeding and flute-possession are quite explicitly linked with menstruation, although in other cases they are not. In what follows, we will touch on some ritual aspects of the Gnau, Mehinaku, Dogon, Wogeo and Gimi peoples whose matriarchy myths we have examined.

Gnau men ritually bleed from their penises, but, when asked whether this is “like” menstruation, reply: “No, it is not like menstruation” (Lewis 1980: 2). However, in Mehinaku myth and ritual, there is “evidence of the mutability of gender. During two ceremonies men shed ‘menstrual’ blood by scarifying their bodies and piercing their ears....” (Gregor 1977: 254).

Dogon men circumcise their youths, and, in discussing menstrual blood, the ethnographer's informant Ogotemmelé "compared this blood with that shed in circumcision." (Griaule 1965: 146).

On the island of Wogeo, "the technique of male menstruation" involves wading out to the sea with a crayfish or Crab's claw, until the water is up to the man's knees:

"He stands there with legs apart and induces an erection... When ready he pushes back the foreskin and hacks at the glans, first on the left side, then on the right. Above all, he must not allow the blood to fall on his fingers or his legs. He waits till the cut has begun to dry and the sea is no longer pink and then walks ashore."

The man then wraps his penis in leaves, returns to the Men's House and stays there for two or three days, sexual intercourse being prohibited until the appearance of the new moon (Hogbin 1970: 88-9).

In discussing the Gimi "Rule of Women" myth, Gillison (1980: 163) turns to the initiation-ritual described in the myth:

...clan elders intern one or two of the men at a time inside a 'menstrual hut' or 'flute house' rapidly constructed in a clearing from palm fronds and wild banana leaves. Inside the hut, an older man applies a tourniquet made of peeled banana stems to the upper arm of the initiate and 'shoots' a protruding vein at the inside of the elbow with a miniature bow and obsidian-tipped arrow. As the blood spurts up...the men shout threats at the novice, telling him they will kill him if he reveals the secret they are about to reveal to him."

And what is this secret? The Initiate whose blood "spurts up" is menstruating. The "secret" is that men are trying in this way to do artificially what women achieve in another way more easily. The novices, having sworn secrecy, are shown the most sacred flutes, which – although in a certain sense symbolic "penises" – are penises of a kind originally owned by women. When they were owned by women, they took the form of menstrual blood. The entire ritual, as Gillison (1980: 164) explains, is "predicated on the 'secret' idea that menstrual blood betokens women's original ownership of the penis".

The myths of the Gimi assert that menstrual potency left in women's hands is deadly and destructive, whilst in men's hands it becomes phallus-like and

creative. The initiation-rite in the forest is designed to transfer the menstrual power of women and attach it to men. "The rite", as Gillison (1980: 164-5) puts it,

"implies an equivalence between the penis and the creativity of menstrual blood in this sense: once menstrual blood is taken away from women (by men who menstruate) its phallic power is 'restored'. Female attributes that are deadly in women become life-producing when they are detached from women and owned by men."

A very similar point is made by Lindenbaum (1976: 56-8) in connection with the Fore, another tribe of the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Men seek to take the potency of menstrual blood from women on the grounds that "menstruation is dirty and demeaning for women, strengthening and purifying for men." Fore men "menstruate" from the penis and from the nose.

A hypothesis to explain our set of "matriarchy myths" can now be proposed. The "power" which men "steal" – stated in the myths to be something to do with women "banding together" – is that of menstrual synchrony and solidarity. Seen in this light, the myths we have examined appear suddenly to make good sense. They appear to be uncannily accurate descriptions of this reality. Because menstrual blood is believed to be supernaturally dangerous, it can be coded as the source of death-dealing "witchcraft". Because the blood is "wet" and resides in the womb it can be coded as "fish" in a "lagoon". Because the cycle is rhythmical, it can be coded as "music" or "dance". Because it secludes women from their husbands – or, from another standpoint, excludes the husbands themselves – It can be coded as establishing Woman's secret "Lodge", "House" or "Hut", which takes womankind to a world apart. Because blood is brightly-coloured and because, while secluded, women are no longer playing the role of wives, It can be coded as a "mask" or "paint" which effaces one feminine image and replaces it by another. And because menstruation's cyclicity is lunar, it can be coded as woman's prior ownership of "the moon".

To these codings and equivalences we may add that if our hypothesis were correct, we would expect women's power to express itself as a form of solidarity – a "banding together" – associated not only with menstrual huts but also with hunting and the obtaining of male-secured meat. As we have seen, these conditions appear to be met. A final prediction would be that men should

be unable to take over and use for themselves women's power without learning artificially to "menstruate". This, we have seen, is the case. The myths explain how men establish the Men's House or ritual Lodge as their political answer to women's "banding together" In their menstrual huts. As the men's counterrevolution is accomplished, male "menstrual blood" becomes sacred and life-giving, whilst women's becomes polluting and feared, the first symbolising solidarity and power, the second, isolation and exclusion from power.

In short, men gain the "flutes", "bullroarers" and "lodges" – while women are left to menstruate in their little huts. And in this respect, it is not just that our hypothesis is confirmed within the realm of myth. At this point it is as if the characters in each mythical portrait were refusing to stay within the picture-frame, insisting on stepping out into real life. Men as they establish and affirm their ritual solidarity set out deliberately and in often-painful ways (a) to isolate menstruating women and (b) to menstruate collectively themselves. In this context it would seem that there are at stake sexual and political issues so burning as to be uncontainable within the confines of the myth-making mind.

The point of departure for this section was a question: What are the political functions of the myth of original matriarchy? An answer now suggests itself. Men, it seems, need to menstruate in collective ritual performances because for some reason they lack an alternative language in which to express their jealously-guarded ritual power. The ideological function of the myth of matriarchy, in this context, is to legitimise the otherwise-inexplicable and certainly unnatural fact that today men menstruate and thereby "rule". The myth legitimises this in pseudo-historical terms, constantly reiterating, as Bamberger (1974: 280) puts it, that "women did not know how to handle power when they had it".

### **Nature and culture**

Our own, western myths differ in that they deny even the possibility of women's power. But they agree in arguing that culture and social order were established in the first place through the work of men.



Writing of institutions embodying male dominance generally, Lévi-Strauss (1969a: 116-17) argues that these have “absolute priority” over all others “because political authority, or simply social authority, always belongs to men....” As noted in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, Lévi-Strauss (1969a: 116) posits an initial situation – taking us back to the origins of culture itself – in which incest-avoidance and the institution of marriage were founded as the cornerstone of culture’s supremacy over nature. Central to this conception are two claims: (a) that exogamous “marrying out” is always and everywhere the exchange of women between different groups of men and (b) “that the relationship of reciprocity which is the basis of marriage is not established between men and women, but between men by means of women, who are merely the occasion of this relationship”. The very inception of culture, then, rests on relationships of exchange and reciprocity only between men, who use women only as the means of forging relations between themselves. In this scheme of things, woman-to-woman bonds have no place at all.

In his *Mythologiques*, Lévi-Strauss extends this argument. Not only was the establishment of the incest-taboo and of marital alliance a culture-founding achievement of the male sex: so also was the establishment of rules and taboos governing the cooking and consumption of meat (Lévi-Strauss 1970). And the same applies to the establishment of *les règles* – the “rules” inseparable from women’s menstrual periods. Nowhere does Lévi-Strauss intimate that women could have had anything to do with this, except insofar as women were a part of that “nature” which it was culture’s project to master and transcend (1978: 221-2).

It is a point worth emphasising: Lévi-Strauss is asserting, not only that culture in general is an invention of and for men, but that even when it came to such matters as cooking and – to take matters to their logical extremes – the timing and synchronisation of women’s menstrual periods, all of the structure-imparting, rule-making work had to be performed by men. The reason for women’s subjection, writes Lévi-Strauss (1978: 221-2), is above all the fact that women’s menstrual synchrony – synchrony both in social terms and in the form of harmony with cosmic rhythms – was not something which could be left to women to safeguard. Not only the cosmic order but the social order, too, would have been “endangered by a state of anarchy in which the regular alternation of day and night, the phases of the moon, feminine

menstruation, the fixed period for pregnancy and the course of the seasons did not mutually support each other". The transition from nature to culture demanded "that the femininity organism should become periodic", and it was men who had to ensure that organised, synchronised feminine periodicity upheld the structures of cosmic and social order despite women themselves. In this context, womankind's "physiological insubordination" – her (alleged) tendency to menstruate and give birth unexpectedly and at random – has to be crushed under the force of rituals and regulations ensuring "the correspondence between social and cosmic rhythms." And these regulations (*les règles*) have to be quite externally imposed upon women's minds and bodies – "instilled into them by their upbringing" – "by a social order willed and evolved by men".

Admittedly, Lévi-Strauss is in all this presenting what he takes to be the message of a series of Amerindian myths, including in particular myths of primitive matriarchy. But in discussing the myths of *Mythologiques* as a whole, Lévi-Strauss argues that they express ideas so widespread that they tell us something about "human nature" itself, a "nature" with which man's actual genesis "cannot have been in contradiction..." (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 304-05). In short, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that he believes in these myths. Culture, it is suggested, could only have come into existence as the myths say it did, when nature – in the form, in particular, of womankind's sexual and reproductive power – was brought under male control.

#### **Is female to male as nature is to culture?**

Perhaps surprisingly, a very similar view is advanced by a feminist anthropologist, Sherry Ortner, whose paper *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?* (Ortner 1974) has become a standard reference in cross-cultural discussions of gender relations. At this point, a critique of this and other writings by Ortner may help place the implications of the present chapter in perspective.

Ortner takes Lévi-Strauss as a starting-point from which to explain the general fact of women's subordination in human societies. Motivated by the "wish to see genuine change come about", Ortner argues that a precondition of effective feminist action is the recognition "that we are up against something

very profound, very stubborn, something we cannot rout out simply by rearranging a few tasks and roles in the social system, or even by reordering the whole economic structure” (Ortner 1974: 87-8). This “something” which women are up against is “culture” in the sense in which this term is understood by Lévi-Strauss.

As the argument is clarified in a later paper (Ortner and Whitehead 1981: 7), woman’s biology-governed sphere is “the domestic domain” – the sphere of the “biological family”. But, according to Lévi-Strauss (1969a), culture can only sustain its pre-eminence over nature by linking these “biological units” into wider systems of alliance, using the incest-taboo to impose “marrying out” and thereby to prevent biological families from turning in on themselves. Ortner’s argument is that since it is always the case “that men control the sphere of wider social coordinations, while women occupy the subunits being coordinated” (Ortner and Whitehead 1981: 7), it follows automatically that women must always be subordinate to men.

Like Bamberger (1974), Ortner finds the central motif of myths of matriarchy – the idea that women could dominate men just as easily as men dominate women – a pure chimera. “I would flatly” assert, she writes (Ortner 1974: 70), “that we find women subordinated to men in every known society. The search for a genuinely egalitarian, let alone matriarchal, culture has proved fruitless.”

Women are *always* linked to the domestic sphere, and hence *always controlled and transcended just as “culture” controls and transcends the sphere of biological “nature” in general.*

This brings us to a discussion of considerable importance in considering the significance of menstrual synchrony, a potentiality of which Ortner seems unaware. Why are women, according to Ortner, pre-eminently linked to the domestic sphere? “It all begins of course”, argues Ortner (1974: 73), “with the body and the natural procreative functions specific to women alone.” She explains

“It is simply a fact that proportionately more of woman’s body space, for a greater percentage of her lifetime, and at some – sometimes great – cost to her personal health, strength, and general stability, is taken up with the natural processes surrounding the reproduction of the species...

In other words, woman’s body seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life...”

whereas man’s body makes very few demands for expenditure of energy in reproduction. Since there is no way that this energy-expenditure could enhance or contribute to womankind’s potentiality for collectivity or cultural power, this effectively excludes her from cultural management while freeing man to concentrate upon it (Ortner 1974: 75). Woman is therefore for biological reasons imprisoned in the realm of “nature” so that – since “it is always culture’s project to subsume and transcend nature” – her subjugation follows as a matter of course (Ortner 1974: 73).

Ortner advances her position as a contribution to the struggle against sexist cultural assumptions. It is difficult to avoid concluding, however, that arguments such as these are part of the problem. Essentially, Ortner concurs with the myths we have been examining in one vital respect: with them, she agrees that men’s dominance over women is the condition of culture’s reign. For culture to come into existence, feminine “nature” had to be “transcended” and “subsumed”. In the remainder of this chapter, this widespread and most tenacious of sexist cultural assumptions will be critically examined.

### **Woman, power and nature**

Myths of matriarchy make the point that even though women once held power, this was a power which men had to take over if nature was to be culturally ordered and controlled. This is implied even despite the seemingly-contradictory assertion that women were the first custodians of ritual power. The notion that ritual power is “naturally” women’s becomes interpreted negatively: women’s ritual power is “only” natural, as opposed to cultural.

It is a point well brought out by Stephen Hugh-Jones (1979) in his ethnography of the Barasana of northwest Amazonia. Here, women very definitely possess the coveted ritual power of *He* – the power of self-renewal and rebirth – but

“only” in natural form. The Barasana admit, that is, “that women are semi-immortal: through menstruation, they continually renew their bodies by an internal shedding of skin” (p. 250). During menstruation and childbirth, women come into the most intimate contact with the mysterious “skin-changing”, season-changing, rain-making and life-making cosmic powers which men seek to harness through their own “menstrual” rites. But – and this is the important point – it is argued by men that women’s ritual power “is not controlled by the women themselves; rather it is they who are seen to be controlled by their nature and their bodies.” In one sense, then, “the women are seen as being closer to the *He* world than men, but this world is on the side of nature and beyond the control of human society” (p. 251). Men’s *He* is embodied in cultural symbols; women’s is simply in their bodies. Women are controlled by the *He* world, whereas men seek “to dominate and control the *He* world”, a process which “involves the dominance of men over women” (p. 251).

Evidence of this kind could be cited *ad infinitum*, and superficially gives support to Ortner’s thesis. However, a counter-argument has been put forward by Gillian Gillison in the light of her fieldwork among the Gimi of Papua New Guinea. Gimi men fear women’s menstrual blood and seek to control its potencies. Were Ortner’s arguments correct, writes Gillison (1980: 143-4), a prediction would be that Gimi men’s attitude towards menstruation should prove to be one of disgust or contempt stemming from the blood’s association with “nature” as a realm “lower” than that of “culture”. The evidence does not bear this out. Gimi men’s fear of menstrual blood is “not explained by an underlying contempt for lower forms of life in nature nor by a drive to control them.” On the contrary, although women’s menstrual and reproductive power is identified as non-human, “men’s ambition, as expressed in their rituals, is to identify with the non-human world and to be revitalised by its limitless... powers”. Far from implying Woman’s “natural inferiority”, men’s rituals “suggest her reproductive superiority” (p. 165); the purpose of men’s rituals – among the Gimi as elsewhere – is in such contexts “to perpetuate a connection between a human and a non-human world when the latter is in the ascendancy” (p. 172). Menstruation, then, is one of the “superior” powers with which men must come into communion if they are to have any hope of exerting ritual power themselves.

Other evidence supports Gillison's case. Commenting on the Mundurucu matriarchy myth examined earlier in this chapter, Yolanda and Robert Murphy (1974: 91) draw attention to an implication which would seem to be intrinsic to all primitive matriarchy myths:

"We could not find a shred of evidence to indicate that men think that women are inherently, biologically, and irredeemably inferior or submissive. Indeed, the whole key to the myth is that women once did exercise dominance, and that they had to be overthrown in a primal revolution.... Women are indeed inferior in the ideology of Mundurucu men, but they are also threatening, male status is not secure and immutable, fixed in nature and beyond challenge, for women once held power and can regain it if male vigilance is relaxed."

In other male secret cults, too, the fear of allowing women to see or touch men's "sacred flutes" or other instruments expresses men's anxieties concerning their power, not their confidence. It is difficult and potentially embarrassing for men to maintain the fiction that they know better than women how to express the mysterious forces and rhythms of menstruation and birth.

The situation of men among the Chagga (a Bantu tribe living on the slopes of Mt. Kilimanjaro) is particularly difficult. Their method of claiming to be in some sense pregnant is to assert that their anuses have been stopped up with a *ngoso* or plug. Consequently, they have only to break wind accidentally in the presence of women or children for the falsity of this claim to be betrayed (Raum 1940: 318). In this case as in so many others, without the great secrecy, formality and social distance placed between women and men, the elaborate fictions could not be maintained.

Were women able to peruse at close quarters the "menstruation" and "childbirth" of men, their scorn and/or amusement could cause the entire enterprise to collapse in shame or hilarity. "Should they know, they would laugh at us", say the men who perform the Nama cult of the Central Highlands of Papua New Guinea (Read 1952: 6). Or as a Kuman man told Nilles (1950: 30) in approximately the same (Chimbu) region:

"Should we show this flute to our women and children they would laugh at us and we men would lose all authority over them."

As Gourlay (1975: 109) comments:

“If the men would ‘lose all authority’ over women simply by showing them the flutes and being subject to the ensuing ridicule, then either the men’s authority rests on infinitesimal grounds or their vanity is so extreme that the entire social structure can be toppled by a woman’s laughter.”

And to this we might add that if the entire social structure can be toppled in this way, then this says something about the social structure itself.

For all their claims about women being “nature”, men experience women as a cultural threat. The men are attempting to maintain secrets which it would be culturally humiliating for them to divulge to the opposite sex. There is no adequate parallel here with the manner in which culture harnesses the forces of nature to its own purposes, no matter how much men may strive to make this ideological point. Men in their relations with nature should have no reason to experience their activities as a precarious fraud – with all the feelings of fear and exposure, humiliation and guilt attached – unless the “nature” concerned were in fact vested with prior cultural legitimacy and rights. The fact that men do see their mastery as based on fraud indicates that what is being resisted is not “nature” but, in fact, an alternative cultural legitimacy which women are seen to represent. Issues of legitimacy and illegitimacy, of truth and falsehood, of pride and humiliation can only be fought out between parties which are wholly within the symbolic, cultural realm. They cannot be features of the relationship between “culture” and “nature” as conceptualised by Europeans or as Implied in Ortner’s paper.

### **Between two cultural logics**

The existence of “menstruating men” (Cf. Hogbin 1970) poses a problem for Ortner’s analysis. Men ought to be able to harness or control the forces of nature without having to pretend to be those forces. It is not self-evident why, in order to control women, men must pretend to be women. This is certainly not a typical feature of relationships of dominance or control in other spheres. We need a more sophisticated explanation than any which Ortner’s or her co-thinkers’ paradigm can provide.

in the mythico-ritual complexes under discussion it is not just “nature” – and not even simply human female “nature” – which male ritual power is functioning

to transcend and suppress. What is being suppressed is an alternative cultural logic opposed to the prevailing logic of male sexual rule. This feminine alternative to men's rule rests on the "sex-strike" potentiality described in Chapters 4 and 5, and involves, in its "pure" form, the synchronisation by women of their menstrual cycles. This synchronisation is a ritual, cultural achievement of women themselves, and lies at the basis of all the mythico-ritual complexes under discussion as their logical starting-point. It presupposes strong woman-to-woman bonds, whose centrality throws doubt upon Lévi-Strauss's conception of culture as in essence a system of marital and other arrangements and agreements arrived at between men.

Menstrual synchrony is touched on or connoted in many of the traditional myths and associated belief-systems we have examined. Often, what is stressed is the idea of harmony between the menstrual cycle and other cycles of cyclical change and renewal. Two case-studies – concerning the Fore of Papua New Guinea and the Barasana of northwest Amazonia – may help us to clarify this aspect of menstrual synchrony as a form of ritual power.

#### **The Fore case. Eastern Highlands, Papua New Guinea**

The Fore case illustrates the major points of the argument so far: the link between menstrual cyclicity and wider rhythms of renewal, the threat which men may see in this, the "political inversion" through which men usurp the symbolic potency of menstruation whilst turning real menstruation into a female curse or burden – and finally the link in male ideology between mastery over nature and men's dominance over women.

"In a sense, female menstrual cycles provide a physiological regularity, like the annual ripening of the pandanus fruit, which is an ecological given... Yet the order in this case poses a threat, since it is a structure provided by women, not men, a phenomenon Fore and other New Guinea groups attempt to neutralize by male rituals of imitative menstruation..., letting blood from penis and nose". In this way, "a political inversion is accomplished; menstruation is dirty and demeaning for women, strengthening and purifying for men." Women's own menstruation, given this political inversion, becomes a perpetual suppressed threat. But it is not the only threat: it becomes symbolic of a general threat felt to be posed by nature and the forces of the wild. "There is a sense of a universe under constraint, of predatory forces purposefully brought under masculine control." Only with difficulty is mastery over the animal world upheld: myths allow of the possibility that animals



might once have gained the upper hand. “But the most precarious victory of all concerns the ownership of the sacred flutes, said to have been once in the hands of women. While the flute myths, stories of male trickery and violence, are myths about the subjugation of women, they are also embryonic statements in the history of the battle of men to control women’s bodies. As one Fore man observed: ‘Women’s menstruation has always been present; men’s bleeding, that came later’” (Lindenbaum 1976: 56-8).

### **The Barasana case. Northwest Amazonia.**

We have become familiar with the Barasana already in this chapter. But at this point it will be worth reviewing more of the evidence contained in Christine and Stephen Hugh-Jones’ remarkable two-volume ethnography of this culture.

Like the Fore material, the Barasana case illustrates many of the themes of the preceding discussion, being particularly valuable for stressing the link between menstrual onset and the onset of the annual rains. It is also worth noting how the fairy-tale motif of “skin-changing” is interwoven with other images of cyclical change:

The initiation-rite known as *He House* is a rite of artificial male collectively-synchronised “metaphorical menstruation” designed to help bring on the rains, which are a “skin of the universe.” It occurs “at a time of cosmic skin-change”, namely, the time of the onset of the annual rains (Christine Hugh-Jones 1979: 153). Rain, besides being a “skin”, is also the menstrual flow of the most important of all ancestral beings, Woman Shaman, from whom all contemporary shamanic powers derive (p. 156; see also Stephen Hugh-Jones 1979: 100).

During *He House*, the men apply to their bodies red paint, which “is identified with menstrual blood” (Stephen Hugh-Jones 1979: 184). No woman is allowed to touch this paint; if she does, she “will immediately start to menstruate; the blood which flows is this paint” (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 76). The ritual involves men “giving birth”: in order to do this, they “must first be opened up and made to menstruate” (p. 132). The boys who are to be newly “born” must first be put back into a “womb”: they are said to be swallowed by an anaconda (p. 218) and returned to the condition of fetuses (p. 77). This condition is compared to that of “crabs and other animals that have shed their old shells or skins” (p. 120). *He House* brings about rebirth; it is “believed to bring about a change of skin” (p. 120), both of the initiates and of the universe, the process being “associated with the moon” (C. Hugh-Jones 1979: 156) and modelled on women’s menstruation, which “is an internal changing of skin” (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 183).

Women are excluded from the *He* rites, despite (or more accurately because of) being “naturally” closer to the *He* world than men (S.

Hugh-Jones 251). The matriarchy-myths tell of how men seized the sacred *He* instruments from Woman Shaman, and punished her and all womankind by causing female menstruation (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 266). The most coveted object which men tried to steal was a life-giving gourd. However, they were able to gain only an artificial replica of this. Woman Shaman kept and still keeps in her possession the true gourd: it was her vagina, which alone confers real immortality. Men admit that their attempts to achieve rebirth and immortality through the artificial gourd and other paraphernalia of lie House are somehow “false”. “We were told directly”, writes Christine Hugh-Jones (p. 154), “that *He wi* (*He* house) is like women’s menstruation, but that women really do menstruate while *He wi* is *bahi kasoase*, imitation”. Or, as the women say: “The men make as if they too create children but it’s like a lie” (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 222).

\* \* \* \* \*

The magical power of menstruation, then, has something to do with its perceived connection with wider rhythms of natural, social and cosmic renewal. It is this connectedness – “harmony” and “synchrony” are also applicable terms – which men appear to envy and attempt to duplicate by artificial means.

As for the rituals themselves, they are presented in each native idiom as based on a ground-plan set out in the “rule of women” myths. Certainly, the rites quite accurately replicate the logic of those myths. In the Barasana case, by possessing the gourd which symbolizes Woman Shaman’s vagina, the men attempt to “appropriate the ultimate female powers of sexual reproduction for themselves and so maintain their control over women” (C. Hugh-Jones 1979: 155). In the Fore case, men possess on a symbolic level the ultimate female potency of menstruation, operating a “political inversion” so that women have their “original” ritual power turned against themselves (Lindenbaum 1976: 56-8).

In a recently-published Baruya (Papua New Guinea) matriarchy-myth in the same vein as those we have been examining, the fact that men steal the power from a feminine menstrual hut is spelled out in so many words:

*“In the days of the Wandjinia (dream-time), the women one day invented flutes. They played them and drew wonderful sounds from them. The men listened and did not know what made the sounds. One day, a man hid to spy on the women and discovered what was making these melodious sounds. He saw several women, one of whom raised a piece of bamboo to her mouth and drew the sounds that the men had heard. Then the woman hid the bamboo beneath one of her skirts that*

*she had hung in her house, which was a menstrual hut. The women then left. The man drew near, slipped into the hut, searched around, found the flute, and raised it to his lips. He too brought forth the same sounds. Then he put it back and went to tell the other men what he had seen and done. When the woman returned, she took out her flute to play it, but this time the sounds which she drew were ugly. So she threw it away, suspecting that the men had touched it. Later, the man came back, found the flute and played it. Lovely sounds came forth, just like the ones that the woman had made. Since then the flutes have been used to help boys grow."*

Godelier (198 70-71), who recorded this story, comments:

"The message of this myth is clear, in the beginning, women were superior to men, but one of the men, violating the fundamental taboo against ever penetrating into the menstrual hut or touching objects soiled with menstrual blood, captured their power and brought it back to men, who now use it to turn little boys into men, But this power stolen from the women is the very one that their vagina contains, the one given to them by their menstrual blood. The old women know the rough outlines of this myth and relate it to young girls when they have their first period."

Such stories, then, describe how – like so many strike-breakers – men violate women's menstrual space and solidarity, In effect invading women's menstrual huts so as to secure the symbols of blood-sanctity for themselves. Myths of this kind – we can now see – are accurate descriptions of the essential structural facts. In describing how women are "robbed", they simply delineate the logic of all that happens in the ritual sphere. It would be different if the rituals were mere theatre – mere re-enactments of an entertaining or compelling narrative. But they are not. They are the political imposition of the myth of patriarchy's message. While in myth, the ritual expropriation of womankind is described, in ritual it is performed. The fact that women may suspect in the associated ideology something "like a lie" (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 222) does nothing to detract from this political accuracy of the myths. Women's suppressed awareness merely means that the mythico-ritual structure Is constantly under threat, so that it cannot be sustained without unceasing conspiracy, secrecy and threatened or actual violence perpetrated against the community of women.

In a sense, then, the myth of patriarchy is good anthropology: It is the self-understanding of men in cultures in which women's ritual solidarity is still a real threat. But as in the case of all anthropology of this kind, its

allegations are not simply to be taken on trust. It is one thing to accept that there is a good fit between story and political reality. Quite another would be to accept as science the central ideological allegation of the myth – the allegation, namely, that women’s rule must be suppressed in the interests of the hegemony of culture as such.

In the next chapter, we will examine further evidence indicating that women’s menstrual power and synchrony should be regarded as a feature of culture’s “initial situation”, departure from which led to the mythico-ritual complexes here being discussed. Such feminine power, far from representing only “nature”, constituted a staple foundation-stone of culture long before male initiation-rites with all their complexities had been heard of.



### ***Chapter 7: Synchrony and Ethnography***

Menstrual synchrony can be examined on different levels. Firstly, we can approach it within a medical framework, as a biological potentiality characteristic of the human female. Secondly, we can examine it in an ethnographic context. Two possibilities exist: (a) menstrual synchrony might be examined objectively, as an observed statistical effect which is either enhanced or inhibited by differing cultural arrangements; (b) it could be examined merely as a cultural belief or ideal – as something which people in different cultures may claim or imagine to happen, regardless of whether or not there is independent evidence for this.

#### **Medical evidence**

The sexual cycles of many marine animals can become phase-locked to the 29.5 day light/dark schedule of the moon. This is an example of photic entrainment: as in the case of circadian (24-hour light/dark) rhythms, It seems that very small amounts of light are sufficient to phase-lock the organism's extremely sensitive biological clock" to the appropriate time-cue (Moore-Ede 1981). Whether the human female's menstrual cycle can become phase-locked to the moon in this way is open to question, but one fact seems secure: of the menstrual cycle-lengths of the higher primates, the average human female cycle-length approximates unusually closely to the schedule of the moon. The period from one new moon to the next is 29.5 days. The average duration of the human female menstrual cycle is 29.5 days (Menaker & Menaker 1959). This may be coincidence, but it is at least worth investigating whether there might be more substantial reasons for the correspondence. The cycles of gorillas are 31-2 days long on average, while those of chimpanzees are longer still (Nadler *et al.* 1979: 293). It is here suggested that the closer correspondence in the case of the human female evolved or was retained as a consequence of cultural selection in the context of the model of origins outlined in Chapter 5.

Cycle-length is one thing; actual phase-locking with the moon would be quite another. In this thesis it is suggested that a combination of many circumstances including conscious, collective ritual action would probably be required in order to phase-lock the cycles of a group of women accurately to the moon. Nevertheless it is interesting to consider the possibility of a slight natural connection based on the direct effects of the moon's light. Studies have not proven conclusive, but In New York City, it has been, argued that a statistically-significant correlation exists between the moon's phases and the dates of human ovulation and birth. Although the effect is very slight, women tend to ovulate at the full moon, menstruate at the new (V. & A. Menaker 1959; Menaker 1967). Dewan *et al.* (1978) report an experiment indicating, they claim, that the human female menstrual cycle can be regularised by artificial light so as to coincide more or less exactly with the lunar cycle-length. This is done by leaving a weak lamp on overnight while the subject sleeps during the fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth days of her cycle (day 1 being defined as the first day of menstrual flow), this photic stimulation simulating the light of the full moon. It is said to be important that the subject sleeps in complete darkness throughout the rest of her cycle. It would seem important to repeat such experiments to ascertain the status of such findings.

Cycle-length and lunar phasing apart, it has long been known that the human menstrual cycle differs radically from that of other primates, and that its development constitutes one of the most outstanding transformations to have occurred in the course of the hominisation process. Anthony Wilden (1972: 388) writes of "the quantum jump in evolution which ended oestrus among proto-hominids", and E. O. Wilson (1975: 547-8), writing of the "extraordinary evolution" undergone by the reproductive physiology and behaviour of *Homo sapiens*, highlights (a) the "intensified" menstruation of human females and (b) the fact that the "estrus, or period of female 'heat', has been replaced by virtually continuous sexual activity...." Earlier, Washburn and Hamburg (1972: 277) had written that the resulting "physiology of human females is quite different from that of any other primate", and that "many specifically human customs and problems" are "directly related" to this.

Only recently, however, has the scientific community recognised in the human female a physiological mechanism tending to synchronise the menstrual cycles of closely-associated women. This potentiality is known as the “McClintock effect”, after a paper in *Nature* (vol. 229, January 1971) by Martha McClintock. Having noted that social grouping can influence the balance of the endocrine system, she went on:

“Menstrual synchrony is often reported by all-female living groups and by mothers, daughters and sisters who are living together. For example, the distribution of onsets of seven female lifeguards was scattered at the beginning of the summer, but after 3 months spent together the onset of all seven cycles fell within a 4 day period” (McClintock 1971; 244).

McClintock’s own work was a study of 135 young women residents of a dormitory in a suburban American women’s college. Each was asked to note and record the date of onset of her periods. In the sample, women who were close friends and/or room-mates synchronised more closely than women who were not, and women who were “dating” males fairly frequently had shorter, more regular, cycles than those who were not. McClintock concluded that “the evidence for synchrony and suppression of the menstrual cycle is quite strong, indicating that in humans there is some interpersonal physiological process which affects the menstrual cycle.”

Similar findings have since been confirmed. Graham and McGrew’s (1980: 249) study was of 79 female undergraduates living in mixed-sex halls of residence in a Scottish university over four months. It concluded that “the significant factor in synchrony is the degree of association between individuals”. For close friends, the greatest synchronic effect was felt between the third and fourth month. Quadagno *et al.* (1981) have studied 85 young women living in a predominantly-female environment in a coeducational university in America, with similar results.

While the fact of synchrony has been established, its causes remain less certain. However, the *New Scientist* (January 1981; 71) reported an experiment in which Russell *et al.* (1980) present evidence suggesting that “olfactory cues” (which may be derived from a substance in human sweat) enable certain women with very regular cycles to “drive” other women’s cycles, with the result that synchrony occurs. The study involved taking samples of sweat from



the armpits of a volunteer known to have a particularly regular cycle. This woman

“had demonstrated a previous experience of ‘driving’ another woman’s menstrual cycle on three separate occasions, over three consecutive years, i.e. a friend had become synchronous with her when they roomed together in summer and dissynchronous when they moved apart in the fall” (p. 737).

Eight other women were exposed regularly and over four months to a solution containing this woman’s underarm sweat; a control group were exposed to a seemingly-similar solution which in fact contained no sweat. The onset of menstruation in the control group did not alter significantly. But in the experimental group the gap between the subjects and the donor narrowed; by the end of the experiment, four of the five women in this group were beginning their periods within one day of the donor’s. The experiment, the authors conclude, supports the theory that odour is a communicative element in human menstrual synchrony.

#### **Possible ethnographic evidence: the Turk case**

It must be said at the outset that we have no hard evidence for menstrual synchrony in any traditional culture. No-one (to the author’s knowledge) has as yet conducted fieldwork in a living non-western culture with a view to discovering whether or not synchrony occurs. On one level, this may seem surprising; yet it has to be remembered that it was not until 1971 that menstrual synchrony was even recognised by the scientific community in our own culture. It then took another eleven years before the finding was taken account of in any published work by a social anthropologist. We would not expect fieldwork to uncover the phenomenon unless or until synchrony as a concept had entered into the body of theoretical understandings on the basis of which anthropologists became trained before entering the field. It is hoped that this thesis may help bring about this result, but it has not happened as yet.

A paper by Thomas Buckley (1982) appears to have been the first published account to have linked medical and statistical findings of the kind described above to the ethnographic analysis of a traditional culture and its ritual. It

has to be conceded, however, that this case is not conclusive; it is based almost entirely upon the recollections of a single informant:

*One evening in 1978, Thomas Buckley was invited to the house of an Indian friend for a meal. The house was a modern one within the Yurok aboriginal homelands in northwestern California, close to the Klamath River. Buckley's male friend explained that he would be doing the cooking since his Yurok wife was "on her moon time" – in her menstrual period – and they were keeping the old ways as best they could. A back room had been set apart in the modern house for his wife's monthly use; the couple neither ate nor slept together for ten days each "moon".*

*The woman emerged from her room to talk with Buckley about what she was doing and how she felt about it. She had been instructed in the menstrual laws by her maternal aunts and grandmother, who were, in their times, well-known, conservative Yurok ladies. Her understanding of menstruation came largely from these sources. She began her account by telling Buckley that as a foster-child in non Indian houses she had been taught that menstruation is "bad and shameful" and that through it "women are being punished." On her return to Yurok society, however, "my aunts and my grandmother taught me different." According to the old menstrual laws, a woman should seclude herself during the flow because this is the time when she is at the height of her powers". Such time should not be wasted in mundane tasks and social distractions, nor in concerns with the opposite sex. Rather, all of one's energies should be applied in concentrated meditation "to find out the purpose of your life." It is a time for the "accumulation" of spiritual energy, the flowing blood serving to 'purify' the woman and prepare her for spiritual accomplishment.*

*In the old days, according to Buckley's female informant, menstruating women used to communally bathe and perform rituals in a "sacred moon time pond" up in the mountains above the old Yurok village of Meri:p. While many girls performed this rite only at the time of their first menstruation, aristocratic women went to the pond every month. All of a household's fertile women who were not pregnant – according to this informant – menstruated "at the same time, a time dictated by the moon", the women practising the bathing rituals together at this time. If a woman got out of phase with the moon and with the other women of the household, she could "get back in by sitting in the moonlight and talking to the moon asking it to balance (her)." Through the ritual bathing practice, and by maintaining synchrony with wider rhythms, women came to "see that the earth has her own moontime", a recognition that made one both "stronger" and "proud" of one's menstrual cycle.*

*Just as the women collectively retreated from their husbands for ten days, so the men used ten days as the standard period for men's "training" in the household's sweathouse. Like the women, the men bathed, gathered firewood, avoided sexual contacts, ate special foods*

*and let flow their own blood – the men gashing their legs for this purpose with flakes of white quartz (Buckley 1982: 51), The flowing of the blood was thought to carry off psychic impurity, preparing one for spiritual attainment. Men who were in special training to become “doctors” secluded themselves in the sweathouse and “made medicine”; Buckley (p. 53) provides evidence that the “medicine baskets” and dentalium shells used by men to contain their power- tokens were symbolic vaginas. Moreover, elderly Yurok men told Buckley (p. 55) that “intensive male training was always undertaken ‘during the dark of the moon’”, while other sources indicate that this was also the time when the women may have been menstruating.*

*Finally, there is evidence that specific features In Yurok sweathouse construction “permitted accurate observation of yearly solar and lunar cycles in each village” (p. 56), while the women’s menstrual houses probably included large communal dome-shaped structures, heated by fires, used for sweating and capable of sheltering several women at a time (p. 55).*

Following an analysis of the literature on the Yurok, including many unpublished field notes, Buckley concludes that there has been a consistent male bias in published interpretations of Yurok menstrual symbolism, and that his female informant’s claims ought to be – taken seriously. He suggests the hypothesis that indeed “the women of aboriginal Yurok households menstruated in synchrony, utilizing the light of the moon to regularise their menstrual cycles...” If this were the case, Buckley writes, then it would follow that the menstrual synchrony and power of women not only influenced ritual life but had “profound, pragmatic implications as well in dictating the temporal structuring of activities for entire households on a monthly basis” (p. 57).

### **Possible synchrony In Aboriginal Australia**

Direct evidence of menstrual synchrony in Australia is scattered and sparse. We have no report comparable with – for example – Shostak’s (1983: 68) note on the !Kung, who “believe....that if a woman sees traces of menstrual blood on another woman’s leg or even is told that another woman has started her period, she will begin menstruating as well”. There is no literature like that of Anne Cameron on the Nootka of Vancouver Island:

“It was the time of Suzy’s menstrual period. It felt good to be around a woman during her sacred time, good to be able to smell the special body perfume, to share in the specialness of it, expecting my own period to start any day, wondering, as it seemed I always did, how it was that the women of the village mostly all had their periods at around the same time. Finally, since I had never been able to figure it out for myself, I asked my granny. She looked at

me as it she couldn't believe anybody could be so simple, and shook her head gently. 'The light, Ki-ki,' she sighed, 'It's because of the light. Used to be, before electricity and strong light made it possible for people to stay up half the night, that we all got up with the sun and went to bed with the sun, and because we all got the same amount of light and dark, our body time was all the same, and we'd come full at the same time' (Cameron 1984: 95).

Certainly there is no Australian counterpart to Buckley's hypothesis that "all of a (Yurok) household's fertile women who were not pregnant menstruated at the same time..." (Buckley 1982: 49). The !Kung, Nootka and Yurok reports, however, are recent; in at least the !Kung and Yurok cases, the ethnographers were aware of the recent medical literature touched on above, documenting and discussing menstrual synchrony among closely associated women (Burley 1979; Graham and McGrew 1980; Kiltie 1962; McClintock 1971; Quadagno *et al.* 1980; Russell *et al.* 1980). Our information on the phenomenon in Aboriginal Australia is all contained in reports made at a time when menstrual synchrony was not acknowledged as a concept by social anthropologists in the field.

Yet enough exists even in the published record to indicate that Aboriginal Australian culture may have acknowledged the possibility of menstrual synchrony long before Martha McClintock (1971) first documented it for western medical science. Suggestive direct evidence for menstrual synchrony, at least as an idealised cultural concept, appears in the form of:

- (a) what appear to be references to synchrony in certain versions of the myth of the Two Wawilak Sisters, from north-east Arnhem Land;
- (b) further apparent references to synchrony in accounts of the mythological Alknarintja women of the Aranda;
- (c) images of apparently menstruating dancing women from the Pilbara region of Western Australia.

Scattered items of additional mythological evidence exist, and will be surveyed in this chapter. Indirect evidence for former synchrony is more abundant, but requires the reader's acceptance of the theoretical interpretation of male initiation ritual and its associated mythology touched on in the previous

chapter and further elaborated below. To the extent that this interpretation is accepted, “menstrual synchrony” may be said to have been widely and repeatedly noticed and commented upon in Australian ethnography – the peculiarity being, however, that what was noticed was always exclusively the ritual synchronisation of the menstrual periods” of men.

We may begin with the more direct evidence.

*A. McCarthy’s (1960) version of the myth of the Two Wawalik Sisters*

Among the Yolngu (formerly known as the “Murngin”) of north-east Arnhem Land, menstrual synchrony is an acknowledged ritually-potent possibility. For example, at Yirrkalla, women traditionally make “cats’ cradles” representing, among other things, “menstrual blood of three women” (McCarthy 1960: 466; see Fig. 1).

“The women”, writes McCarthy (1960: 424),

“make their figures amongst themselves, end not in front of the men, particularly the old men, as a rule. The men walk past and do not look because the game belongs to the women’s sphere of life”.

A woman may not make such figures with her husband. It is evident, then, that men’s attitude to the string-figures should include an element of avoidance.

“Menstrual blood of three women” is not reported as a subject more frequent than topics such as “three vulvas”, “birth of a baby” and many others pertaining to the sexual and reproductive sphere (McCarthy 1960: 419). However, the theoretically-possible male counterparts of these (“three men urinating”, “three penises” etc.) are not listed as possible subjects, indicating that where matters concern synchrony or collectivity in reproduction, women consider only the female organs relevant. Admittedly, this still does not give us grounds for singling out “menstrual blood of three women” as a topic of special significance. Our evidence in this respect comes from the string-figure origin-myth – a myth recorded in many versions, and whose wider ramifications will form the subject-matter of the next three chapters:

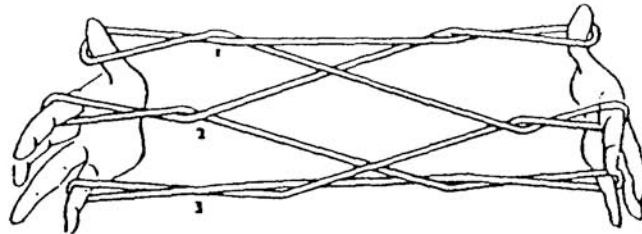


Figure 1. String-figure from Yirrkalla, north-east Arnhem Land. "Menstrual blood of three women". From McCarthy (1960: 466, Fig. 63).

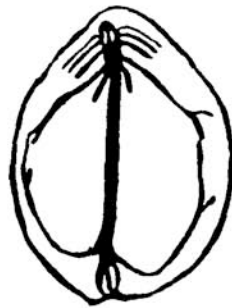


Figure 2. Female figure. Rock-engraving from Pilbara region, north-west Australia. From Wright (1968: Fig. 85).



Figure 3. Female figure. Rock-engraving from Pilbara region, north-west Australia. From Wright (1968: Fig. 88).

*“String was first made by the two Wawalik sisters at Mudawa, near Buckingham Bay. They saw a lot of honey, about which they made a string loop...” Later, the elder sister made a figure of the yams in her sister’s hands: “She then looked inside the latter’s vagina and made another string figure”.*

For our purposes, the crucial passage is the following:

*Later still: “The sisters sat down, looking at each other, with their feet out and legs apart, and both menstruated. Each one made a loop of the other one’s menstrual blood, after which they put the string loops around their necks”. They were subsequently swallowed by “a Snake” (McCarthy 1960: 426; emphasis added).*

These two women, then, in an apparently-deliberate action, simultaneously menstruated, strung loops of “menstrual blood” around one another’s necks and were then jointly swallowed by a “Snake”.

#### *B. Berndt’s (1951) version*

Berndt’s (1951: 22) version of the myth of the Two Wawilak Sisters states that ritual dancing was used by two “incestuous” women to synchronise their blood- flows.

With one sister already shedding quantities of afterbirth blood, the other began to dance:

*“She moved her body gracefully, shuffling her feet, swaying her body from side to side, and holding In her hands feathered string from which she made cats-cradles as she danced.”*

This, then, was a cats’ cradle of the kind noted by McCarthy (1960) among living Yolngu women. The dancing was also a puberty celebration – In the words of the mythical younger sister, “a very happy time, for this is my first menstruation” (Berndt 1951: 27). The younger sister danced on. “and as she swayed from side to side the intensive activity caused her menstruation to begin” (Berndt 1951: 22-23). Blood from both women was now flowing simultaneously, and it was precisely at this moment that “the Snake” also flowed from its womb-like “waterhole” and coiled around the Two Sisters and their child. “There is the suggestion”, comments Berndt (1951: 2n), “that the snake found the blood attractive”. Certainly, it is a noticeable feature of the

Wawilak Sisters myth in all its versions that blood must be flowing in the “Snake” in order to appear; where there is no blood, there is no “Snake”.

*C. Other mythological evidence*

In western Arnhem Land, women knew how to bring on their menstrual flows, if late in arriving, by “steaming, massage or violent exercise” (Berndt and Berndt 1951: 45). We may speculate that dancing (as in the Wawilak myth) might have been the mythologically-sanctioned form of “violent exercise” used to bring on the flow. Whilst there is little direct evidence for this, other regions of Australia repeat the notion as a mythological theme. Among the Aranda, deposits of red ochre – “blood” – were formed by the mythical Unthippa women: their sexual organs dropped out from sheer exhaustion, caused by their uninterrupted dancing over the spots where the ochre now lies (Spencer and Gillen 1927: 1: 345). Collective feminine bleeding appears in other Aranda myths. At a point along the Finke River is a traditionally-used red ochre pit. At this spot two kangaroo women “caused blood to flow from the vulva in large quantities, and so formed the deposit of red ochre”. Travelling away westward, “they did the same thing in other places” (Spencer and Gillen 1899: 483-4). Over much of Aboriginal Australia (Flood 1983: 46, 238), red ochre was a recurrently-used symbol of ritual power.

Now let us turn to Central Australia. Strehlow (1947: 94) writes:

“...the female ancestors celebrated in Aranda myths are usually dignified and sometimes awe-inspiring figures, who enjoyed unlimited freedom of decision and action. Frequently they were much more powerful beings than their male associates, and the latter sometimes lived in constant terror of their mysterious supernatural strength.. Reverently proud of the powerful characters described in their ancient legends, Aranda men look down upon their own women with a certain measure of pitying contempt.”

Among the most important of these feminine mythological figures (among “the most important people of both mundane and ritual life” – Róheim 1974: 122) are the so-called “alknarin tjina women. In the words of one song, these Women

“cut their breasts.  
On their breasts they make scars.  
They slap their thighs...  
They are menstruating.  
Their flanks are wet with blood.  
They talk to each other.





Figure 4. Two female figures, dancing. Rock-engraving from Pilbara region, north-west Australia. From Wright (1968: Fig. 112).



Figure 5. Two female figures, dancing. Rock-engraving from Pilbara region, north-west Australia. From Wright (1968: Fig. 383).



Figure 6. Two female figures with snake. Rock-engraving from Pilbara region, north-west Australia. From Wright (1968: Fig. 100).

They make a bull-roarer...  
They are menstruating.  
The blood is perpetually flowing” (Róheim 1974: 138-139).

In any myth, an alknarintja may be recognised by the fact that she is constantly decorating herself with red ochre, is associated with water and is “frequently represented as menstruating copiously” (Róheim 1974: 150). Such women possess bullroarers and other symbols of power, and have solidarity – evoked in one song through the image of a clump of bushes “so thick and so pressed against each other that they cannot move separately” (Róheim 1974: 144).

The alknarintja women, while not characterised as on “sex-strike”, are known as “women who refuse men”. The name “alknarintja” means, in fact, “eyes-turn-away”. From another song come these lines:

“They say, ‘I won’t go with you’.  
‘I will remain on alknarintja.’  
They whirl their bullroarers.  
They stay where they are. They sit very still.  
The man wants them to say, ‘I will go with you’.  
But they remain where they are” (Róheim 1974: 141-2).

Interestingly, an informant told Róheim (1974: 122-3) that “all women become alknarintja when they are very small, i.e. they begin with an attitude of avoiding men”; it is only in later life that the “resistance” of young women is broken and they lose their “original” power.

#### *D. Pilbara rock-engravings*

Rock-engravings from the Pilbara region of Western Australia include images of dancing pairs of women “suggesting the sisters in some Aboriginal mythologies” (Wright 1968: Figs. 99-115). Some examples are reproduced here; the numbers in parentheses are Wright’s figure-numbers. Figure 2 (85) may depict a menstruating woman. Figure 3 (88) seems to depict a more copious flow. Figure 4 (112) shows two women who seem to be dancing and emitting something from their vaginas. 5 (383) depicts dancers beneath an arc (rainbow?) and beside what may be a snake. 6 (100) shows two women with a snake. 7 (845) seems reminiscent of the scene in which the Two Wawalik Sisters “sat down... and both menstruated” (McCarthy 1960: 426). If the parallel is valid, this image would depict two women conjoined by the same menstrual flow. 8 (105) again seems to



Figure 7. Two figures conjoined. Rock-engraving from Pilbara region, north-west Australia. From Wright (1968: Fig. 845).

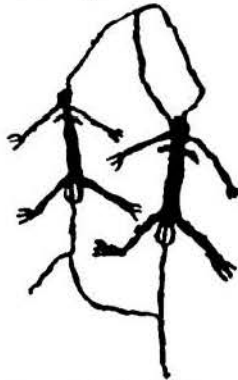


Figure 8. Two female figures conjoined. Rock-engraving from Pilbara region, north-west Australia. From Wright (1968: Fig. 105).



Figure 9. Two figures with coiled snake. Rock-engraving from Pilbara region, north-west Australia. From Wright (1968: Fig. 648).

show women linked by streams of their own blood. 9 (648) would seem to connote cyclicity in the form of a snake.

### **Australian snake-women and rainbow-snakes**

The Alawa Aborigines of western-central Arnhem land say that certain “Mungamunga girls”, when they go into the water, become merged in the corporate identity of their “mother the “Kadjari. This awe-inspiring mother-figure emerges from the water: she “comes out as one person, but as she stands on the dry land she is manifested as a Kadjari with a group of Mungamunga girls” (Berndt 1951: 189—190).

One is tempted to ask a question in relation to this scene. Why should a group of girls become “one” whenever they get wet? And why should they recover their separate individual identities on becoming “dry” again? On grounds which will be elaborated in what follows, It is suggested that getting “wet” refers to entering the menstrual phase, and that when a group of women do that simultaneously, they become “as one”. The body of synchronously menstruating women which results is conceptualised traditionally as “like a rainbow”, “like a mother” and “like a snake”. Becoming “dry”, by contrast, refers us to womankind’s emergence from collective menstrual seclusion, whereupon each woman no longer asserts her “sex-strike” solidarity: she is no longer maternal and collective but becomes a distinct, separable individual once more and is maritally available. The remainder of this chapter will accumulate evidence in favour of this interpretation.

The Mungamunga girls, when diving into the water, may be called Kilji:ringkiljiring. When the Wawilak (Wauwelak, Wawalik etc.) Sisters have been swallowed by ‘a Snake’ in a waterhole, they change their names to Ka’lerika’lering – a derivation of the Ma:ra term, “This would suggest”, as Berndt (1951: 173) comments, “that the Mungamunga and Wauwalek are identical...”. Ka’lerika means “having been swallowed” (Berndt 1961: 35). The Sisters now “belong to the Kunapipi side” – the side of the great ancestral “Mother” or “Snake”. “Kunapipi” and “Kadjari” are alternative names for this mother-figure, whose all-swallowing uterus is the “inside” of “the Snake” (Berndt 1951: 32, 43, 54). Becoming “at one” with “the Mother” in the

water and becoming “at one with “the Snake” in its waterhole appear, therefore, to be different ways of saying the same thing. This is confirmed by the fact that synchronous menstruation is practised by the Mungamunga girls, too. In one song from the Ma:ra (neighbours of the Alawa), a man called Bananggala “comes over and wants to copulate with the Mungamunga, but they are menstruating. They each say to him, ‘I’ve got blood: you wait for a while’” (Berndt 1951: 164). Another song from the same area concerns two men who encounter a group of Mungamunga girls by a lagoon:

“No sooner do they seize a Mungamunga and put her on the ground, ready for coitus, than she slides away, jumps up and runs down to the lagoon, and dives into its water; then she emerges and joins the rest...” (Berndt 1951: 174).

These women, then, have two ways of avoiding sex with a man: diving into the water, and menstruating. It seems that whether they are menstruating, diving into water, becoming submerged in the identity of a mother-figure or being “swallowed” by a “Snake”, women are repudiating heterosexual intercourse and returning into a symbolic womb instead.

The mythology of western and northern Australia focuses centrally upon “swallowing” episodes of this kind. A Yolngu myth ends by describing how two sisters “decided to go into the waterhole and become a rainbow”. It is explained: “They wanted to be a snake, like the rainbow, when she is standing up in the waterhole and makes lightning” (Groger-Wurm 1973: 120). These sisters, then, change their form into that of a rainbow-snake. Just as the Wawilak Sisters change their names to “having been swallowed” and the Mungamunga girls submerge their separate identities into the corporate one of “the Mother”. The positive attitude of the women who “wanted to be a snake” is significant. The women desired to lose their separateness in the formation of a larger whole. Many Aboriginal “swallowing and regurgitating” myths depict women in such circumstances as helpless victims being devoured by an enormous monster: the myth of the Two Wawilak Sisters is perhaps the best-known example (see next chapter). Here, however, the connotations are very different:

the girls enjoy their experience; there is no evidence to suggest that they would have welcomed the arrival of a monster-slayer to “rescue” them from this fate.

Robinson (1966: 61-66) provides a dramatic Murinbata dragon-story in which the dragon wins (in what follows, terms such as “winged snake”, “monster”, “rainbow-snake” or “dragon” will be used more or less interchangeably). It is worth citing at some length:

*The Rainbow-Snake Kunmanggur was in the water with a number of water-women or ‘Murinbungo’. A man called Ngalmin approached and tried to catch one; at first they had been lying along the riverbank in the sunlight, but they saw him coming and “ran and jumped into the water”. Ngalmin went away, disguised himself in mud, approached again and succeeded in seizing a young woman. He went off with her, camping at various places but always carefully avoiding “any big water”. The woman kept asking far water, but Ngalmin insisted on keeping to dry places. Eventually, she went off, looking for water on her own, and found a billabong where she drank: “And when she drank, all the Murinbungo, the water-lubras, rose up out of the billabong. They had long streaming hair and they called out to her: ‘O, sister, sister, where have you been? We cried for you. Come back to us, sister’. The water-lubras reached out their arms to her. They pulled her down to then into the water.”*

*When Ngalmin discovered his loss, he cried, cut his head and lost all interest in life. He returned to the billabong and tried to recover his wife, but she resisted and the Rainbow Snake frightened him away. Again, he attempted life without her, but could not stop pining and crying. He returned to the water for a final time, saw his woman lying in the water and cut his head with a stone. He called out to the Rainbow Snake: “You have to give me your girl. I cut myself. You see this blood belonging to me? You have to be sorry for me.”*

*The Rainbow Snake just lay still, watching Ngalmin; the girl did not move despite the man’s pleas. At last, Ngalmin jumped into the water to catch a fleeing woman. Kunmanggur the Rainbow Snake lashed out from the water, grabbed Ngalmin, crushed him and drowned him.*

This, then, is a dragon-slaying myth in reverse. The heroine wants to stay with her dragon-protector; it is her would-be suitor who is killed.

Another myth – from the Kimberleys – makes clear that to try to detach a woman from “the Snake” is to sever bonds symbolised not only by water, but also by the presence of menstrual blood:

*A man called Purra was looking for a wife. One day he was crossing a creek when he noticed that its water was red. ‘Look’, he said, ‘a girl must be around here. She is at the time of the passing of blood and went into the water. That is why the creek is red.’ He followed the water right up to its source. There he found a girl. Her lower half was in the water, but the rest of her was lying on the bank.*

*'She is Tira's (the Rainbow-Snake's) daughter', Purra said to himself. He took the girl, 'but he knew that her father, the serpent, would be after him.' lie tried to run away but the Serpent followed. Purra kept lighting fires to keep the Serpent away, but one day 'the big rain came'; it extinguished Purra's fire-stick and caused a flood into which Purra's wife disappeared (adapted from Bozic and Marshall 1972: 121-123).*

This myth eloquently links the notion of being “wet” or in the “rains” with a woman’s menstrual state and consequent non-availability as a wife. At the same time, it emphasises that to be “wet” and menstruating is to be under the guardianship of the Serpent.

These are consistent mythological equations and themes. The great Snake of the Wawilak myth “swallows” the incestuous Sisters as they synchronously shed blood into a pool (Berndt 1951: 23; Warner 1957: 254). The Yolngu say that not so long ago, a man took his two wives in a canoe for a trip from one island to another. One of them was menstruating. When they had gone for a short time, Yurlunggur the Rainbow Snake “smelt the unclean odour, came out of the subterranean depths, and swallowed them all” (Warner 1957: 76). In western Arnhem Land, among the Gunwinggu, a menstruating woman should avoid associating with other women around waterholes or streams; she should stay in seclusion with a fire burning “to keep the Rainbow away” (Berndt and Berndt 1970: 180). In Western Australia, the Wagaman snake, Djagwut,

“lives in deep springs, rivers and billabongs. His spit is the ‘secondary’ or ‘high’ rainbow. He is the source of spirit-children and the protector of human life. He is especially dangerous to menstruating women, being able to smell them from afar” (Stanner 1966: 87).

Von Brandenstein (1982: 58) suggests that “Muit” and similar names for the Rainbow Snake in western and northern parts of the continent derive from a Kariara root meaning “blood & red & multi-coloured & iridescent”. When Yolngu neophytes are shown “the Snake” for the first time, it is in the form of two immense white “Muit emblems” consisting of padded poles “with the rock pythons painted in blood on the white surfaces gleaming in the light of the many fires...” (Warner 1957: 304). “Two Snakes”, then, may appear as two lines of blood. The Wik-Mungkan of Cape York confirm this identity of “Snake” and blood-flow: the Snake “is believed to be responsible for women menstruating” (McKnight 1975: 95); seeing the red band in a rainbow, people say: “Taipan

the rainbow snake belly sore-has (i.e. has-a-period) the rainbow-sister has-a-‘sore inside’ i.e. has her menstrual pains” (McConnel 1936: 2: 103). The rainbow’s red band, the “Snake” and the menstrual flow are in this case, then, explicitly one and the same.

### **The paradox of the Rainbow Snake**

Marshack (1977: 288), referring to prehistorians’ difficulties in interpreting upper palaeolithic “serpentine designs”, notes that “what we ‘see’ or recognise conceptually are usually ‘units’ and ‘patterns’ in terms of our culture, units and patterns which are relevant to us in terms of equations derived from our West European training.” it is central to the project of social and symbolic anthropology to escape from ethnocentrism of this kind, yet it is not certain how far we have succeeded.

Radcliffe-Brown (1930: 342) argues that the Rainbow Snake “represents the element of water...” On the basis of native statements that “the Snake” is embodied in seasonal wet/dry alternations, Warner (1957: 378) concludes that it is “a weather-eye”. On the basis of other native statements that “the Snake” is identified with the production of babies or “spirit-children”, Berndt (1951: 12-13, 31) argues that it symbolises “the Penis”, being the counterpart of the “All-Mother”, who symbolises “the Uterus”. For Elkin (1951: 9), “no deep analysis is needed to show that the mythical Snake is a sexual symbol”. For Schmidt (1953: 909; quoted by Maddock 1978a: 2), the creature represents “the male element (membrum virile)”, or “the male idea of the penis”. For Triebels (1958: 129-130; cited by Maddock 1978a: 2), in its snake aspect it symbolises the spirally-formed cosmic power that lay in the world’s virgin waters, while as rain it is an emanation of the snake.

Marshack’s (1977: 286) note of caution is appropriate here. Snake-symbolism, in Australia as elsewhere, is associated with the innermost mysteries of secret rites and cults. Since the “meaning” of the symbols is that given by these religious systems themselves, it is hardly likely to consist of a mental or physical reality – “water”, “weather”, “penis” or “male idea of penis” – immediately recognisable or familiar to those whose belief-system is rooted in the scientific rationalism (or Freudian or Jungian psychologism) of



western culture. Maddock (1974: 121) suggests “that what is called the Rainbow Serpent is but a visually striking image of force or vitality, a conception that cannot adequately be given figurative expression”. As evidence, he cites the Dalabon term *bolung*, which signifies not only “rainbow”, “snake” and “the mother of us all” but also “ambiguity in form, creativity, power and time long past” (1974: 122—123). The reality in mind “cannot be more than partially and misleadingly conveyed in visual and psychological images like rainbow or snake or mother”. In fact, Maddock concludes, no western concept or expression can hope to convey the notion of what is meant.

The Rainbow Snake is paradoxical to the core. Yurlunggur of the Yolngu “is both in the heavens., and in the subterranean depths” (Warner 1957: 386). “He is the highest in the sky and the deepest in the well” (Warner 1957: 255n). Although “he” may be male, he is both man and woman” (Warner 1957: 383). Kunmanggur, say the Murinbata, is bisexual: “Even those who asserted the maleness of Kunmanggur said that he had large breasts, like a woman’s” (Stanner 1966: 96). “It is as though paradox and antinomy were the marrow in the story’s bones”, comments Stanner (1966: 100) on the basic Kunmanggur myth. Eliade (1973: 115) writes that the Rainbow Snake is able to relate “to women’s mysteries, to sex and blood and after-death existence” because “his structure has permitted the Rainbow Serpent to unite the opposites...”

What “the Snake” is cannot be simply stated. An understanding of it would refer us back to the deepest logic of Australian Aboriginal culture, which in this thesis is conceptualised in terms of the transformational template outlined in Chapter 5. The meaning of the snake refers us to a rhythmic, periodic structure intrinsically connected with the periodicity of the menstrual flow. Its analysis tells us something important, not only about Australian Aboriginal culture but about all human culture to the extent that we trace it to its source; consequently, to understand the one may be to fathom the genesis of the other. In any event, we need an explanation of the fact that the rainbow serpent “is not confined in Australia to any particular ethnological province, but is very widespread and may very possibly be practically universal”, forming “a characteristic of Australian culture as a whole...” (Radcliffe-Brown 1926: 24). Flood (1983: 134), on archaeological grounds, speculates that the Snake in northern Australia may be “the longest

continuing religious belief documented in the world”, stretching back 7,000 or 9,000 years. And It has frequently been noted that snake-myths evocative of the Australian ones “appear to belong to all peoples, irrespective of time and race” (Mountford 1978: 23).

For Maddock (1978a: 1), rainbows, snakes and related images are “a host of fleeting forms in and through which a fundamental conception of the world is expressed”. As a first approach to an understanding of the Dalabon term for “rainbow-snake” – *bolung* – he suggests that we should “lay stress on the cyclicity embedded in the concept and... draw attention to the role of cyclical thinking in Aboriginal thought generally” (1978b: 115). Why should snakes and rainbows be used to conceptualise the force behind the changing of the seasons, the movements of the celestial bodies, the breeding time of animals and plants, and the cycles of life, death and afterlife? “The curvilinear imagery of snakes and rainbows”, Maddock (1978b: 115) answers, “might be considered apt to express the abstract notion of cyclicity”.

In accordance with Marshack’s (1977 1985: 141-142) interpretations of serpentine symbolism cross-culturally, let us take it, then, that “the Snake” In at least one of its aspects connotes cyclical time. It would then be an Australian version of what Marshack discerns distributed globally in palaeolithic and neolithic rock-art and symbolism – namely, “The serpent of time, of process and continuity, the serpent of self-birth and origins, the serpent of death, birth, and rebirth, the cosmic serpent, the serpent of such processes as water, rain, and lightning, the ouroboros that bites its own tail in perpetuity, the guilloche serpent of endless continuity and turns...” (Marshack 1985: 142). For Marshack, the serpent-motif may be a spiralling or undulating line, a primitive “calendar” or mnemonic device for describing or recording the passage of lunar/solar time, with all the to-and-fro movements and alternations between contrasting phases and seasons which that Implies. “The Snake”, like seasonal or any other form of cyclicity, would in this aspect express the logic of alternation, metamorphosis and change, per incorporating within itself its own opposite: it would be wet season and dry, the highest and the lowest, male and female etc. etc.

### **The hypothesis: menstrual synchrony as “Snake”**

But why were the two Wawalik Sisters “swallowed” by “a Snake”? Were they swallowed by “cyclical time”? It is suggested that in a sense they were. It will be remembered that in McCarthy’s (1960: 426) version of the Wawalik myth, the Sisters sat down, face to face, “and both menstruated”. They then (a) encircled each other’s necks with “loops” of “menstrual blood” and (b) were swallowed by “a Snake” (Cf. Figs. 2, 8). Cyclical time seized them in the form of their own menstrual flows. Being “encircled” by blood and being “swallowed” by a “rainbow” or “snake” were not two separate experiences. They are alternative metaphors for expressing one and the same experience.

What, then, is “the Snake”? On the basis of the evidence so far, the following hypothesis suggests itself: “the Snake” is in the first instance a ritual phenomenon. In one of its aspects (the opposite aspect is “male” and is discussed below), it is an all-female ritual presence. It is the ritual synchronisation of women’s reproductive cycles and menstrual and/or afterbirth flows. It is a way of describing women in such close intimacy that they feel as if they are “one flesh”, “one blood” – or “one Mother”. As the Aranda song-fragment quoted above put it, they resemble a clump of bushes “so thick and so pressed against each other that they cannot move separately”. With their blood-flows conjoining, they form a single flow or stream – its elements as harmoniously conjoined and as inseparable as those of a snake. The Two Sisters who in the myths “turn into a rainbow” or are “swallowed by a Snake” are in reality entering the “wet” phase of the menstrual cycle and becoming engulfed in their own blood-derived unity with one another. Like water-women diving into a river, they are being “swallowed up” in a collective medium which transcends the boundaries of each. Whenever an out-of-phase woman is brought back into synchrony, it is as if her “water-sisters” were claiming her back into their team. These women are indeed “like a snake”, for no creature on earth more closely resembles a river or flow, or can coil itself up into so many repeated cycles (Fig. 9). And menstruating women are indeed “like a rainbow” – because, given seclusion-rules, the blood-flow carries them from world to world. They move from dryness to wet, from marital life to the world of seclusion, just as the rainbow moves cyclically between sunshine and rain, dry season and wet, earth and sky.

### **Testing the hypothesis**

It was argued in the Introduction and in Chapter 5 that to be of value, a hypothesis should make specific predictions and be testable in relation to the fine details of ethnographic evidence, it should be possible to conceive of types of evidence which, if verified in the ethnographic record, would disprove the hypothesis. The model should also prove fruitful as a research guide, enabling us to seek out evidence which the hypothesis would predict, but which had not been “seen” before,

In this thesis, the “unlikely” hypothesis has been put forward that ritual power in human societies begins as the “sex-strike” power of synchronously menstruating women. In the present chapter, it has been noted that ritual power is above all symbolised, in Aboriginal Australia, by the image of the Rainbow-snake. Were our hypothesis correct, we might expect this “Rainbow Snake” to display a systematic relationship with menstrual synchrony as ritual power.

In its strongest and simplest form, our hypothesis would run as follows: the Rainbow Snake is menstrual synchrony. In fact, this is not quite what is claimed, for from another perspective the evidence suggests that “the Snake” is anti-synchrony – It is the pseudo-menstrual synchrony of men, a phenomenon which involves the suppression of women’s synchrony. The “Snake” is therefore male and emblematic of male ritual power. But for the moment, let us leave this complication aside (it is dealt with in the next section below) and consider the hypothesis in its simplest form.

Now, if feminine reproductive and sexual solidarity were the essence of “the Snake”, we would expect everything which could be said of menstrual synchrony to be equally applicable as a description of the rainbow snake. The prediction can be put more starkly. Let us list the features which we would have to mention in order to describe to someone what menstrual synchrony is “like”. Then, let us examine Australian Aboriginal informants’ descriptions of “the Rainbow Snake”, listing its essential features one by one. Were our hypothesis correct, we might expect the two lists to coincide. For example, has menstrual synchrony a colour? Yes: if a colour had to be selected, it would doubtless be

red. Our question, then, is this: What is the colour of the Rainbow Snake? Does menstrual synchrony have anything to do with smell? Yes: the blood has a strong odour, and synchrony appears to be induced through olfactory mechanisms (see above). The question is: do Aboriginal informants link the appearance of “the Rainbow Snake” with menstrual “smell”? Again, could menstrual synchrony be depicted using a spiral or wavy line? Yes: it expresses a logic of alternation or cyclicity. Do Aboriginal informants depict the “Rainbow Snake” in this way?

This, then, is the suggested methodology for testing our hypothesis. If it were correct, we might expect complete correspondence between the two sets of features. And indeed, we might expect the two sets to be confused and treated as one. We might expect synchronised women to be termed “rainbow-women” or “snake-women”, with one half of their being in a “wet” phase or element and half in the “dry”. Meanwhile, so-called “rainbows” or “snakes” would turn out in fact to be human mothers. They should menstruate, give birth to human offspring, copulate (incestuously – see below) with human partners. Assuming that menstrual blood is thought of as “wet” rather than “dry”, menstrual seclusion should be depictable as a snake’s drawing of women into a watery world. In terms of detailed mythological imagery, the “swallowing” episodes would, then, be associated with pools, streams, marshes, rain, storms, wet season etc., while the “regurgitations” should be linked with dryness (fire, dry earth, sun, dry season etc.). A “dry” swallowing and a “wet” regurgitation would disprove the hypothesis. Since menstrual seclusion in the real world is a withdrawal from exogamous sex into “one’s own blood”, no union with a snake should have the characteristics of legitimate, exogamous marriage. It should be a union of blood with blood – that is, an intimacy comparable with the incestuous relationships of the Wawilak Sisters (see next chapter). A “correct” marriage with a “Snake” would be a contradiction in terms; if one were reported as a mythical event it would undermine the hypothesis. Given that menstrual blood is “taboo” and also reminiscent of the blood in meat (Warner 1957: 278; McKnight 1975: 85), the Snake should connote the sanctity of both women and animal “flesh” during the “raw” or menstrual state.

“The Snake”, then, if our hypothesis were correct, should be an immense, blood red, cyclical phenomenon, analogous to the changing of the seasons, responsible

for women's periodic "death" to marital life, embodying all opposite phases in itself and associated in the first instance with women, Childbirth, fertility and "wet" things such as rain, storms, floods and menstrual or other blood, it should prove hostile to marital or ex sex, "swallowing" women and their offspring into "incestuous" blood-unity whenever and wherever blood was flowing, it should be "sacred representing the "tabooed" state of game animals and women alike, it should be incompatible with fire and cooking. And finally, we come to the complication in our hypothesis which is nonetheless an inescapable logical consequence of it: "the Snake" should be a ritual entity beyond the power of men to usurp or control – except in the event that men were able to simulate menstruation and childbirth themselves

#### The snake as "penis" and male power

In the following three chapters, it is hoped to show that these predictions are borne out. Here, however, we may begin with the prediction that for men to express snake-power, they should have to "menstruate".

Despite its being a "fantastically painful operation (Gould 1969: 112), subincision is practised over an immense area of traditional Australia (Fig. 10), The penis is cut along the underside, the incision reaching to the urethral canal; the organ then opens out wide. During rituals, the wound is reopened to produce a flow of blood. The more sacred the ritual (as a general rule), the more bloody – and the more "taboo" it is to women. "This", according to Róheim (1945: 171), "looks like a simple inversion of the menstruation taboo, the men saying: 'We are not allowed to see your bleeding so we shall not allow you to see ours'". The Pitjantara call the subincision bole a "penis womb" (Róheim 1945: 164).

Róheim (1945: 171) noted in 1945 that subincision in general produces "a penis that is also a vagina", adding that the consequently-bleeding men "are playing the role of menstruating women". The idea was not entirely new, in 1937, Ashley Montagu (1974: 320-325) had first put forward the theory that

"subincision in the male was originally instituted in order to cause the male to resemble the female with respect to the occasional effusion of blood which is naturally characteristic of the female...."

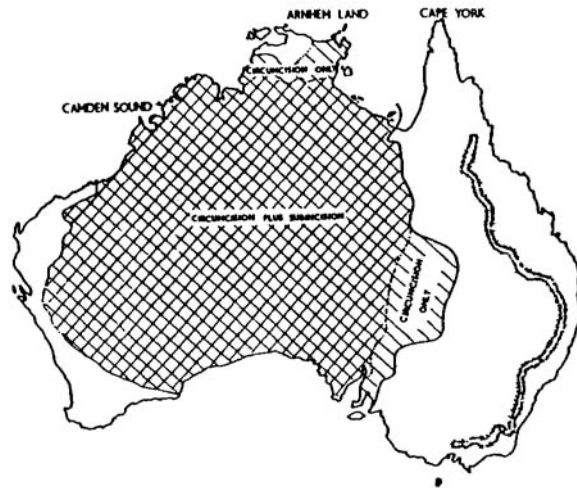


Figure 10. Map showing distribution of subincision and circumcision in Australia. From Abbie (1969: Fig. 15).

He admitted that the idea “must appear somewhat fantastic”, but provided ample supportive evidence. When the Berndts (1964: 145) confirmed, “Certainly the evidence points in this direction”, it ceased to remain a matter of serious controversy.

But if the operation is so painful, why do men do it? In Chapter 5 of this thesis, it was argued that the “initial situation” for human culture was one in which women menstrual cycles were ritually synchronised. In Chapter 6, it was suggested that under certain circumstances, the symbolic potency of menstrual synchrony may come to be appropriated by men. Subincision in Aboriginal Australia can be interpreted in this light.

C. H. Berndt (1965: 274) writes of menstruation as “a rite performed more or less automatically by women (although imitated artificially, in various regions, by men).” This is an important insight, since it indicates an

awareness that female menstruation and male initiation ritual are head and tail of the same coin. In itself, however, Berndt's statement is not enough, for it fails to bring out the contrast between randomised and synchronised "menstruation" whether male or female. It is here suggested that an individual woman's menstruation cannot confer upon her the full potency associated with the realm of "rite". An element of synchrony is required in order to transform the private experience of menstruation into the collectively-experienced potency of ritual power.

In Aboriginal Australia, Women menstrual experiences are almost always atomised and randomised. Men's "menstrual periods", by contrast, are elaborately synchronised with each other, and there is evidence that the phasing was traditionally connected with the periodicity of the moon (Berndt and Berndt 1970: 141, 131, 133; Maddock 1974: 159; Warner 1957: 296). Gill (1969: 133—135) describes how two men near Ayer's Rock "jagged viciously" at their subincision wounds until blood flowed. Then fifteen more men "surged forward and began to mutilate themselves in the same way", after which they all danced to a quickening beat. When the Berndts (1945: 309—310) watched an Ooldea region initiation-rite, ten men simultaneously began puncturing their penis incisures;

"The blood was sprinkled on the thighs of the men, either by holding the penis at each side and letting it drip, or by moving so that the bleeding penis flopped from side to side, or upwards and downwards, the blood touching the lower buttocks and loins."

"The actual initiation", comment the Berndts (1945: 3 "was held during the period of the new moon."

Yolngu men, while not subincising cut themselves to produce blood, a practice which is justified and explained in the Wawilak Sisters myth. This myth is in some versions (e.g. McCarthy 1960: 426) merely a story of how two sisters synchronised their menstrual flows, being then swallowed up in a "Snake". In more elaborate versions, however, it tells not only of two women's blood-shedding synchrony. It goes on to tell of how men learned from these Two Sisters the secret of how to ritually organise their "menstrual" flows, with exactly the same Snake-generating effect. In Chapter 8 below, we will examine



some of these versions, along with the corresponding rituals in which men do in fact collectively bleed.

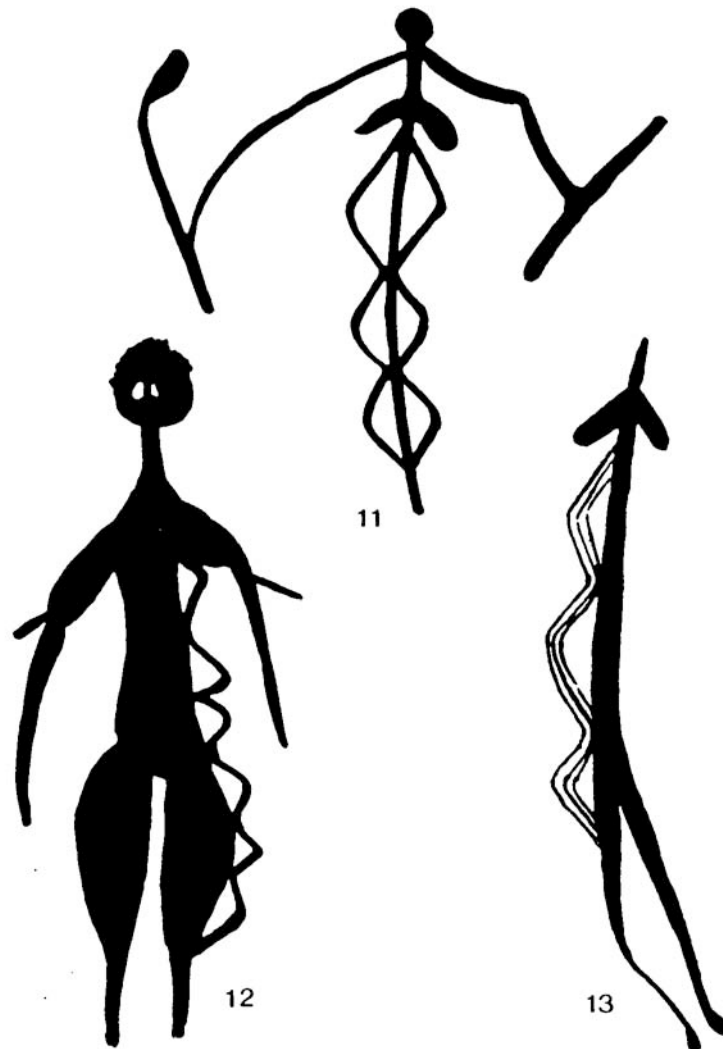
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Rituals of collective blood-loss are a condition of male ritual potency virtually throughout Aboriginal Australia. To acquire ritual power, a youth or man has always to “die” and be “reborn”, and the symbolic language is that of pools and waterholes, wombs, blood, rainbows and all-swallowing “Mothers” who are “Snakes”. men not only “menstruate”; they are also the agents of their own kind’s “rebirth”, and they “give birth” by taking youths or boys into their collective “womb” – which may be a deep pit – and subsequently expelling (“regurgitating”) them. The original “womb” is depicted to the uninitiated as having been a monstrous, cannibalistic “Mother” or “Snake”, always thirsty for blood. This “bad” dragon – usually associated with the evils of womankind – is said, however, to have been killed and replaced with a more benevolent male controlled symbolic substitute which does not permanently kill those it “swallows” (Hiatt 1975b). In terms of the model presented in this thesis, it seems clear that the “bad” dragon is the menstrual synchrony and power of women, the “good” one the male substitute. Male myths justify the usurpation of women’s menstrual power by describing the female version in lurid terms as a cannibalistic monster from which humanity had to be rescued (Hiatt 1975b).

Interestingly, however, even the male myths in some regions are rich with ambivalence and a sense of tragedy at the “loss” of the original “Mother” or “Snake”. For example, here is the essence of an important myth from the Murinbata in north-west Australia:

The snake-woman Mutjingga had to be killed, since she had swallowed ten children alive. Men cut open her belly and rescued the still-living victims. This is why boys are swallowed and then reborn in being initiated by men today (Stanner 19 40—43).

Men regard this tale (to which we will return in more detail in Chapter 10) as “a sorrowful story”; the Old Woman they say, was once “truly human” and had “primal authority”. With her death, a disaster of almost incomprehensible dimensions had occurred. “The loss to man”, say the Murinbata, “was irreparable”. The symbolic substitutes for her are felt as inadequate. “Because



Figures 11, 12, 13. Serpentine forms with women. Cave paintings from Oenpelli region, Arnhem Land. From Mountford (1956: 167; Fig. 49).

she died”, it is said, “men now have only the bullroarer, which was made in order to take her place i.e. stand for her and... to be her emblem, symbol and sign” (Stanner 1966: 43, 54, 56). Turning now to eastern Arnhem Land, the sound of the bullroarer – heard across Australia at moments when ancestral blood is flowing – is in at least one case (that of the Ma:ra) explicitly stated to be the sound of the dying ogress Mumuna’s blood, but only in a form derived from a piece of wood (Berndt 1951: 150-151).

When Mutjingga “swallowed” the ten children, she took them down into the waters of a river (Stanner 1966: 40-43). When the Wuradjeri medicine-man wishes to acquire power from the water-dwelling Wawi or rainbow-snake, he has to paint himself in red ochre, follow a rainbow to where it enters a pool, and dive down under the surface (Elkin 197?: 87). Countless other examples could be cited; it is here suggested that all such processes of immersion in water, all such intimate encounters with “a Snake” or “Rainbow” or “Mother”, are male replications of the female potentiality to conjoin, through menstrual synchrony, in a blood-union transcending the boundaries of the self. “The Snake”, as Aboriginal paintings from the Oenpelli region of Arnhem Land suggest (Figs. 11, 12, 13), is a rhythmic line or flow inseparably associated with the body of Womankind. It is a symbol of periodicity – or of “the abstract notion of cyclicity” itself (Maddock 1978b: 115). A prediction would be that by its entire structure and language, ritual potency should indicate its derivation by men from the opposite sex. This, too, is confirmed: the finding is acknowledged by many Aborigines themselves. As Yolngu men say in re-enacting the myth of the two Wawilak Sisters:

“But really we have been stealing what belongs to them (the women), for it is mostly all woman’s business; and since it concerns them it belongs to them. Men have nothing to do really, except copulate, it belongs to the women. All that belonging to those Wauwelak, the baby, the blood, the yelling, their dancing, all that concerns the women; but every time we have to trick them. Women can’t see what men are doing, although it really is their own business, but we can see their side. This is because all the Dreaming business came out of women – everything; only men take ‘picture’ for that Julunggul (i.e. men make an artificial reproduction of the Snake). In the beginning we had nothing, because men had been doing nothing; we took these things from women” (Berndt 1951: 55).

To this Aboriginal analysis, there seems little to add.

***Chapter 8: The two Wawilak Sisters***

This and the following three chapters are closely interconnected. They will draw on the transformational template outlined in Chapter 5 – the model of an “initial situation” linking synchronised feminine bleeding with blood shed in the hunt – to decode the fine details of a particular Australian Aboriginal myth. Later chapters will extend the argument to cover the constraints governing the detailed imagery of magical myths more generally.

The myth of the Two Wawilak Sisters was mentioned briefly at the beginning of the previous chapter. It is a rich and dramatic story, well able to hold its own among the highest accomplishments of European or world literature. It is the “most fundamental myth” of the Yolngu (previously known as the “Murngin”) of north east Arnhem Land, Australia.

The story is not just a myth. It is also, as Lévi-Strauss (1986: 91) comments, the basis of an important part of the ritual life of the Yolngu. Indeed, the major ceremonies in this region are all re-enactments of either the myth of the Two Wawilak Sisters or that of the Two Djungao Sisters which is regarded by Warner (1957: 399) as “fundamentally... the same” (but see Berndt 1952: 399). Since there is a general subordination of the several institutions of the social organization to the higher sacred realm which constitutes the Murngin system of totemism” (Warner 1957: 394-5), and since this “higher” totemic realm is codified through the Wawilak myth, the status of the narrative can be appreciated. Warner (1957: 248) writes: “The Wawilak myth is of extreme importance to the Murngin and is always present in their thinking”; this appears to have been literally true. An animal could not be killed or cooked, a woman could not menstruate or give birth, a taboo could not be observed or breached, or a ritual performed – without some aspect of the Wawilak myth being on some level recalled. In a real sense, the whole of social life is/was structured in and through this story, much as medieval Europe was structured

in and through the story of the Last Supper and Christ's death and subsequent resurrection.

Levi—Strauss (1981: 632) writes that experience has taught him

“..how impossible it is to grasp the spirit of a myth without steeping oneself in the complete versions, however diffuse they may be, and submitting to a slow process of incubation requiring hours, days, months – or sometimes years – until one's thought, guided unconsciously by tiny details, succeeds in embracing the essential nature of the myth.”

The drama of the Two Wawilak Sisters repays such attention. In what follows, several versions of the story will be compared and the circumstances of their recording discussed.

### **Warner's version**

In the finest and best-known of recorded versions (Warner 1957: 250-59), the story of the Two Wawilak Sisters runs as follows:

#### ***First movement: the coming of the Sisters***

*It was the mythological period (Bamun) when Wongar (Dreamtime, ancestral) men walked about and modern men had not yet appeared. “Everything was different. Animals were like men then!” “Those two Wawilak sisters had come a long distance.” They were coming from the far interior to the Arafura Sea. They had come from the clan territory of the Dua moiety – from Kardao Kardao, the country of the Wawilak people. The wirkul (a young woman who has not had a child) was pregnant. The gungman (a woman who has had a child; literally, ‘the giver’) carried her own baby under her arm in a paperbark cradle. It was a male child.*

*The two women carried stone spears and hawks’ down and bush cotton. They killed iguana, opossum and bandicoot for their food, and gathered yams. When they killed the animals, they gave them the names they bear today; they did the same for the yam. They gathered all the plants and animals that are in the Murngin country today. They said to each thing they killed or gathered, ‘You will be maraiin (sacred, taboo, totemic) by and by’.*

*When the two sisters started their journey they talked Djaun, later Rainbarngo, and still later Djinba; then they talked Wawilak, and finally Liaalaomir. They named the country as they went along. In the Wawilak country they copulated with the Wawilak Wongar men. “These men were Dua, and they were Dua.” This was very wrong.*

*“The two women stopped to rest, for the younger felt the child she was carrying move inside her. She knew her baby would soon be born.*

*'Yeppa (sister), I feel near my heart this baby turning', she said. The older one said, 'Then let us rest.' They set down, and the older sister put her hand on the abdomen of the younger sister and felt the child moving inside. She then massaged her younger sister, for she knew her labor pains had commenced. The baby was born there". The country was still part of the territory of the Wawilak clan.*

*After the child was born the older sister gathered mare bush food, then the two moved on toward the sea, stopping at various places, to which they gave names. All these localities were Dua and were within the country of the Wawilak clan.*

*'Come on, sister', said the older, 'we'll go quickly now'. They drank water at the last place and hurried on.*

\* \* \* \* \*

#### ***Second movement: the Snake***

*They did not stop until they set down at the great Mirrimina (sacred name meaning 'snake swallows') or Ditjerima (sacred name meaning 'menstruation blood') water hole in the country of the Liaalaomir clan. It is in the bottom of this well in the deep subterranean waters below the upper waters that Yurlunggur, the great copper snake, or python totem of the Dua moiety, lives. They called the country for the first time Mirrimina.*

*The older sister took her fire drill and made a fire. She started cooking all the yams and all the animals gathered and killed on the journey. She then gathered some paper bark and fashioned a bed for her younger sister's new born child. As she did this, she said, 'By and by, sister, we must circumcise these two small sons of ours.'*

*As soon as each animal or plant was placed on the fire, it jumped out, ran to the Mirrimina water hole and jumped into it. The crab ran in first. When he did this, the two women talked Liaalaomir for the first time; before this they had talked Wawilak. The other plants and animals followed the crab. The yams ran like men, as did the iguanas, frilled-neck lizard, darpa, ovarku snake, rock python, sea gull, sea eagles, native companions and crocodiles. Each ran and dived into the totemic well and disappeared from sight.*

*The older woman, in going out to gather bark for the cradle for her sister's baby, walked over some of the water of the Mirrimina well. Her menstrual blood fell in the totem well and was carried down the sacred clan water hole, where Yurlunggur, the Big Father, lives. "When the menstrual blood dropped into the pool Yurlunggur smelled the odor of this pollution from where he was lying in the black water beneath the floor of the totem well. His head was lying quietly on the bottom of the pit. He raised his head and smelled again and again."*

*'Where does this blood come from?' he said". He opened the bottom of the well by throwing the stone which covers its base out of the well on to the land by the women's camp. He crawled out slowly, like a snake does, from the well. When he came out he sucked some of the well water into his mouth. He spat it into the sky. Soon a cloud about the size of a man's hand appeared from nowhere in the centre of the sky. As Yurlunggur slowly rose from the bottom of the pool the totemic well water rose too and flooded the earth. He pulled himself up on the stone which he had thrown, and laid his head there. He looked around him. He saw the women and their babies. "Yurlunggur was older brother to these women, and they were sisters to him."*

*Yurlunggur continued to look at them. He hissed. This was to call out for rain. There was no cloud in the sky until then, but soon the two sisters saw a small, a very small, black cloud appear in the heavens. They did not see the great python lying there watching them.*

*The cloud grew larger and larger, and soon the rain came down. The Wawilak sisters hurriedly built a house to be ready for the rain. They named the forked sticks they used as uprights. The women went inside the house. They did not know where this rain had come from; they did not know that the older sister's menstrual blood had defiled the Mirrimina water hole and made Yurlunggur angry.*

*'Sister', said the older woman, 'where does this rain come from? There's no cloud in the north or south, and there is no cloud in the east or west, but over us is this huge black cloud. I think something is wrong. I think something terrible is going to happen.'*

*She got up and went outside. The younger one stayed within the house and sang. The elder beat the ground with her yam stick; she knew that Yurlunggur was going to swallow her, and she wanted to stop the rain. She sang, 'Yurlunggur, don't you come out and swallow us. We are good, and we are clean.' The two sisters then called out the taboo names ('snake swallows'; menstrual blood') of the Mirrimina well.*

*While the older sister sang and danced around the house, and the younger sister sang inside it to stop the rain from coming down and to drive the great cloud away, they were being surrounded by all the snakes in the land. The pythons, death adders, tree snakes, black snakes, iguanas, the blue-tongued lizard, snails, caterpillars and all the Dua snakes came up around them in a circle, for they had heard the call of their father, Yurlunggur. It was night and the women did not see them.*

*The elder sister first sang all the songs now sung in the general camp. After this she sang all the songs sung during the Gunabibi (male initiation ritual re-enacting the myth). These are the less powerful songs. She did this first, for she thought they would stop the rain, but it did not stop. She was afraid of this rain, for it*

*came out of a cloud she could not understand, "because this cloud came from nowhere."*

*"She sang then the taboo songs of the Djungguan (an older and 'higher' initiation ritual) – 'Ah! Ah! Ah! Kak Ye!!' She sang the songs when the subsection names are called out in the Djungguan. She took the Dua subsections first."*

*The young sister sang like the leader of the Djungguan ceremony does today. She said, 'We'll turn to the Yiritja subsections now. We'll call out the Yiritja people' (subsections).*

*They first sang the songs which belong to the camp of the women, for they are not 'strong'. Then they sang the songs of the Marndiella, for it is only a little more powerful, and its songs only slightly more taboo. Then they sang Djungguan and Ulmark.*

*The rain continued and came down harder and harder. They decided that they must sing "something even more powerful, more taboo, and deeper within the ceremonial camp of the men."*

*"They sang Yurlunggur and menstrual blood."*

*When Yurlunggur heard these words, he crawled into the camp of the two women and their two children. They had suddenly fallen into a deep sleep from his magic. He licked the women and children all over preparatory to swallowing them. "He bit the noses of each and made the blood come." He swallowed the old women first, the younger one next, and the little boys last.*

*He waited for daylight. When dawn came he uncoiled and went out a short distance into the bush, because he "Was too near the water. He wanted to leave the women in a dry place."*

*He raised himself and stood very straight. He was "like the trunk of a very tall straight tree." His head reached as high as a cloud. When he raised himself to the sky the flood waters came up as he did. They flooded and covered the entire earth. No tree or hill showed above them. When he fell later, the water receded and at the same time there was dry ground." While he was high in the sky and had the two women and children inside him he sang all the Marndiella, Djungguan, Gunabibi and Ulmark ceremonies. The other totemic pythons stood up too. They were all Dua and none was Yiritja. Yurlunggur was higher than all the rest. He was the leader for those other snakes, and was more powerful than they.*

*The snakes stood on their tails high in the sky. Each belonged to a different Dua-moiety clan, and spoke a different language. All were asked by Yurlunggur what their language was, and each answered in the language of his country.*

*Yurlunggur said then, I see we all talk different languages. It would be better if we talked the same tongue. We can't help this*



now. It is better then that we all have got our ceremonies together, for we own the same maraiin (totemic emblems).

They all sang out together then, and their voices “Were the thunder and roared all over the land and sea”.

Yurlunggur then turned to “a Dali Dua snake”. He said, ‘What have you been eating?’ ‘I have been eating fresh-water fish’ (Dua variety). ‘How did he taste?’ ‘Oh, he was very good. Nice and fat.’ • ‘What will you do now that you have eaten him?’ ‘I’m going to spew him up and look at him and eat him again for the last time.’ He was going to do what the live pythons do now; “they eat something, swallow it, spew it up, lick it, and eat it again. It does not come up again.”

Each snake was asked what It had eaten, until the turn case of Yurlunggur himself. ‘What did you eat?’, the Wessel Island snake asked Yurlunggur. ‘I won’t tell you.’ ‘Why not?’ Yurlunggur raised himself higher and higher into the sky. He laid his head and neck on a cloud. His eyes shot lightning. He felt ashamed. ‘Come on and tell me, my big brother’, said the Wessel Island snake again. After a long time Yurlunggur replied: ‘I ate two sisters and a small boy and girl’ (the children were previously described as two boys). Yurlunggur roared and fell to the ground as he said this. When he fell, he split the ground open and made the present dance ground at the Liaalaomir ceremonial place. He lay there on the ground and thought, ‘Those two sisters and their children are dead inside me now.’

Yurlunggur cleansed his mouth with his cheeks and tongue, spat several times and said, ‘I’m going to spew.’ He regurgitated the two women and the little children. They were dropped into an ant’s nest.

The Wessel Island snake, when he heard what Yurlunggur had said, was disgusted. ‘You’ve eaten your own wakus and yeppas’ (sisters’ children and sisters), he said. “This was a terrible thing.”

Yurlunggur crawled slowly back to his water hole. Of its own accord, the Yurlunggur totemic trumpet came out of the well and – although no-one blew it – “sang out like it does now” (when used in male initiation ceremonies). The trumpet blew over the two women and their children. “They were lying there like they had fainted. Some green ants came out then and bit the women and children. They jumped. The women and children “were alive again”, whereas Yurlunggur had thought them dead. He picked up two singing sticks and crawled out of the water hole, with snakes, lizards and snails on his head.

“He bit the mothers and their babies on their heads with the sticks and swallowed them again. He meant to keep them down this time.”

He felt sick again, “for once more he had swallowed Dua people.” lie decided to stand straight up. While he was raised, he was asked once more, ‘What did you eat?’ ‘Bandicoot’, he lied. ‘You do not tell the truth.’ ‘Two Dua women and two Yiritja boys.’

*When he said this he fell again. This time he made the Gunabibi and Ulmark dance grounds by his fall. After his fall, he crawled into the Liaalaomir well and went down into the subterranean waters, lie put a stone over his entrance and stopped the flood of water that had been coming out. He swam in the underground waters to the Wawilak country, for he wanted to take the mothers and their children back to their own country; here he spat them out for the last time. He left them there and came back to his own country. The two women turned to stone and one can still see them in the Wawilak country today. Yurlunggur kept the boys inside him, for they were Yiritja and he was Dua.*

*The two women “did not circumcise their two sons as they intended, because Yurlunggur had interfered before they were ready. It was because they so intended, and said for other people to perform this act, that people cut their sons today.”*

***Third movement: the transfer of ritual power to men***

*While all this great drama was being acted in the country of the Liaalaomir, two Wawilak Wongar men had heard the terrible noise of the snake’s voice (thunder) and they had seen the skies fill with lightning and felt the downpour of the rain. They knew something was the matter, so they followed the two women’s tracks. It took them many days and nights to get there. They finally saw the snake tracks.*

*‘I think the sisters had trouble’, said one. ‘I think that maybe a crocodile or python has killed them.’*

*They arrived at Mirrirmina. They had followed the Goyder River down. They saw all the ants walking around everywhere, like they smelled something that was dead and they wanted to eat. They then found all the snake tracks. “The well water shone like a rainbow. When they saw this they knew there was a snake in there.”*

*They went farther in the bush and saw the ceremonial ground where Yurlunggur’s fall had made the dance places. ‘Wongar python has been here’, they said. When they looked carefully at the stone, they found blood from the heads of the two women and boys. ‘What will we do?’ ‘Run and get some paper bark and make a basket’, said the older Wawilak man. They gathered two baskets of blood and went to the dance grounds. They made a bush house on part of the ground that represents the snake’s tail. ‘You take all the hawk’s feathers, bush cotton, and this blood and we’ll paint ourselves. You do this, and I shall go cut a hollow log and make a Yurlunggur trumpet.’*

*Each did his task. The hollow ridgepole from the Wawilak sisters’ house was used for the trumpet totemic emblem of Yurlunggur.*

*The sun went down. They left the blood till morning. They slept, and while they were in a deep sleep they dreamed of what the two women sang and danced when they were trying to keep Yurlunggur from swallowing them. The Wawilak women came back as spirits and taught*

*the two Men the Djungguan songs and dances that are for the outside general camp, and the inside ones that are for the men's camp. They told the men the way to do the ceremonies. They sang Yurlunggur and Muiit (another name for Yurlunggur). The men slept on and dreamed that Yurlunggur brought out all the iguanas from the Mirrimina well.*

*The two sisters said to men 'This is all now. We are giving you this dream so you can remember these important things. You must never forget these things we have told you tonight. You must remember every time each year these songs and dances. You must paint with blood and feathers for Marndiella, Gunabibi and Djungguan. You must dance all the things we saw and named on our journey, and which ran away into the well.*

*After the men danced the new dances and ceremonies for the first time they went back to their own country. "We dance these things now, because our Wongar ancestors learned them from the two Wawilak Sisters."*

\* \* \* \* \*

## Sources and versions

### **(a) General**

No Australian Aboriginal myth has received as much anthropological attention as that of the Wawilak Sisters. It forms the centrepiece of two full-length books: *A Black Civilization* by Warner (1957), and *Kunapipi*, by R. B. Berndt (1951). The myth and its analysis are central to chapter 3 (Systems of Transformation) of Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind* (1966: 75-108. Numerous independent recordings of the myth have been made (Allen 1975: 67-75; C. H. Berndt 1970; B. B. Berndt 1976; C. H. and B. B. Berndt 1904: 212-13; Chaseling 1957: 139-46; Kupka 1965: 111-21; Mountford 1956: 278-9; McCarthy 1960: 425-7; Robinson 1966: 37-43), and a succession of articles (Buchler 1978; Hargrave 1983; Hiatt 1975b; Knight 1983; Layton 1970; Haddock 1976; Bunn 1969) have taken one or more versions as their point of departure.

Lévi-Strauss (1966: 91) relies entirely on Warner's version (abridged above). Hargrave (1983) and Layton (1970) follow suit, although acknowledging the existence of Berndt's (1951) recording. Testart (1978: 112) comments only on Berndt's (1951) version. Bunn (1969) and Hiatt (1975b) rest their analyses on Warner and Berndt. Buchler (1978) stretches the net a little wider, citing (in addition to Warner's and Berndt's Classic accounts) also Mountford (1956) and

McCarthy (1960). A valuable series of songs relating to the myth is presented in Berndt (1976). C. H. Berndt (1970) provides some versions recorded from women, along with a useful discussion of the range of variation of the myth throughout much of its area of distribution.

But certain valuable recordings appear to have gone almost ignored in the literature: these include Chaseling (1957), Kupka (1965) and Robinson (1966). A fragment linking the Wawilak myth with a girls' puberty ritual appears in Barney (1959: 02). Allen's (1975: 67-75) long and detailed version appears to be a composite built up from other recordings, although checked over by a native informant.

**(b) Warner**

The version presented above – that of Warner (1957) – was collected in the late nineteen twenties near its main locus at the Millingimbi mission camp on the Crocodile Islands in the north-western corner of north-east Arnhem Land. This earliest recorded version is perhaps the most effective and dramatic to a European ear, and in Warner's book is accompanied by a wealth of detail concerning the myth's ritual re-enactment and general ethnographic context. Warner observed several lengthy ritual performances dramatising the myth, which he pieced together as parts of it were told to him in asides by informants explaining the significance of the various ritual episodes.

**(c) R. M. Berndt**

B. L. Berndt's (1951) version was collected nearly twenty years later (1946-7) at Yirrkalla, in the far north-eastern corner of the same region. In his *Kunapipi*, Berndt also provides an invaluable account of a major ritual sequence re-enacting the myth, in addition to informants' dreams, drawings and comments. A striking feature of this version is its emphasis on the female gender of the Great Snake (*Julunggul*) which swallows the two sisters. This is accompanied by such evidence that the supposedly- menstrual and afterbirth blood of the women is in fact *mareiin* – sacred. Two statements are worth quoting here. Berndt (1951: 22) writes:

“menstruation and afterbirth blood is usually described as *mareiin*, or sacred, and so could not ‘pollute’ the well”.

In a later work, Berndt (1976: 70) comments on an associated song:

“From its association with that blood..., the water itself becomes sacred”.

On this interpretation, the waterhole of the Great Snake is indeed taboo and sacred, as in Warner’s version – but only because of the pouring into it of menstrual blood. This gives a rather different twist to the notion of the blood’s “pollution” of the pool – but this is only one of the paradoxes we will meet.

According to Berndt (1951: 50), the women have their own “inside” or “sacred” name for the Great Snake – “Kitjin”. A male informant comments: “But it is the same Dreaming Snake, even though it is called by a different name: for the women call it Kitjin so that we (the men) won’t know the real meaning.”

#### ***(d) Chaseling***

The same name reappears, it seems, in the missionary Chaseling’s (1957) version, in which the Snake is called “Kaitjalan”. This version – in which the snake is male – stresses the creative, structure-generating potencies of the Two Sisters, who as the myth opens camp on a hill “eating their first raw meat and naming and distributing the animals and birds to the eight marriage-subsections or ‘malk’” (Chaseling 1957: 139). In this version, there is no explicit mention of menstrual pollution (the motif of eating raw meat might be interpreted, perhaps, as compensating for this omission). Just before the birth, however, the younger sister goes to the lagoon for water:

*“By the lagoon she bent down to dip water and her mali or ghost then quietly slipped into the pool but she was unconscious of what had happened and returned to the camp.”*

It is only following this incident that the dead animals, on being placed upon the cooking-fire, refuse to be cooked, leap up in resurrected form and dive into the lagoon. And it is at the very moment of childbirth – in this version – that the thunder and lightning of the storm is unleashed and the Great Snake rises up to swallow alive the women and their babies. It is said that it is the women’s “mali or ghost” – corresponding to their blood in the other versions – which makes the Snake sick after the swallowing and so causes him to vomit up his victims. So after carrying the women to the sky,

falling, regurgitating them and seeing them resurrected by the bites of green ants, he first removes their “mali” before swallowing them again and taking them beneath the lagoon’s waters, where they have remained ever since. On calm moonlit nights, we are told (Chaseling 1957: 140),

“the faint echoes of the Gunabibee ceremony can be heard from under the waters of the lagoon....”

***(e) Robinson***

Robinson’s (1966: 37-43) is perhaps the most emphatically “male” of the versions. Here, the women’s antagonist is “Wittee the snake-man”, suspected by the Sisters to be “our brother or our father” when they first encounter him. As in most versions, it is blood (in this case afterbirth flow) which “angers” the Snake and causes its erection from the pool. As the storms gather and the animals refuse to be cooked, one sister observes to her companion: “Look! Bamditdit the moon is curved.” In this version, the sisters’ antagonist starts as an ordinary kinsman by his camp-fire and then, as the storms burst, turns into “a huge Snake” rising up out of his coils “in the sacred water-hole.” When he has swallowed the women, the snake-man says: “Might be I have eaten my sister or my daughter.” It is then that he begins to belch and to spew out his victims.

The sun then comes out (the swallowing took place in total darkness) and “began to dry the two sisters.” It is only as their blood is drunk by ants and they begin to dry that they come alive once more. It will be recalled that before regurgitating the two sisters, Yurlunggur in Warner’s version “wanted to leave them in a dry place”; he eventually (after a world-engulfing flood had delayed matters) deposited them on an ants’ nest where the resurrection took place.

As in the other versions, the snake swallows his victims again, the swallowings and regurgitation. corresponding to a rhythmic alternation between earth and sky. In this version, however, there is the strongest of suggestions that in being swallowed, the sisters are merely undergoing a change of state whilst retaining their essential identity. The evidence is as follows. When

Wittee speaks to the other snakes in the sky, he does so in roars of thunder indicating that he has “eaten good meat”, and the myth continues:

*“Now when Wittee spoke to these other snakes it was the spirits of the two sisters who were speaking out of his mouth. ‘We are here now’, the sisters said. ‘The snake has eaten us. We are the Marraiin, the sacred knowledge of Wittee. Our spirits talk through him for another country.’”*

The myth concludes:

*“Then Wittee spoke as one with the spirits of the two sisters: ‘I give you my ceremonies.’”*

The Two Sisters and the Serpent – apparent antagonists – are, then, ultimately one and the same. The women are “the Marraiin, the sacred knowledge” of the Snake. It is to be noted that in this as in all versions where relationships are specified, the union is regarded as one of blood-with-blood, like with like – it is an “incestuous” union, not an exogamous or marital one. A comparison seems relevant here. We may recall that despite their long cross- country travels, the sisters in Warner’s version meticulously avoid encountering anyone or anything outside the boundaries of their own Dua-moiety territory; neither does the great Dua Snake contemplate swallowing and regurgitating anything but Dua-moiety varieties of human or animal “meat” or “flesh”. In both cases, this restriction can be interpreted as a code-term for Incest, which is – like the anti-marital menstrual “sex-strike” postulated here as the template for all such phenomena – the refusal to make relationships beyond the boundaries of one’s own collective social space.

#### ***(f) Kupka***

The version recorded by Kupka (1965: 111-121) explains why the Two Sisters set off on their travels: “They had been punished for incest, and that was why they had to leave their country” (p. 112). Most of the story resembles the versions noted above, but in this recording the sisters possess a hunting-dog with whose help they obtain the animals they try to cook. The animals are resurrected and jump from the fire in the usual way. Instead of diving into a waterhole, however, they go inside a hollow tree. The dog attempts to recapture the animals; he “stuck his nose into the hollow tree and it made a noise like a drum” (p. 113). The “hollow tree” is a reference to the drum or *ubar* log used as a sound-making instrument in ritual performances, particularly in western

Arnhem Land; in the Oenpelli *ubar* ritual, for example, the hollow instrument is “the Uterus of the Mother” and the means through which boys are “reborn” (Berndt and Berndt 1951: 127). Comparing Kupka’s version with the others, it is worth noting that whether the game animals collected by the Two Sisters hide from the cooking-fire in a waterhole or in a hollow tree, they are emphatically raw, associated with menstrual blood and are protected inside a “womb”. Why all this should be associated with the making of noise will be discussed in Chapter 10.

**(g) C. H. Berndt**

The final versions to be discussed here, are C. H. Berndt’s (1970: 1306-26) recordings – apparently very similar to each other – from women informants. These give names to the Two Sisters (the youngest is Boaliri, the eldest, Waimariwi). A further feature is that “the Snake is always male” (Berndt 1970: 1308). The usual episodes are present except for these omissions: (a) the Sisters do not confer names on the world; (b) they are not said to commit incest; (c) no mention is made of their handing over of their ritual secrets to men. As recorded, then, these women’s versions appear to be slightly weaker or impoverished by comparison with the others: the ambiguities and mysteries of the versions used by men to explain their ritual secrets are missing.

A significant point is, however, made by C. H. Berndt (1970: 1324). Although in one sense the Sisters (in this version) do not commit incest, in another sense they do. There is no mention of the sisters’ having had relations with a clan-brother in Wawilak country before setting out on their journey. However,

“...the women were due, like the Snake himself: he called their child *wugu* (sister’s son or daughter, man speaking), and themselves ‘sister.’ This was, therefore, an incestuous union. It was not only intra-moiety, but also involved two close relatives between whom there is ordinarily one of the strongest of tabus as well as one of the strongest kinds of co-operation i.e., brother and sister. In such an interpretation, it was (from an ‘outside’ viewpoint) at the waterhole itself that the mythical act of incest took place and not, or not only, In the distant Wawalag country”.

This is interesting, because it suggests that in Warner’s version, the initial brother-sister incest is the same thing as the later snake-swallowing episode. The two episodes are really two different code-terms for the same type of



relationship conferring magical power linked with fertility. In defining the nature of this power, the same author (C. H. Berndt 1970: 1324) continues by remarking upon

“the connection between conventionally wrong (or ‘incestuous’) unions and fertility, seasonal or otherwise. The *kunapipi* rites provide the example *par excellence* mating that is normally wrong is sanctified in a ritual context...”

This incestuous kind of union is in fact “far more potent symbolically than any ordinary union could be.” To this, we might add that this kind of union is characteristically associated with the flowing of menstrual and/or afterbirth blood; It is the form of mating recurrently and exclusively favoured by all manifestations of the Rainbow Snake.

C. H. Berndt (1970: 1306) writes that It would be most rewarding to look at all the variants of this myth and related material”, but points out that it would require much space and involve descriptions of ritual as well. The above list of versions makes no claim to being exhaustive – many other recordings must undoubtedly exist; one source which has not been mentioned here is the large variety of bark-paintings depicting scenes from the Wawilak myth, reproductions of many of which have been published in art-books and catalogues. References to the Wawilak myth in the literature of social anthropology are too numerous to mention. Finally, it should be noted that Berndt’s and Warner’s versions seem to be the only ones recorded in the context of their ritual associations. Of the recordings by other authors, little is known of precise localities, sources or contexts.

#### **A composite made from four versions**

The richest and longest recordings are, then, the following:

1. “The Wawilak Women” (Warner 1957: 250-59).
2. “The Two Wauweluk Sisters” (Berndt 1951: 19-26).
3. “The Two Waugeluk Sisters” (Robinson 1966: 37-43).
4. “Two Women and a Serpent” (Chaseling 1957: 139-48).

From these four, we any construct a composite, broken into its component episodes:

- A. Two sisters, one with a child (*versions 1, 2, 3*), travel (*all versions*) and name the features of the world (*1, 2*).
- B. They collect plants and animals (*all versions*), which they prophesy will soon become “marraiin” or sacred (*1, 2*).
- C. They commit incest with a man of their own dua patrilineal moiety (*1, 2*).
- D. They reach a waterhole, into which they accidentally let flow menstrual and/or afterbirth blood (*1, 2, 3*).
- E. The Serpent who dwells in this waterhole, and who is male (*1, 3, 4*) or female (*2*), is enraged by the pollution (*all versions*) and begins to emerge from the depths (*all versions*). The Serpent is of the dua moiety (*1, 2*).
- F. The food plants and animals which the sisters attempt to cook refuse to be rendered edible. They jump up, resurrected, from the fire, and dive into the lagoon or waterhole (*all versions*).
- G. The childless sister, made pregnant by her earlier incest (*1, 2*), gives birth (*all versions*).
- H. At this moment (*4*) or soon after (*1, 2, 3*), a rain cloud (*1, 2, 4*), a rainbow (*3*) and lightning flashes (*all versions*) appear in the sky, portending the season of rain and storms (*all versions*). When the skies momentarily clear, it is seen that the moon is curved (*3*). Darkness falls (*all versions*) as the storm bursts (*all versions*).
- I. To drive away the Serpent-floods-rains, the sisters sing “Yurlunggur and menstrual blood” (*1*) or chant other spells (*2, 3, 4*), crying “Go away! Go away!” (*1, 2*), and dancing in a ring (*4*). At the same time (*1*) or previously (*4*) they give names to the subsections. The great ceremonial dances and rites are founded (*all versions*).
- J. These songs and dances are, among other things, rain-making magic (*all versions*). Yet the Sisters perform them in order to stop the rain (*all versions*). Their effect is to make the rains come on still harder (*all versions*). Instead of retreating in face of the spells, the Great Snake comes closer and closer (*all versions*), and the strenuous dancing causes the menstrual onset of the Sister who had not previously bled (*2*). The snake smells the blood (*all versions*) and is attracted by it (*2*), becoming more and more aroused and erect (*all versions*) as the rains fall harder and harder (*all versions*).
- K. The sisters with their babies retreat, finally, into a hut which they have built (*all versions*). For the young sister, this is her first menstruation – a “happy time”; she digs a hole in the middle of the hut to receive her flow (*2*). The Snake coils around this hut and begins to swallow all the occupants alive (*all versions*), first biting the noses of each “to make the blood come” (*1*).

L. The snake carries its victims to another world, taking them up into the sky (*all versions*). It is tall and straight as a tree, its head as high as a cloud, and it goes on “flying and flying and flying and naming and naming and naming” with its victims inside (1). The spells and chants of the great present-day ceremonies are being sung from the sky (*all versions*). It is the Sisters themselves who are singing these songs from within the Snake (3).

M. A “terrible noise” (2) is made by these ritual performances, the sounds being those of the eating of “good meat” (3) or human flesh (*all versions*). The Great Snake is joined in the sky by other snakes corresponding to the clans and linguistic units from miles around (*all versions*). “They all sang out together then, and their voices were the thunder and roared all over the land and sea” (1). The Great Snake moaned “like the big boats that come into Darwin harbour” (4). The roaring is “now part of the sound of the bullroarer” (2).

N. The ceremonies established in this way are to constitute a universal language of ritualism which will cut across the differences between localised dialects throughout the region (1, 2).

O. Admitting the incestuous “wrong” of having cannibalistically eaten its own kin (1, 3), the snake is ashamed (1, 3, 4) or, on the contrary, she is boastful (2). In face of the moral outrage of the other snakes, the python crashes to the ground, splitting it open (1, 3, 4), forming the dance-grounds used today in ritual re enactments of the myth (1, 2). The bones of the sisters are smashed inside the snake (3), who believes the victims are now dead (1, 4). Regurgitated (*all versions*), the victims are left to dry (1, 3) on an ant-bed (1) and are brought to life by blood-drinking (1, 2) ants (*all versions*). A bad snake, however, is unable to resurrect the victims he swallows; he roams over the region, swallowing youths and regurgitating their corpses which never come back alive. This snake, therefore, has to be killed by ancestral men (2). Returning to the main story, the resurrected victims are swallowed again (*all versions*) and finally regurgitated to turn to stone (1). Only the *dua* victims are regurgitated, however. This is because it is not “wrong” for the *dua* snake to “eat” flesh belonging to the opposite (*jiritja*) patrimoiety. Of the victims swallowed, only the Sisters and animals are *dua*. Their sons are *Jiritja*. In the final regurgitation, therefore, the Snake discriminates, spewing up the *dua* victims whilst keeping the boys inside himself (1).

P. Some ancestral men (a) gather blood left by the Sisters and are told by them in a dream how to use it in performing the great rituals of the present day (1); or (b) the men cut their arms and say that this is the menstrual and afterbirth blood necessary for ritual use (2) or (c) the snake-man Wittee himself cuts a vein in his forearm for the same purpose (3). In one way or another, men obtain from the Two Sisters the sources of their present-day ritual power (*all versions*).

### **Ethnographic context**

A full understanding of the Wawilak myth would presuppose an exhaustive description and understanding of Yolngu social life, kinship, ritual, ecology and much else. This thesis makes no claim to attempt such a task. It is proposed, however, to present enough background information to pursue the analysis of the myth to the extent required by our theoretical purposes. We begin with three topics – menstruation, moieties and seasonality.

#### ***(a) Menstruation***

When a Murngin girl has her first menses the mother and older women put her inside a hut and leave her. She is supposed to remain in one place and move with digging sticks as crutches. “This represents the myth of the two old women who made the present world walking with the aid of digging sticks; the older of the two was menstruating (Warner 1957: 75). It is believed that menstruation is due to the sexual act, and that the blood “is not dangerous to a woman” although sea must be careful (Warner 1957: 75). When an older man takes a pre-adolescent girl as wife, he helps the mother perform the above little ritual at her first menstruation. After this is over the husband paints her with red ochre (this is always done for mourners after the death of a relative). Ordinarily, there is no great fear of menstrual blood. The menstruating wife sleeps in the same house or camp with her husband, though the couple do not copulate. The only restriction in daily life is that no man would allow a wife or any other woman to go out in a canoe with him during this period,

“for otherwise the great mythical snake, Bapa Indi (the Great Father), would swallow them all. The story is told that not so long ago a man took his two wives in a canoe for a trip from one island to another. One of them was menstruating. When they had gone for a short time Yurlunggur (Bapa Indi) smelt the unclean odor, came out of the subterranean depths, and swallowed them all”

Warner (1957: 7C) consents: “This modern folk-tale, which is believed by all Murngin, fits into the tribe’s most fundamental myth of the two old Creator sisters.”

**(b) Moieties**

Throughout the whole area of eastern Arnhem Land, the territory is divided between a number of linguistic groups (*mata*, “tongue”) which correspond more or less closely with patrilineal, patrilocal clans (*mala*). These are the “countries” referred to in the myth. Each of these belongs exclusively to either the *dua* or the *jiritja* patrilineal moiety. The moiety is “the most important social control” in the social organisation as a whole: “it divides all *mata* and *mala*, the whole life of the people and the known universe, into two groups, and affiliates all those belonging to one moiety” (Berndt 1951: 3). Warner (1957: 146-7) writes of “the separation of all things on the basis of their inherent nature of being *Dua* or *Jiritja*”, this applying to stretches of territory, women, men, children, animals, plants and the cosmos. Warner (1957: 388) comments:

“The kinship system functions as an ‘international’ social system by means of the allocation of the clans to one of two groups.”

The opposition between the moieties is reaffirmed and sustained through the rituals which re-enact the Wawilak myth, a fact which sheds light on the claim made by the mythological snakes to be establishing something equivalent to an international language:

“I see we all talk different languages. It would be better if we talked the same tongue” (Warner 1957: 255).

“Ah, what a lot of languages we talk.... But....we all share the same ceremonies” (Berndt 1951: 24).

The moieties are exogamous, “so that they remain the basis upon which marriage rules depend” (Berndt 1951: 3). All of the *dua* people, throughout the vast stretches of territory over which this category presides, are said to be “of one family” (*dua ’kundit*). The same applies to all the *Jiritja* people.

The moiety-dichotomy is stated mythologically to have been established in the Dreamtime when the two Djanggawul Sisters (related closely to the Wawilak Sisters – Berndt 1951: 12-13; Warner 1957: 399) removed from their uterii the first male and female predecessors of the present-day groups (Berndt 1951: 3). Comparable moiety-dichotomies span the whole of Arnhem Land and north-western Australia (not to mention the rest of the continent). Around Cape Don in western Arnhem Land, the first humans born to the female ancestral being were

called “Sun-skin” and “Water-skin” (Chaseling 1957: 157-65). Among the Murinbata in the Port Keats/Daly river area of Western Australia, one moiety is linked with water, its partner with fire (Stanner 1966: 32). Sections and subsections are expressions of the same binary logic, contrasting symbolically as dark to light, cold to warm, active to passive and so on (Von Brandenstein 1971).

The native terms for “subsection” – *malg* at Yirrkalla – are translated into English by the Aborigines throughout the area as “skin” (R. I. Berndt 1970: 1058, Stanner 1966: 32). Dry versus wet “skins” may also – as at Cape Don – connote the opposition between moieties (Chaseling 1957: 157-65). But if the notion of “skin” is drawn on to characterise the underlying logic, then so also is the notion of skin-change or metamorphosis. “The esoteric significance of the terms Jiritja and dua is today unknown”, writes Berndt (1951: 3), “although old and reliable aborigines state that both these moiety terms convey the meaning of metamorphosis...” In place of a fixed, immutable contrast between essences, then, there is implied the notion of opposites being transformed into one another.

Within this logic of metamorphosis, the changing of the seasons is important. Dua connotes the rainy season, female ancestral power and dark or deep colours such as black or red, whereas Jiritja is more associated with the dry season, male ancestral power and light colours such as yellow and white (Testart 1978: 174-5; Maddock 1978b: 114). The dua moiety is felt to represent the side of conservatism and tradition, while Jiritja connotes change and innovation (Berndt 1951: 9). Testart (1978: 191) cites a report that “the red of the Dua moiety contrasts with the yellow of the Yiritja moiety as feminine blood contrasts with masculine sperm”. If all this is so, then it would seem tempting to suppose that the contrast between menstrual seclusion (“wet”, “dark”, “red”, “female ancestral power”) and marriage (“dry”, “light”, “white”, “male power”) has been used as a template from which to derive other symbolic contrasts such as the opposition between moieties and the alternation between seasons.

*(c) Periodic structure: seasonal*

Following Warner (1957: 380-1), Lévi-Strauss (1968: 91) notes that the Murngin “consciously associate the snake with the rainy season which causes the annual inundation.” In this area, the various seasonal changes are so regular that, as a geographer points out, they can be predicted almost to the day. Rainfall is often as high as fifty or sixty inches in two or three months. It increases from just two inches in October to some ten inches in December and fifteen in January.

The rainy season, Lévi-Strauss continues, forces the Murngin to disperse and take refuge in small groups in the areas which have not been submerged. “Here they carry on a precarious existence, threatened by famine and inundation.” A few days after the floods have receded, the vegetation is lush again and animals reappear. Collective life picks up once more and relative abundance reigns. None of this would have been possible, however, had the floods not swamped and fertilised the plains.

The various counterposed forces depicted in the Wawilak myth are conceptualised, then, as necessary to one another. “They must”, Lévi-Strauss (1966: 92-3) writes,

“collaborate if there is to be life. As the myth explains: had the Wawilak sisters not committed incest and polluted the water hole of Yurlunggur there would have been neither life nor death, neither copulation nor reproduction on the earth, and there would have been no cycle of seasons”.

Reproductive cyclicality, in other words, in both natural and human forms, is felt to have been first set in motion by the Two Sisters’ great menstrual “wrong” (cf. Berndt and Berndt 1970: 230). When the Sisters’ blood flowed under a crescent moon, the result was to unleash the monsoon season of floods and storms. The dua phase is the period of darkness, thunder, blood, flood and rains.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Chapter 9: The rule of men**

This and the following two chapters will take up in turn three main problem- areas presented by the Wawilak myth:

1. The relationship between the sisters, their blood and the Snake.
2. The relationship between the sisters, their blood and the power to give the world its first “names”.
3. The relationship between the sisters, their blood and the refusal of the game animals to be cooked.

This chapter will address the first issue, which concerns the identity of “the Snake”.

#### Menstruation and “the Snake”

Alain Testart (1978: 113) describes the relationship between the Rainbow Serpent and menstrual blood in Australian Aboriginal mythology as “an association of opposites linked by their very contradiction.” In the previous two chapters, it has been suggested that the seeming polar “opposites” – the menstrual flow on the one hand, serpent on the Other – are at a deeper level one and the same (Testart in a personal communication (1987) has generously conceded this point.) “They sang blood because that is what brought the snake when Yurlunggur came”, an informant explained to Warner (1957: 270), . referring to the Wawilak Sisters whose chanting, dancing and menstrual bleeding generated the Serpent at the beginning of time. The Sisters “sang blood”, then, because that was what “brought the Snake”. There was no other way to make it come.

Yet in most recorded versions of the myth, the exact opposite is implied. It is said that the Two Sisters were attempting to stop the Snake – they were attempting through magical measures to make it go away. To *repel* the Snake,



they were singing “menstrual blood”. Yet such blood was the one thing known to attract it more than anything else. How should we interpret the contradiction?

Two opposite messages seem to be being transmitted at once. One message is that the singing, dancing and simultaneous bleeding of the sisters was impotent in that it had the opposite effect to the one which was desired. Despite “singing menstrual blood” and despite dancing frantically (an activity which, with seemingly-fatal inevitability, brought on the younger sister’s flow), the sisters found themselves being swallowed by the Snake. Everything which the sisters did – singing menstrual blood, dancing menstrual blood – was precisely the wrong thing to do if they wished (as the myth says they wished) to avoid becoming engulfed.

But this leads us to the opposite implication of the myth – that the Serpent was conjured up not despite the sisters’ songs and dances, but because of them. It is certainly the case that – particularly in Berndt’s (1951) version – “the Serpent” flows from its deep hole in precise proportion as the sisters’ blood flows from the vagina. Each time a non-bleeding sister dances, the Snake stops flowing from its holes; each time a bleeding sister dances, the Snake flows out in synchrony with the blood. As we read in Berndt’s (1951: 22 version:

“So the wirkul (younger sister, non-bleeding) began to dance, to hinder the Snake The Julunggul (Rainbow Snake) stopped in her course, and watched the dancing. But the girl grew tired, and called out: ‘Come on, sister, your turn now. I want to rest.’

The older sister (gungman, bleeding afterbirth blood) came from the hut, leaving her child in its cradle of soft paperbark, and began to dance. But her blood, still intermittently flowing, attracted the Snake further; and she moved towards them.

‘Come on, sister’, cried the gungman ‘It’s no good for me; my blood is coming out, and the Snake is smelling it and coming closer. It’s better for you to go on dancing.’

So the younger sister continued, and again Julunggul stopped and watched.... In this way, the Wauwalak took it in turns to dance; when the younger sister danced, the Snake stopped; but when the older one continued, she came forward again. So the younger girl danced longer than the other, and as she swayed from side to side the intensive activity caused her menstruation to begin; then the Python, smelling more blood, came forward without hesitation.”

It was when the two sisters were bleeding together that two things almost simultaneously happened: (1) they entered their little hut together; (2) they were swallowed by the Snake. The implication is that it was the combination of their blood-flows – the connexion of womb-with-waterhole or womb-with-womb – which constituted the force carrying off the Sisters to the other world. This would be consistent with Hiatt's (1995: 156) suggestion that, in Aboriginal "swallowing and regurgitation" myths generally, the ingesting and regurgitating organ is an immense vagina or womb.

Yet if "the Snake" is really nothing other than the combined "flood" or "flow" of the women, why is this message so effectively concealed? Why is the Snake depicted as a force alien to the women themselves? At the moment of childbirth (or soon after), the sisters become "as one". They enter a birth- hut/menstrual hut together, both covered in a combined flow of blood. If this is really a shared "return to the womb", conceptualised as a journey to the sky, why depict it as the trauma of being "swallowed" by an alien, monstrous "Snake"?

In fact, to describe the Snake as "alien" would not be quite accurate. If its relationship to the sisters is mentioned in the myths at all, it is invariably said to be kin – a "brother" or other relative. But the conundrum remains, for the Snake's intention is depicted as threatening – even when it is explicitly said to be kin, even when it is female, and even when it appears to emanate with total predictability from the sisters own sacred ritual. How can we reconcile the Snake's hostile nature with its apparent kinship with the sisters and its basis in their own ritual power? This is the difficulty to which the present chapter is addressed.

Before trying to answer the question, we should perhaps recall that a sacred myth of this kind can mean one thing to the uninitiated, another to those whose eyes have been opened. Here, the myth's import – the moral lesson spelled out by the tribal elders to women and children – is fairly clear. It is that women and babies are "unclean" in the eyes of the Great Serpent who is the guardian of all male ritual power. If feminine impurities are not carefully controlled – the implication is – those responsible are likely to be swallowed

alive. But if this is the meaning to the uninitiated, the meaning to the initiated is not necessarily the same.

To those with “inside” knowledge (revealed only gradually through the various stages of initiation), to be “inside the Serpent” is no disaster at all. On the contrary, to be so engulfed is to feel an immense sense of solidarity and strength. Throughout the greater part of Aboriginal Australia, there is no way to generate this Serpent-power other than by bleeding. We are here discussing what in Arnhem Land Donald Thomson (1949: 41) called “...the solidarity (the *marr*) of a group, members of which are bound together by the sharing of a special bond.” In adjacent regions within Arnhem Land and western and northern Australia, the counterparts of this collective *marr*, magic or “reproductive power” are termed *ungud*, *wondjina*, *bolung* etc. (Maddock 1978a).

The highest expressions of such power are found in the physical intimacies of ritual life, when men share even the warmth of one another’s life-blood itself, smearing blood over one another from penis or arm. In the course of male initiation rituals (designed to sustain the reproductivity of both human and natural realms), men shed considerable quantities of blood, dipping their hands in each other’s streams, fondling each Other’s bodies and becoming generally immersed in the flow of both affection and blood. In north east Arnhem Land, men use the Wawilak Sisters myth both to discourage women from doing any such thing and to justify the fact that men alone are today permitted to share in the power of one another’s “menstrual” blood.

An example will illustrate the point. Warner (1957: 274-78) writes of “the principal interclan circumcision” ceremony of the Murngin, the Djungguan ritual re-enactment of the Wawilak myth:

“On the day before the circumcision a bloodletting ceremony takes place in the old men’s camp. The blood is to be used as an adhesive substance to hold the birds’ down and native cotton to the dancers’ bodies. Before a man offers his blood for the first time Yurlunggur (a trumpet symbolic of the Snake) is blown all over his body....

The old men sing over the man....

While the singing is going on, the man’s arms are tied near the wrist and shoulder with some stout cord. A stone spear head is broken and a flake of it used to make a half-inch cut in the lower arm. The leader rubs the man’s head with his hand while another cuts his arm. The totemic emblem is blown against the wound.

The blood runs slowly, and the rhythm of the song is conducted with equal slowness. In a second or two the blood spurts and runs in a rapid stream. The beat of the song sung by the old men increases to follow the rhythm of the blood. The blood runs into a paper-bark basin... The next man opens a hole from yesterday's giving and the blood pours forth in a stream. It runs quickly, and the rhythm of the song is at a very fast tempo. There is much smiling among the men and an occasional '*main-muk, main-muk* (good, good)'

A third man pulls off an old scab from his arm and the blood pours forth in a larger stream than that of the others. The trumpet continues to blow....

Several as proudly exhibit their arms which show five and six cuts that have been made during previous ceremonies...."

An informant explains the meaning of the blood:

"The meaning is like this: suppose you and I have come a long way and we reach a good camp and our people have one house empty and it is a good place for us and they take us in and put us in it. We get in that house and have a good sleep and no one can hurt us because we have friends. That blood is just like that. It makes us feel easy and comfortable and it makes us strong. It makes us good."

In being enveloped with a coating of blood, the men are being "swallowed" by "the Snake". *The snake is defined as kin*. And *this* – this sensation of "belonging", of being "at home", of being with kin – is what it feels like to be "swallowed". Whatever the myths told to frighten women and children, the men are quite adamant that being "inside the Serpent" is what sacredness and strength are all about. Whereas the mythological Sisters are alleged to be afraid of the impending disaster of being swallowed by the great Serpent, the real secret is that the men actively court this "disaster", which they bring upon themselves by "menstruating" precisely as the Sisters had done:

"Native Interpretation. – The blood that runs from an incision and with which the dancers paint themselves and their emblems is something more than a man's blood – it is the menses of the old Wawilak women. I was told during a ceremony: 'That blood we put all over those men is all the same as the blood that came from that old woman's vagina. It isn't the blood of those men any more because it has been sung over and made strong. The hole in the man's arm isn't that hole any more. It is all the same as the vagina of that old woman that had blood coming out of it. This is the blood that snake smelled when he was in the Mirrimina well. This is true for Djungguan and Gunabibi.' – 'When a man has got blood on him (is ceremonially decorated with it), he is all the same as those two old women when they had blood. All the animals ran away and they couldn't cook them.'

When the trumpet blows over the man giving his blood, it is Yurlunggur risen out of his well to swallow the women and their two children because he has spelled the menstrual blood of the older sister. Several well-informed men told me, 'When Yurlunggur blows over them, when they cut their arms it is like that snake comes up and smells that woman's blood when he is getting ready to swallow them.' The songs refer to the profanement of the pool and the swallowing of the women by the snake, which means that the man who is giving his blood for the first time is being swallowed by the snake and is at the moment the old woman."

So although ostensibly the Wawilak Sisters are supposed to have met disaster in being "swallowed" by the "Snake", the "inside" meaning of all this is very different, for the men eagerly repeat the "wrong" of menstruating in order to be "swallowed" themselves. Dancing, singing, holding and fondling one another, they let flow their own blood in a rhythm which – to the accompaniment of singing to the same beat – conjures up "the Serpent" and engulfs them all in feelings of profound security, warmth, solidarity and strength.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Myth, social conflict and contradictions**

The various seemingly-conflicting and irreconcilable messages of the myth, then, revolve around the ambiguity inherent in the identity of the Serpent his or herself. One reading – which is in a sense the "obvious" one – is that the Serpent is "that which controls women" in the sense not of menstrual cyclicity but of male dominance over the female sex. It is therefore a phallic symbol within a context of male sexual dominance and possible rape. The Two Sisters violate male sacred territory (the waterhole and its surroundings), and are sexually punished as a result. This is certainly the message which the women are supposed to understand, and it is also the message which most social anthropologists appear to have accepted at face value. The great Snake, Warner (1957: 387) writes, "is a ritualization of the male section of society, and the Wawilak sisters who by their uncleanness have provoked the snake (men) into swallowing them are the unritualized or profane sections of the tribe, i.e., the women and uninitiated boys." Lévi-Strauss (1968: 91-4) accepts this reading in its entirety, and it is generally the case that the Rainbow Serpent in Aboriginal Australia as a whole has been interpreted as a "penis-symbol" (for references, see Maddock 1978a: 2).

The Serpent in this context is the collectivity of males – it is male sexual solidarity conceptualised as an immense phallus which rises up into the air and falls, rises and falls, punishing the Sisters for their crime by a cosmic act of rape. When the Sisters are trying to hide from the advancing Serpent, the little hut in which they hide becomes symbolic of the vagina. Their efforts to stop the Serpent coming in connote feminine resistance to an unwelcome sexual advance. As the Serpent, disregarding the Sisters' pleas, inserts its head into the aperture of the hut, the act of rape begins. Berndt's (1951: 23) version runs:

*"Frightened, the Wauwalak ran into their hut, and with the baby, sat waiting inside. Slowly Julunggul drew nearer, twisting her body all round the outside of the hut, and put her head into the aperture. Seeing the women and the child, she sprayed them with saliva (called ageiakageiakma) from her throat, to make them very slippery; this covered their bodies, so that their skin became soft and easy for swallowing. Then Julunggul opened her mouth and swallowed first the baby, then the mother. As the elder sister was being swallowed, even when only her head and breasts were protruding from the Snake's mouth, she called out kei'wa! kei'wa! (Go away! Go away!). But the Snake took no notice; she turned to the wirkul (younger sister) and swallowed her too."*

Warner (1957: 387) comments:

"The women are swallowed because of their unclean acts. When the various ceremonial acts are listed, the snake is found to be played almost always by the men and the Wawilak sisters by the women, uninitiated children, and those who are being initiated...

In all instances the sale snake (Bapa Indi, Father Big) is a ritualization of the male section of society... The men's age grade (the group consisting of adult initiated men) is a snake and purifying element, and the sociological women's group is the unclean group. The male snake-group in the act of swallowing the unclean group 'swallows' the initiates into the ritually pure masculine age grade, and at the same time the whole ritual purifies the whole group or tribe."

Lévi-Strauss (1966: 91-4), as noted above, accepts all this at face value. And even Berndt (1951: 21), who obtained a version of the myth which emphasizes the female nature of the Snake, remarks in passing: "The fact that a female snake eventually swallowed the Two Sisters does not affect its role as a Penis symbol." We have, then a penis which is female, and whose characteristic mode of action is not to penetrate but to encircle, enfold and sexually "swallow" human flesh.

It is in fact Berndt (1951: 24-5) who particularly emphasises the sexual symbolism of the act of “swallowing”. Yet it is worth reading his words carefully, for they reveal something of the difficulties and paradoxes involved:

“The fact that the Rock Python, in the version we outline, is female (called by Informants *jindi‘ba:pi*, big/snake, and not *jindi‘ba:pa*, big/father: *ba:pi* and *ba:pa* may perhaps have been confused in Warner’s version) is an important point, for it stresses the aspect of fertility: the female Julunggul is big (as if she were pregnant) from having swallowed the Wauwalak. Aborigines say: there are two Snakes, both Julunggul. One of these smelt the afterbirth blood and swallowed the Wauwalak: this was the female. The other was her husband, who stopped back in the well.’ According to another version, both take part in the swallowing.

Nevertheless the female Julunggul, entering the hut in which the Sisters were crouching, symbolizes a penis, and her entry into the hut ‘is like a penis going into a vagina.’ The whole process of swallowing is interpreted by natives as an act of coitus.”

Since the sisters were crying “Go away! Go away! at the time, the coitus apparently takes the form of rape.

Berndt’s adherence to the “penis-symbol” theory may seem persuasive. Yet the words of his male informants themselves are also interesting, for according to them the Sisters, in being swallowed by the Serpent, are “like a penis being swallowed by a vagina, *only we put it the other way around* (19 39, my emphasis). That is, matters are presented as if a penis were the organ doing the swallowing, even though the process is really “like” the swallowing sexual action of a vagina. The inversion causes problems. A “swallowing penis” is not easy to conceptualize. It seems a contradiction in terms. But paradoxes of this kind are perhaps typical of myths whose functions include mystification as a deliberate policy. Messages are exactly inverted for the consumption of those on the “outside” of the privileged circle within which alone the essential secrets are known. And it is those on the outside who are then left to ponder over the insoluble contradictions which result.

It is worth pursuing the implications of this idea. We know that the Serpent rose up out of its well and reached up straight into the sky having swallowed the Sisters. But was it at that point “big” because it was a penis undergoing erection – or was it, as Berndt’s words suggest, “big” because it was a womb

in the state of pregnancy? No doubt both interpretations are valid – clearly the ambiguities are essential to the structure and significance of the myth. But If this is so, then we might legitimately ask whether the ambiguities themselves serve a sexual-political purpose. Might not the myth’s function be to convey opposite messages to “opposite” sections of society – namely, women and uninitiated males on the one hand, initiated men on the other? If that were the case, the contradictions apparent within the myth would reflect faithfully the essential contradictions buried in the social structure itself.

The possibility to be considered, then, is that the myth is designed to deceive women in the interests of men. On this interpretation, everything superficially-apparent within the myth would be inverted with respect to its “inside” or “secret” meaning – because deception of women and the uninitiated is essential to the maintenance of male ritual rule. Might this not explain the male informant’s comment that the Snake in fact “swallows” people rather as the vagina swallows the penis – “only we put it the other way around”? And might it not also explain the internally self-contradictory motif of Two Sisters who use snake-attracting ritual to rid themselves of a snake, at the same time chanting rain-making spells in order to stop the rain?

Let us follow these implications further. Maddock (1974: 146-52) uses the term “rites of exclusion” to describe a characteristic feature of male ceremonial life in Aboriginal Australia. It is not simply that women are not needed in certain of the ceremonies – what is needed is that their exclusion should on occasion be highlighted and accentuated by bringing women into the closest possible physical contact with secrets which nevertheless are kept securely impenetrable to their minds. Maddock cites the example of certain central Arnhem Land ceremonies during which women are brought during the night within feet of the sacred objects which, under normal circumstances, they would be killed or severely punished for seeing. Fires are lit so that the objects become visible, but the women are told to keep their eyes down. They obey. In other rituals, the women “see” the forbidden objects, but fail to realise that they are seeing them, since the messages they have been given are wholly incorrect. Maddock comments:

Now in playing their part well the women have penetrated the secret area without looking at the secret things before their eyes. Despite



being so close to secret things, they are as far as ever from knowledge of them. Spatial proximity is made to stress what Durkheim... called the 'logical chasm' between sacred and profane. The view to be taken here is that the chasm is the point of the rite, and that the play on proximity drives home the point.

If it is important that women be ignorant of the men's rites, why take them to the secret area to sleep? If they must sleep within the secret area, why take them later to the edge of the ceremonial ground itself? If this forward movement must be made, why wait for the moon to appear to lighten the scene, and why start a fire that the women are required to stimulate so that the scene is lit even more brightly? These features of the rite are paradoxical, for the men risk at each stage that the women will see what they are forbidden absolutely to see. The rite is designed as though to court disaster. The puzzle is solved if we accept that the rite dramatises women's exclusion. The successive stages develop the theme that there are hidden matters that women must not so much as glimpse. How better to teach the lesson than by increasing the visibility of these forbidden things while decreasing their distance from women?"

Maddock adds: "If the original psychology of rites of exclusion were to be reconstructed, it might be found to consist in a deep feeling that it is unsatisfying merely to keep women ignorant, that it is preferable to flaunt in women's faces the things of which they are ignorant." We might suspect that old Aboriginal informants rather enjoyed deceiving anthropologists in much the same way.

### **The alienation of women's reproductive power**

In the light of our previous discussion, a question is suggested. Could it be that in the myth of the Wawilak Sisters, women are having "flaunted in their faces" information which is of vital importance to them – information which, in fact, indicates to them the secret source of their own immense potential power – while all the time they are kept unaware of the significance of what they both see and hear? Could it be that the paradoxes surrounding the Two Sisters' dancing and singing in the Wawilak myth stem from men's political requirement that females be allowed to "know" the Wawilak myth only to the extent that the significance of "the Snake" is precisely inverted in their eyes?

The myth is about women, blood and childbirth. It is a myth connected with male initiation rites. Through such rites, men strive to separate women from

their own “kin” and/or “blood” – in particular, from their own (male) offspring. It will be remembered from Chapter 5 that women – within the terms of the template – assert their sex-strike power and solidarity in part through the inclusion of their own male offspring within this solidarity. The rites we are now examining appear to represent the negation of this. It is worth examining what the mythico-ritual complex taken as a whole involves.

The Berndts (1970: 22) give us the following western Arnhem Land myth. During the performance of a ceremony,

“...a little boy, an orphan, was crying for milk... nobody thought of saying, Don’t make so much noise, don’t upset the whole place or we’ll be drowned!’ Nobody said that. They just kept on dancing and (a girl, the orphan guardian) kept on calling and the orphan kept on crying... and, from underneath, water kept rising upward to where they were dancing and calling and crying. Presently they saw the ground getting soft and wet. They cried out to one another. ‘Why is this happening? Why is the whole place getting soft and wet, so we can’t run away? What could it be?’ The orphan and the girl didn’t hear their frightened cries because they themselves were making so such noise. Then, after a time, even those two saw water coming rushing toward them. People said, What’s happening? What’s eating us here? Oh, we did wrong to make so such noise and to let that orphan go on crying... And now, Ngäljod (the Rainbow Snake) is coming to eat us!’ The water grew wider and deeper as they cried out in fear. She ate them all, those people who were calling out and the orphan who was crying. Water covered them all....”

In another version, a little orphan, about two or three years old, was crying for forbidden food. “All morning, all afternoon, and right through to daybreak he kept on crying. Nobody could stop him. And so that Snake came and ate them..., she ate them all” (Berndt and Berndt 1970: 21).

So it is not just the flow of feminine blood which generates the Serpent: a situation which permits or tolerates children’s crying can also produce the same effect. The significance of an orphan “crying for milk” (Berndt 1970: 22) lies, we may suspect, in the intensity of its yearnings for maternal attachment. It is this which generates the Rainbow.

“The combination of Orphan and Rainbow”, write the Berndts (1970: 21), “appears throughout the whole region” of western Arnhem Land. The myths seem to be warning women not to be over-indulgent towards the crying child; such

indulgence is associated with milk, blood and/or other “wetness”, and (as always where “wetness” is concerned) with the associated experience of being “swallowed up” by the Rainbow or Rainbow Snake. Could it be that anything “wet”, anything unmasculine, anything which threatens to arouse “excessive” maternal feelings – “arouses the Serpent” in a manner felt as threatening to the ritual power of men?

What is it which makes the moral legislators (almost exclusively male) in Aboriginal Australia insist that when women give birth to babies, they should do so far from the centres of public life? What is it which necessitates taboos such as the following, reported by Ryan (1969: 46) from a Queensland (Bulloo River) tribe?

“No woman must see a baby born except her own, and nobody except the mother of the child must be present at the birth. When a woman knows she is to have a baby, she goes away to a place she has picked for that purpose and there she makes a large fire so as to have plenty of ashes to clean herself and the baby when it arrives. After the baby is born she returns to the camp and then it can be seen by all. She must have no help or aid from anyone.”

Here, too, male “childbirth” – the initiation-process through which boys are “reborn” – is a decidedly collective affair, in starkest contrast with what women are supposed to be allowed (Ryan 1969; 14-15).

The above is an extreme case – neither menstruation nor childbirth are shunned in so rigid a way in north east Arnhem Land. Nevertheless, taboos exist and childbirth is far from emphasised as a source of ceremonial power for women. It seems, therefore, that when the Wawilak myth depicts the older woman putting her hand on the abdomen of her pregnant younger sister and massaging her as her labour pains begin, an emphatic point is being made:

*“The two women stopped to rest, for the younger felt the child she was carrying move inside her. She knew her baby would soon be born. ‘Yeppa (sister), I feel near my heart this baby turning’, she said.*

*The older one said, ‘Then let us rest’.*

*They sat down, and the older sister put her hand on the abdomen of the younger sister and felt the child moving inside. She then massaged her younger sister, for she knew her labor pains had commenced. The baby was born there” (Warner 1957: 251).*

These two are women with power and solidarity, in contract with women of today. The mythical sisters bleed and give birth in intimate contact with one another, not in lonely isolation. They are in tune with the immense powers vested in one another's physiologies and blood.

We may remember at this point the corresponding lines from McCarthy's (1960: 426) version of the same myth, quoted in Chapter 7 above. The elder sister made a string-figure of the yams in her sister's hands and then "looked inside the latter's vagina and made another string figure.... The sisters sat down, looking at each other, with their feet out and legs apart, and both menstruated. Each one made a loop of the other one's menstrual blood, after which they put the string loops around their necks."

These women evidently heed – or have heard of – no warnings or taboos with regard to "excessive" physical closeness, either with one another or (to return to the other versions) with their offspring. With fatal predictability, then, they are almost immediately swallowed by the Rainbow or Snake. It seems that it is precisely their impermissible solidarity "at the point of reproduction" which is the essential secret of their magic. *Is it not this kind of power – consummated with storm-unleashing impact as the sisters are swallowed – which the corresponding male structures of "reproductive" ritual solidarity are designed to suppress in women and break up?*

In any event, when women are isolated in the course of bleeding, some awe-inspiring potential, whether real or imagined, is being suppressed. Almost universally throughout Australia, writes Stanner (1965: 216), women's "blood-making and child-giving powers were thought both mysterious and dangerous...." They represented forces which had to be kept down, kept under control. The argument of this thesis will by now be familiar: it is that men's fears of "the Rainbow Serpent" and their fears of women's reproductive solidarity were one and the same. What was feared was that women's "flows" might – in the absence of rules of seclusion or isolation – begin to synchronise, to connect up in a collective "rhythm" or "dance" over which men would have no control. This "rhythm" or "dance" was thought of as "like a mother", "like a rainbow" and "like a snake".

### **The waterhole and the womb**

The image of the two Wawilak Sisters is one of women whose blood-flows combine. The central Australian image of the *alknarin tjä* woman – a topic touched upon in Chapter 7 – is interpretable as a variation on the these. In central Australia as in Arnhem Land, men “menstruate” In imitation of the ritually-potent women of their myths.

During the *alknarin tjä* ceremony observed by Röheim in 1929 (1945: 103), a group of men whose penises had been subincised took blood from their subincision holes and poured it on a piece of string tied round and round a yam stick. This was then placed in a hole in the ground, into which more blood was poured. The hole was called *ilpintira*, meaning “right in the womb”. Concentric circles of charcoal and white down were drawn around the hole, blood being used as adhesive. Two men then crawled around the circle on their knees, sweeping sand away with boughs in their hands. “This represented”, Röheim writes, “the *alknarin tjä* women cleaning themselves after menstruation.”

This, then, is a scene of “sacred” menstruation around a “hole”. Despite the distance between Aranda country and north east Arnhem Land, it lends itself to comparison and contrast with the scene by the waterhole in the Wawilak myth. In both cases, the “hole” or “pool” is a symbolic womb. “The association of... the hole or waterhole with the female genitals is a regular feature of Walbiri men’s thinking”, writes Munn (1973: 199) of a culture closely related to the neighbouring Aranda. Among the Yolngu, too, the sacred waterhole of each clan is a kind of “womb”. “All members of the clan are born from this water hole, and all go back to it at death” (Warner 1957: 16). It will be recalled how, in the Wawilak myth, all the game animals at the moment of menstrual onset refuse to be cooked and dive into Yurlunggur’s “pool”. It is clear that on a symbolic level they are diving into a protective “womb”. We have only to assume that the same applies to the Sisters and their children for the impenetrable mysteries of the myth to begin to clear.

On this assumption, just as the animals escape the fate of being cooked and eaten, so the Sisters escape from the realm of marital availability, which is a state of being “cooked” or “edible” in another sense (“Colloquially a native

woman frequently uses the word ‘eat’ for coitus” – Berndt 1951: 162-3). The “waterhole” which the Sisters come to – and around which they both shed blood and/or give birth – is, then (like the menstrual hut built beside it) a zone of protection against the possibility of being maritally “eaten”. It is, in fact, nothing other than the sisters’ own combined, social “womb”, from which immense blood-streaked “floods” emerge at the very moment of childbirth. If the sisters can be metaphorically “eaten” at all in this context, they can be eaten only by one another, only by their own “blood”, their own offspring, their own kin. Within this protected zone they can be “eaten”, in other words, only “*incestuously*”.

And if all this is so, what else can the Serpent be but the sisters’ own conjoined blood-flows forming a single, magically-protective stream? What else can the female Snake (Berndt’s version) be but the all-embracing, all-engulfing flow of maternal life, love and blood? As in the case of the men’s Serpent, what is being generated is kinship-security or blood-solidarity, which is the very antithesis of marital sex. It is the “self”, not the “other”. The fact that this Serpent is depicted as related inversely to the sisters’ flows (“The Julunggul stirred in discomfort, seeing the streaks of blood on the surface of the water” – Berndt 1951: 22) could then easily be explained in view of the fact that the whole point of the male secret rituals justified by the myth is to secure a political inversion through which the blood’s symbolic protective power is rendered alien – paradox of all paradoxes – to women themselves.

### **Science, ritual and myth**

The Wawilak Sisters myth tells of how women originally possessed the secrets of ritual power, which were then – following the women’s removal from the scene – taken over by men. In Chapter 6, we saw that “primitive matriarchy” myths of this kind have a world-wide distribution, being particularly prominent in those areas of the world in which men attempt to monopolise ritual power through secret initiation rites, in all such myths, the “original” manifestation of ritual power – symbolised by such objects as bullroarers – was experienced by men for some reason as threatening, particularly on account of its seemingly-intrinsic connexion with feminine sexuality and reproductivity. Men therefore speared, tricked, raped and/or

robbed the “snake-women”, “dragons”, “ogresses”, “witches” or other “original” rulers of the world, and seized the power for themselves. Invariably, the “original” rule is depicted as a form of misrule or “chaos”. “The myths constantly reiterate”, as Bamberger (1994: 280) puts it, “that women did not know how to handle power when they had it.” The same author continues: “The myth of matriarchy is but the tool used to keep woman bound to her place.”

But if the preceding arguments have any force, there is more to it than that. The truth seems to be that men in the corresponding rituals collectively “menstruate” and “give birth” as a kind of answer to the threat of synchronised, potent, reproductivity which the very existence of feminine periods seems to pose. By “subincisive menstruation” – to recall Lindenbaum’s (1976: 6-7) apt formulation (describing the Fore of Papua New Guinea) – “a political inversion is accomplished; menstruation is dirty and demeaning for women strengthening and purifying for men”. Women are not allowed to menstruate together or synchronise their conceptions or pregnancies, whereas men do organise such things for themselves. The counterpart to the men’s insistence that they derive solidarity and power from the processes of “menstruation” and “childbirth” is their determination that women should be isolated in such processes and permitted to derive very little power from them at all.

The preceding comments (summarising our findings in Chapter 8) refer primarily to mythico-ritual complexes in South America and Papua New Guinea. It is clear, however, that Australian “secret pseudo-procreation rites” (Hiatt 1971) are “political inversions” of much the same kind. From this perspective, the various components of the myths and rituals of north east Arnhem Land seem intelligibly interrelated, if what were being perpetrated through the rituals (in turn justified by the myths) were a “political inversion”, then we might expect to find that whereas men were permitted to synchronise their “periods” (their ritual cycles) in the present, the image being suppressed in all of this would be that of women synchronising their periods (bleeding in conjunction with one another) in the past. And if part of the justification for men’s carrying on their rituals in the present were the argument that, without

these rituals, women might throw the universe into chaos, we might expect to find the suppressed image of women menstruating collectively preserved in men's secret songs and myths to provide an object-lesson to this day. The Wawilak Sisters myth lends itself to interpretation in this light: before men acquired the "blood" and the "dance" of women, men were without ritual power, and an uncontrolled cosmic disaster (the swallowing" episode) occurred.

\* \* \* \* \*

We may now tie up the ends of the argument. In the light of medical evidence for menstrual synchrony presented in Chapter 7, it appears that menstrual cycles can be in phase with one another or out of phase, depending on the social and cultural circumstances. Whether they are in phase or out of phase depends, it appears, upon the degree of physical and emotional "closeness" culturally-permitted between women. Women who were forced to menstruate and give birth in isolation from one another or who were otherwise denied the possibility of sisterly intimacy might be expected, under these circumstances, to show less synchrony than women permitted to support one another in their reproductive lives. In Aboriginal Australia – or at least in Arnhem Land and much of the Northern Territory of Australia – the myths indicate that what the rituals are suppressing is the solidarity in their reproductive lives of women. If the male rituals were not rituals in which men synchronised artificial menstrual cycles of their own, we would have no reason to suppose that what was being robbed from women in the course of their oppression was a form of power and solidarity of which the most obvious symbol was the menstrual flow. Given the evidence that men in these rituals do synchronise their "menstrual flows", regarding their ability to do so as the condition of their ritual power, it seems that the onus of proof rests with those who wish to argue that the myth of the "logical priority of the feminine" (Gell 1975: 172) is no more than a myth.

If the preceding arguments are valid, they indicate a simple solution to the problem of explaining the genesis of the recurrent formal features of male initiation-ritual in Aboriginal Australia. The value of our hypothesis is that it removes the need to assume that these features were at any stage "invented". Men at no stage had to invent anything at all. In Australia as elsewhere where



such cults prevailed, men were able to use a template for the production of ritual which had always been in place. This template had been set in position with the establishment of culture itself. And in this sense the myths accompanying male “menstruation” and “childbirth” are not arbitrary stories but absolutely accurate collective descriptions of the essential structural facts. They state that the template came from women. While in most respects these myths are pure political ideology in which the world appears upside-down, in this conclusion such native understandings merit recognition as findings inseparable from those of science.

In addition to being radically simplifying, our hypothesis has the advantage that it assumes a degree of conservatism which is consistent with the manner in which traditional peoples themselves conceptualise the origin of their rituals. Informants rarely make the assumption of sudden invention or innovation on the part of men. The “ceremonial acts”, as Strehlow (1970: 111) writes of the Aranda situation, “were believed to be capable of producing their practical effects only if they were performed in their entirety, and without any deviations from the exact patterns that had been instituted by the supernatural beings at the beginning of time.” Shifts, changes and even profound revolutions or counterrevolutions may occur to transform the external embodiments of ritual, but all such changes are inversions, transformations and other operations worked out systematically on the basis of a uniform and shared transformational template which is never discarded, however much its manipulation may take groups and cultures through all the permutations and possibilities it permits.

The myths serve to preserve society’s fund of conscious and subconscious knowledge of this template. And in essence they make a correct evaluation of its source. The template was ready-given, as if by “supernatural beings” at “the beginning of time.” If there is more to say on the subject, it is simply this: that the “patterns that had been instituted by the supernatural beings at the beginning of time” (Strehlow 1970: 111) were those structures of synchrony which evolution had entrusted in the first place to women, who are constructed physiologically and anatomically to sustain those structures, and not men, whose bodies in these respects are inadequate in the extreme. To many in our own culture, such a finding may appear startling. To native

philosophers – such as the Fore informant who explained. “Women’s menstruation has always been present; men’s bleeding, that came later” (Lindenbaum 1978:58) – it has long seemed self-evident.

## Conclusion

Bearing in mind our previous discussion of “male menstruation” (In Chapter 7), we may sum up the resulting situation quite simply. Male rituals of pseudo-“menstruation” and “childbirth” have gender-specific differential effects. The rituals:

1. Conjoin men with one another in “menstruation”, whilst disjoining women;
2. Disjoin women from their own offspring (male) whilst conjoining the male community with these same children;
3. Conjoin men with one another in “childbirth”, whilst disjoining women.

In these three related respects, the combined structures of ritual and avoidance suppress feminine solidarity and power “at the point of reproduction” and transfer this same power – its logical structure and symbols preserved unchanged and intact – to the community of men.

\* \* \* \* \*

Returning, now, to the Wawilak Sisters myth, we can see what an accurate description of reality it is. The myth describes with complete accuracy the rituals which re-enact it. And these rituals are not mere re-enactments of a myth. They are the imposition of its truth. They are the organized solidarity and force of the men, suppressing, inverting and transferring to themselves the reproductive power and solidarity of the feminine sex. On this understanding, myth, ritual and the dynamics of social change are not haphazardly connected but bear a meaningful relationship with one another. The men *know* that they stole women’s “dance” long, long ago in the mythological past – and they know it because such things do not change, *and they are still doing it today*.

Let us check with the ritual re-enactment of the Wawilak myth. We may use as an example the Kunapipi ceremony from Yirrkalla as described by Berndt (1951). Just before the ceremony begins, Julunggul is heard roaring some distance away: she can smell blood. The little boys to be “swallowed” have been smeared with red ochre and arm-blood; the male “snake-group” snatches them away, taking them to the dance ground of the men. This ground’s “inside” name is “the Mother’s uterus.” The male snake-group approaches the women too, but refuses to swallow them. These women are discriminated against – i.e. they are not allowed to be “swallowed”, not allowed to be “made sacred” – on the paradoxical grounds that whereas their sons are “polluted” with “menstrual blood they themselves are not. The men form a “snake” and advance upon the women, who are hiding on the ground under their *ngainmara* mats. Berndt (1951: 42) writes;

“The dancing men symbolize Julunggul surrounding the women (the Wauwalak in their *murlk*); but these are not swallowed, because none are menstruating or have after-birth blood. ‘The men dancing around are smelling, but they smell no odour of blood’”.

Because they are not supposed to be bleeding, the women cannot be “swallowed”; the women’s exclusion from the heart of the ritual stems from this fact. The boys, on the other hand, are blood-covered (they “have been smeared with red ochre and arm blood” – p. 40), and so they are eligible to be “swallowed up.” We have, then, the paradoxical situation that women are not allowed to be menstruating or shedding afterbirth blood in the course of a ritual in which men and boys do just that. The task of acting out the parts of the Wawilak Sisters, from this point on in the ritual, are played (in the main) by *men*.

Yet if anything is truly extraordinary about these rituals, it is the extent to which the men are aware of what they are doing. As noted at the end of Chapter 8, they seem to be “tricking” the women in a conscious way:

“Men have nothing to do, really, except copulate, it belongs to the women. All that belonging to those Wauwelak, the baby, the blood, the yelling, their dancing, all that concerns the women; but every time we have to trick them. Women can’t see what men are doing, although it really is their business, but we can see their side.”

And the women, to some extent, seem to be complying in a process of alienation of their own menstrual power with a certain collective awareness of what is going on. The rituals as Berndt describes them do not give the impression of being ossified, age-old ceremonies repeated by sheer force of habit long after

the significance of the original design has been forgotten or lost. There appears to be taking place a struggle between the sexes to gain or retain possession of a power whose basic nature is collectively understood. The two sides are struggling for “the Snake”, and both sides know – with at least a “tacit knowledge” (Sperber 1975: x-xi) – what this “Snake” really is. Sometimes the women are permitted to gain the upper hand, while more often they concede victory to the men. But the struggle for the snake is a very real, living reality, not just the mindless re-enactment of a drama from the distant half-forgotten past.

Two or three nights before the finale of the Kunapipi at Yirrkalla, after the boys have passed through “the core of their Kunapipi experience” in being swallowed into the uterus of “the Mother”, all the women dance into the pen’s sacred ground. Some of these women are ochred and decorated “to dance for coitus” (Berndt 1951: 50). It is the women themselves who now hold the power, invading the men’s “forbidden” sacred ground and forming into a “snake” of their own. Berndt (p. 50) writes:

“As they dance along they call out, in just the same way as the men in the *djunggawon* do when they enter the main camp. And like those men, the women too symbolize Julunggul moving towards the Wauwilak. Instead of calling it Julunggul or *gundaru* as the men do, the women call it Kitjin. ‘But it is the same Dreaming Snake, even though it is called by a different name: for the women call it Kitjin so that we (the men) won’t know the real meaning.’ They turn away again from the main camp and return to the sacred ground, calling out their sacred term, kitjin! kitjin! and warning the men: ‘Don’t call this name, or watch us (that is, the men cannot look straight at the dancing women: ‘we are frightened of the power they have’) don’t come close and see us, or your bellies will come up like pregnant women.’ And the men sit down quietly, with heads bent, for they may not look directly at the dancing women; the women are mareiin (sacred), just like the dancers in a totemic ceremony.”

It is only once this snake-power of the women themselves has been established that conditions are felt appropriate for the climax of the ceremony – collective and “incestuous” sexual intercourse (re-enacting the “wrong” of the Wawilak sisters) within the dance-ground or symbolic “womb”.

Then, on the morning following the ritual intercourse, the initiates (who by this time have learned most of the kunapipi secrets) are removed in a re-enactment of “childbirth” from an immense “womb” which is in fact a hut

symbolic of that built beside the pool by the Two Sisters in the myth. While the boys are still in the hut, and the women and children are close by (lying down and covered with mats), the male dancers burst on to the scene, dancing in single file and calling out *wa! wa! wa!* This call is used theoretically to “trick” the women into thinking that something else is meant, “but really the cry belongs to the two Wauwalak sisters; for they cried out *kei’wa! kei’wa! kei’wa!* (Go away! Go away! Go away!) when they were frightened of Julunggul coming towards their camp.” That is to say, the cry *kei’wa!* is used only by women, and men cannot use it. As one informant said, “we can’t yell out like women, or we might have to change our business (sacred ritual) for women’s business, and they would take over ours” (Berndt p. 55). “What side is this?”, the women are said to wonder, covered with their mat. “But”, the men continue, “they can’t get the meaning of what we do.” It is then that the same men add the extraordinary explanatory statement quoted more fully at the end of Chapter 8:

“But really we have been stealing what belongs to them (the women), for it is mostly all women’s business; and since it concerns them it belongs to them... all the Dreaming business came out of women – everything; only men take ‘picture’ for that Julunggul. In the beginning we had nothing, because men had been doing nothing, we took these things from the women” (Berndt 1961: 55).

The men all carry spears and dance around the women, prodding them lightly with the shafts, so that they “awaken” and sit up, and look towards the hut in which the boys are hidden. Then:

“They see the young initiates coming out of the bushes (used to form the hut) emerging from the uterus, all covered with red-ochre that symbolizes ‘the spring blood (i.e. ‘fountain-blood’, ‘menstrual blood’) of the Wauwalak.’ And the men call out to the women saying, ‘See those young men covered with the saliva of that Snake’; ‘but really’, and the women are not officially supposed to know this, ‘they are covered with the spring blood.’”

The boys have been newly born, and having witnessed this, the women return to their camp.

The “Snake”, then, is collective power of a very specific kind – of the kind, namely, which can be derived only in solidarity in the processes of menstruation and childbirth. In the Kunapipi ritual, men have this power, and derive it at women’s expense, preventing women from becoming swallowed up in

such power just as they reserve this experience – simulated with elaborate care – for themselves. Yet the fact that women, too, can “dance the Snake”, together with the fact that the male monopoly of power seems to be only precariously upheld, indicates the reality of the potential which is being suppressed. The men know that they are practicing a deception, and that the real Snake – as opposed to the “picture” reproduced by men – is the reproductive solidarity of women themselves. Images of the real Serpent are preserved in myths, which have to be “doctored” only slightly to prevent their being generally understood. The real Serpent is women dancing together, co-ordinating their menstrual cycles and reproductive rhythms. Wherever women “danced”, the Serpent – according to the myths – flowed out from its womb-like waterhole. “A dance ground is a snake’s body”, writes Warner (1957: 274) of the people at Millingimbi, “and it is usually thought of as having the women and children inside it.” The Serpent of which men have “taken a picture” is – and the men seemingly know this – the “flood” of blood and of power which engulfs women and their babies when intimacy and dancing cause their rhythms to conjoin.

The “doctoring” of the Wawilak myth is only very slight – just enough to mislead the uninitiated, and no more. It takes the form of inverting the relationship between the Serpent and the menstrual flow. Maternity and Serpent-power are made to appear opposites, whereas at source they are one and the same.

\* \* \* \* \*

#### **A western Arnhem Land footnote**

We may close this chapter with some evidence from western Arnhem Land which confirms our analysis from another angle. Today, among the Gunwinggu in western Arnhem Land, both the Rainbow Serpent and “the Mother” have the same “inside” (i.e. secret) name, which is *banagaga*. This is also the name for the *ubar* log which is used in the course of initiating young men (Berndt and Berndt 1951: 127). The “Old Woman” or “Mother” in her form as *Ngaljod*, the Rainbow, may also be called *gagag*, meaning “mother’s mother”. Here, these identifications are not kept secret from women, but are widely known. The Serpent is the womb which every woman has. It is not any individual womb but

the womb of women everywhere, and as such is also the womb of the ultimate ancestress. An old Aboriginal woman told the Berndts (1970; 117-18):

“She came underground from ‘Macassar’ to Madabir, near Cooper’s Creek, bringing children inside her – people, who later made more people. She made us talk like people, she gave us understanding. She made our feet, cut fingers for us, made our eyes for seeing with, made our heads, made anger and peace for us, made our belly/intestines, gave us energy to move about – made us people....”

There may be other important ancestral beings:

“But that Snake that we call gagag – we would have died of thirst if she hadn’t urinated, making water for us. Now, if it’s a bit dry, we dig to get water. And she showed us how to dig food and how to eat it, good foods and bitter foods. She told those that she bore first, who became djang (totemic, immortalised), those who prepared the territory for us, and they made us... Those First People, she scraped them with a mussel shell when they were born, until she saw their skins were lighter, and she licked them all over... And now, when we are inside our mothers she gives us breath, and shapes our bodies....

Every woman knows, in other words, that the womb of her own mother belongs to that “Snake” who was the real creatrice of the world.

Even in this region, though, the “political inversion” has been carried some way. A girl at her first menstruation becomes particularly powerful and feared: she must keep away to avoid harming people, living for three days in a menstrual hut with the opposite of water – with, namely, a constantly-burning fire. By staying close to this fire and never going near water she avoids the attention of the Rainbow.

At the end of her seclusion, her hair and body are completely covered with red-ochre. A crescent moon is painted in white clay below her breasts; sometimes a rainbow is painted between them. The moon, according to the people (Berndt and Berndt 1964; 153-4), symbolically “regulates the menstrual flow so that it will not continue indefinitely but will reappear with each moon unless she becomes pregnant”. In later life, whenever a woman is pregnant or menstruating she should do all possible to avoid (a) water or (b) other women’s “flows”. Everything “wet” or which “flows” risks the danger of summoning up “the Serpent”; the way to keep the Snake down is to use fire to dry up the potent, world-threatening blood.

Although in relatively wild form, then, the same pattern reappears here as elsewhere In Aboriginal Australia: while men are allowed to combine their “reproductive. activities to engulf them in the power of the Snake”, women must experience their blood-flows in isolation. Women’s own power is depicted to them as a force from which they should hide in fear:

“When a woman is pregnant.... she should keep well away from pools and streams, for fear of the Rainbow – other women should get water for her. Babies are especially vulnerable to attack from the Rainbow. In rainy weather, or if she goes near water, a mother should paint herself and her baby with yellow ochre or termite mound. And a menstruating woman should not touch or even go close to a pregnant woman or a baby, or walk about in the camps, or go near a waterhole that other people are using. Traditionally, she should stay in seclusion with a fire burning constantly to keep the Rainbow away” (Berndt and Berndt 1970: 180).

The suppression of women’s reproductive solidarity and the suppression of the Rainbow Snake are one and the same.





**Chapter 10: Menstruation and language**

*“It is probable that the origin of language is not a problem that can be solved out of the resources of linguistics alone but that it is essentially a particular case of a much wider problem of the genesis of symbolic behavior...”*

*Edward Sapir,*

*“Language”*

*Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences,*  
*Macmillan, New York, 1933.*

Sapir invites us to approach the origin of language as an aspect of a wider problem – that of “the genesis of symbolic behaviour”. In this thesis, such an approach has been adapted. To the extent that they established their humanity, protohuman females asserted themselves periodically as “on strike” – and to the extent that they did this, they were in effect “speaking” in a language of blood. But theirs was not just a symbolic action narrowly conceived. It was not just a matter of communication as a mode or level of activity separate from others. Women were expressing themselves in a manner which had a sexual dimension, an economic one, a kinship dimension, a ritual dimension, a linguistic one and no doubt others besides. The fact that women could “say ‘No’ (an accomplishment presupposing a reciprocal response on the part of males), meant that they could *in principle* perform symbolic functions on the various different levels which human culture involves. One and the same symbol – that of bleeding and asserting the inviolability of blood – acted on all the different levels simultaneously. Or to be more accurate, the “levels” themselves were not yet differentiated but were telescoped or collapsed onto a single plane. To be on sex-strike was to be asserting the primacy of culture in sexual terms, in economic terms, in kinship terms etc., the implications of the action penetrating unavoidably into the roots of all aspects of social life. From this perspective, separate theories of “origins” – one for each “level” – are not required. Our task, rather, is to account for the origin of a unitary mode of collective self-expression whose emergence included “the origin

of kinship”, “the origin of economics”, “the origin of language” etc. as interrelated dimensions.

The transformational template used in this thesis, then, features menstrual bleeding as (among other things) the first “word” – a word which acted equally and simultaneously in structuring the sexual, economic, kinship, ritual and other dimensions of social life. Using it involved “speaking” in a digital language of “No” and “Yes” – blood and the absence of blood. To the extent that this most basic template for the production of “language” lies also at the root of cultural symbolism more generally, and to the extent that it is shared by all cultural traditions as the structural base-line from which they have evolved (see Chapter 5), the template may be thought of as, in a sense, an “international language”. In this thesis, the world’s traditions of myth, magic and ritualism are interpreted as messages encoded in this language.

### **Blood and the Bogus “Word”**

Before continuing with our analysis of the Wawilak myth, we may introduce the topic of menstruation as language by returning to the Dogon myth of matriarchy touched on in Chapter 6 (see page 182 above).

Throughout the world, traditional attitudes towards menstrual blood are typically ambivalent. For the Dogon of the Western Sudan, such blood is “the evil word that charms a woman and prevents her conceiving....” (Griaule 1965: 151). On the other hand, this blood is termed the “water of God’s bosom”, and is compared with the blood which is shed in circumcision (Griaule, p. 146). A menstruating woman

“...lives on the edge of the village in a round house, symbol of the womb, and only leaves it at night to wash herself. She has to go by a prescribed path to the waters she is allowed to use, for if she goes anywhere else the area would be polluted, the pools would be troubled, and the headwaters of streams would boil” (p. 146).

Menstrual blood is prominent in the myth of matriarchy which was presented in abridged form in Chapter 6. According to this myth:

*The Earth Mother copulated with her own son, an act of incest which caused the world’s first menstrual flow, reddening a fibre skirt which had been given the Earth by the Water Spirit. The blood-*

*covered fibres were put to dry on an anthill. The red colour was so bright that a passer-by, seeing them, exclaimed:*

*“Is it the sun? Is it fire? What an astonishing thing!”*

*A voice from the anthill replied:*

*“It is not the sun, it is not fire, it is something new.”*

*Time passed, and the reddened fibres were stolen and put to human use. A woman got hold of them, put them on, spread terror all around her, and reigned as queen, thanks to this striking adornment which no-one had ever seen before. But in the end, men took the fibres from her, dressed themselves in the royal garment and prohibited its use to women, with a few exceptions. All the young men danced wearing the red fibres, and the women had to content themselves with admiring them.*

*Having gained the fibres, however, the men found their way barred by an immense Serpent which had placed itself across their path. But this Serpent, instead of speaking its own Word, used the language of men and therefore (having defiled itself) died. That was how death appeared in the world. The seers “advised that a large wooden image of the serpent be carved as a substitute for the departed”, but to no avail. While the real serpent had lived, people did not die but simply “went into an ant-hill, symbol of the earth’s sex, and there transformed themselves into a large serpent, and then into the water-spirit”. The death of this Serpent had been an irreparable loss (Griaule, pp. 60-71; 170).*

Here, then, we have a myth which contrasts an “initial situation” with the present state of affairs. In the initial situation, (a) a woman possesses menstrual ritual power, (b) the Serpent speaks its own “word”, (c) people do not die but turn into a Serpent instead. All this is changed when (a) men take the power of menstrual symbolism from womankind, (b) the Serpent defiles itself by speaking “the language of men”, (c) death enters the world. Men’s attempt to produce an artificial Serpent is not successful.

The concept of the Serpent’s “word” is intriguing. The Dogon believe that the first word uttered in the universe “had been pronounced in front of the genitalia of a woman” (Griaule 1965: 138). It had originated in “the deepest and most secret part of the being, namely, the liver” and had eventually – after a journey “along the spiral curves of the breath” – emerged into the outer world from an anthill, “which is to say from a woman’s genitalia.” The second word, contained in the craft of weaving, “emerged from a

mouth, which was also the primordial sex organ, in which the first childbirths took place.” “Issuing from a woman’s sexual part”, explains the ethnographer’s informant (Griaule p. 139), “the Word enters another sexual part, namely the ear.”

The Interesting aspects of all this is the underlying assumption that language-origins are not to be conceptualised in purely cerebral or verbal terms. In the philosophy of Griaule’s Dogon informant, language, sex and symbolism are to be approached in a holistic way, so that mouth and vagina, word and breath, childbirth and speech can be understood as so many different aspects or components of the one symbolic domain.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Language and the Wawilak Sisters**

The Dogon, of course, are not the only people to have attributed the origin of humanity’s naming-power to the human female genitals. The story of the Two Wawilak Sisters, with its many variants, expresses the belief that humanity’s primordial naming potency emanated from the sexual organs of womankind.

Let us re-examine the opening lines of the Wawilak myth. As the story opens, the Two Wawilak Sisters bestow upon the world its first names. They also speak – and by implication invent – the languages of all the dua-territory countries through which they travel. In the myth, the same theme is later taken up by Yurlunggur the Snake, who regrets the absence of a universal human language and institutes a shared pattern of ceremonial symbolism to compensate. This universal symbolism is derived from the symbolic potency of the Two Sisters’ blood.

The Wawilak myth draws a connection between menstrual potency and “naming power”, and between rainbow-snake ritual and the concept of an “international language”. In what follows, these linked motifs will be traced back to the transformational template earlier outlined. What is particularly interesting is that the Yolngu appear not only to use this template on a hidden level in constructing their myths, but to delineate its essential features while telling

the Wawilak myth almost as if the connections it implies were common knowledge.

The Two Sisters are initially depicted as wandering across the sea or across a landscape which until then had been unnamed. No feature of this uniform world was distinguished from anything else. “Everything was different. Animals were like men then!” (Warner 1957: 250). Or, as the Djungkao Sisters variant puts it: “The sea was red at that time and not like it is now. There was no land anywhere... There were no islands then, either” (Warner, p. 338). In this case as with so many origin-myths, then, the assumption is that “in the beginning” distinctions were not properly made. A world-wide variation on the theme is that the sky was originally joined with the earth. Or a mother-figure was originally incestuously conjoined with her son. Alternatively, females had no vaginas and were therefore not properly differentiated from males. Eventually – run such myths – the gods or founding ancestral beings disjoined the poles from one another and thereby created the world we know.

In the Wawilak myth, the differences and polarities which make up the world we know today – the contrasts which enable us to distinguish between “water” and “dry land”, between human and animal life, between daylight and darkness and between male and female – these and all other contrasts were established thanks to the activities of the Two Sisters. Their most potent naming activities had something to do with their flows of menstrual and afterbirth blood. It was this blood which caused the Rainbow Snake Yurlunggur to rise up out of his (or her) waterhole for the first time, and it was this great “wrong” which set up the contrasts and polarities – between wet season and dry, life and death, male and female etc. – of which life is composed today.

Life today is cut up, fragmented, compartmentalised into opposite phases and states of being; there is expressed some regret at the loss of the original state of oneness:

*“The cycle of the seasons with the growth and decay of vegetation, copulation, birth and death of animals as well as man, is all the fault of those two Wawilak sisters. ‘If they hadn’t done wrong in their own country and copulated with Dua Wongar men and then come down to the Liaalaomir country and menstruated and made that snake wild’, this cycle would never have occurred. ‘Everyone and all the plants and animals would have walked about by themselves.’ There*

*would have been no copulation between the sexes and no children and no change. 'After they had done this wrong they made it the law for everyone' (Warner 1957: 385).*

Instead of an undifferentiated universal continuum, and instead of the self-sufficiency and immortality of all beings, there is now complementarity, discontinuity and change. The sea is interspersed with islands, life is interrupted by death. Instead of a continuous dry season, the wet season regularly intervenes. No male is self-sufficient: each needs a female, and every female needs a male. And all of this need, opposition, cyclicity and change is the outcome of a primordial act of incest associated with a flow of menstrual blood.

Let us examine a variation on this theme – the theme of discontinuity being generated by the menstrual flow. The opening sections of the Wawilak myth display a logic which is clarified in this variant from the Port Keats region to the west:

*“Ngun’bal:in wandered about in Madje’lindi at the time of the new moon. Suddenly she got pains and began to bleed from her vagina. She looked down and was frightened by all the blood which flowed. No one had had menstruation before. She made herself a shade from a tree which she first created. This first camping place of hers lay exactly on the boundary between two clan territories – Madje’lindi with its watery creeks on the one hand, and the dry, hilly country of Jendalar on the other.*

*While she sat there on the Madje’lindi side of her shade, she saw the snake Koidar (a group of males) who came up to the Jendalar side, wishing to have intercourse with her. But Ngun’bal:in explained that she was menstruating and must therefore hide from men. When the Koidar heard this, they began their wanderings in Jendalar; Ngun’bal:in began her wanderings in Madje’lindi.*

*When Ngun’bal:in saw that her bleeding stopped, she began to wander. But then she began to bleed again, and had to camp at a new place. Here she made a waterhole of the blood. But when the bleeding stopped, she went on. In this way she wandered and made camps until she had formed and named all of Madje’lindi (Falkenberg 1952: 88-9).*

Notice that Ngun’bal:in “forms and names” the landscape by alternating between blood and no blood.

The myth concludes with Ngun’bal:in reaching the end of her journey, whereupon a flash of light changes a male ancestral being into a rock, while she herself

turns into a snake – the snake known as Ngun’bal:in (a variety which has a reddish tail associated with blood and menstruation). Women today should not walk the path which Ngun’bal:in followed – so it is said – for if they do, they will come across the “bad smelling” waterholes which she created, and will begin to menstruate.

It is not difficult to appreciate why the menstrual flow can be identified with discontinuity – with a regular alternation between opposite phases or states. First the blood does not flow. Then it flows. Then the flow ceases. Then it appears again:

wet / dry / wet / dry / wet / dry / wet / dry / wet /....

and so on. Translating this temporal alternation into spatial terms, it is easy to appreciate why this should seem “like” a sea (particularly a “red” sea) of “wetness” interspersed with islands which are “dry” – or, alternatively, a dry landscape interspersed with waterholes.

The Ngun’bal:in myth seems to be giving expression to the principle that a basic – perhaps the basic – dichotomy in the universe is the contract between “the wet” and “the dry”. This contrast divides the new moon (“wet” – the time of Ngun’bal:in’s menstrual flow) from the full moon (“dry”), the shade of a tree (“wet” – the place of menstruation) from the glare of sunlight (“dry”), Madje’lindi clan territory (described as “wet”) from Jendalar (“dry”), the female snake (its habitat “wet”) from the male one (“dry”), and rest or immobility (“wet” – each flow halts the movement of the snake) from movement (“dry”). It is also made clear that each “flow” precludes sexual relations between members of neighbouring clans; marital relations, therefore, must be classed with the full moon, with sunlight and with the “dry” seasons or phases of life, in contrast with kinship (“blood”) relations, which (if consistency is to be preserved) must be classified along with the “dark” and the “wet” phases. The establishment of the above polarities seems to constitute the essence of Ngun’bal:in’s naming power, which was given to her with the first appearance in the universe of menstrual blood.

Ngun’bal:in, then, introduces discontinuity into the world by bleeding in a halting, periodic, on/off way;



‘In this way she wandered and made camps until she had formed and named all of Madje’lindi’ (Falkenberg 1962: 89).

The link with “naming” seems logical for, as Lévi-Strauss (1981: 550; cf. 1970:53-5) points out, “to name is to classify, and therefore to introduce discontinuity.”

The fear that women might rediscover their menstrual power is expressed in the myth’s conclusion, which warns contemporary women against approaching Ngun’bal’in’s pools. We should note men’s assumption that women could easily synchronise their flows if they wanted to: were a group of women to approach one of the “bad-smelling” pools, all their flows would simultaneously begin. The taboo against this seems to be one more example of men’s widespread fear lest contemporary women should become “powerful” through combining their flows to form a “snake”.

#### The myth of Mutjingga

The fear that women’s reproductive collectivity would involve them in a too-powerful “snake” finds expression in another myth from the same group – the Murinbata. Although it is not explicitly about language or naming-power, its analysis will enable us to refine our understanding of this theme in the Wawilak myth.

The myth – touched on briefly in Chapter 7 (see above, pp. 232-34) – is the “basic myth” of the Murinbata, and is very like that of the Wawilak Sisters. Perhaps even more clearly, however, it indicates the nature of the “Snake” as an immense “womb”.

The story concerns an ancestral being called Mutjingga. Stanner (1966: 39n) writes:

“Mutjingga may be represented as a grotesque figure only in part recognisable as human. One drawing shows her as half-woman, half snake.”

Another name for this figure is *kale neki*, “the mother of us all” (Stanner, p. 56). Like the Wawilak Sisters myth, the story of Mutjingga is re-enacted in rituals in which boys, in being initiated, are “swallowed alive”. It is men who

organise this ritual “swallowing”, while pointing to the “crime” of old Mutjingga, who, according to the myth, did the very same thing until men killed her and took over in the past.

### **Mutjingga**

At the beginning of time, an Old Woman called Mutjingga was left in charge of ten children while the people went hunting and gathering honey. ‘Go and bathe in that water’, she said to her charges, ‘and then come here and dry in the sun.’ The children washed, as they were told, and then lay close to Mutjingga, wanting to sleep. The woman took one child by the arm. ‘Let me look for lice in your hair’, she said. The child agreed, and Mutjingga swallowed it, letting the child go entirely inside her own body. Then she took a second child and swallowed that one, too. One after another, she took the children, until she had swallowed all ten of them completely, taking them right into her womb.

A man and his wife, thirsty for water, came back early to the camp. ‘I see no children here’, said the woman. ‘Where are they? What did she do with them? She swallowed them! There are no children. Come quickly!’ She saw Mutjingga’s tracks. ‘Ah, yes, she went that way.’ Then, pointing to the water, she called to her husband: ‘You run quickly the short way.’ Both ran along different routes, in the direction in which the water flowed, calling out in alarm.

Hearing the cries, all the people came running. They gathered spears and womerahs and set off. Among them was a mature man called Left Hand, calling: ‘That way, that way.’

Five men ran one way, five another, to come together later at a shallow water-crossing. There was no one there. The water was clear. They ran again as before, and again met. Still the clear water gave no sign. Again they ran and met to no avail, finding clear water only.

The river now went crookedly. The people thought the Old Woman might have crawled along it. The people again divided and met, but this time they saw that the water was not clear. Ah! The murk stirred up by her dragging fingernails could be seen! Again they divided and ran, meeting to search again. Ah! The water was more clouded still. They divided and ran along the sand to Manawarar. Ah! Here the water was heavily clouded. They were overtaking her. Good!

Now the people came together and looked. No one! They waited and waited... Then they saw big eyes coming – and out came the Old Woman, throwing water from each side! Mutjingga was here!

She did not notice the men, and kept coming closer. Left Hand threw his spear. Du! It pierced both her legs. Yakai! The Old Woman cried, ‘From whom is this?’ Left Hand answered: ‘From yourself! Yours was the fault!’

Right Hand jumped into the water and broke the old woman's neck with his club. There, it was done! The men looked. Her belly was moving! Then, slowly, holding her up, they cut her open with a knife of stone. There, in her womb, the children were alive! They had not gone where the excrement was.

Left Hand and Right Hand now pulled the children from the womb one by one, washed them and dried them in the smoke of a fire. Then they painted the children with ochre and put on their foreheads the kutaral – a band of opossum hair – which is the mark of the initiated. Then the two men returned the children to their mothers.

'They are alive! They are alive!' cried the mothers on seeing their children. 'See, the men are bringing them now!' they said, and hit their own heads so that the blood flowed.

Because Mutjingga died, men now have only the bullroarer, which was made in order to take her place" (Stanner 1966: 40-43).

The similarities between this and the Wawilak myth are striking. Here, the "waterhole" of the Wawilak Sisters is replaced by a river, which contains a "Serpent-woman" if not an actual serpent. The "blood-streaked" waters of the first myth are replaced by the "murky" waters thrown up by the old snake woman. The up/down/up/down alternations of Julunggul or Yurlunggur are replaced by side-to-side (i.e. zigzagging) movements along the "crooked" river; these movements are accompanied and emphasised by the conjoining/disjoining alternating movements of Mutjingga's pursuers. The comparable rhythm in the Wawilak myth is linked with the successive "swallowings" and "regurgitations" of the victims, which are also alternations between "the wet" and "the dry" – Mutjingga's pursuers conjoin only by the water, separating again as they leave the river's banks. As in the Wawilak myth, the victims are swallowed in a watery element, regurgitated in the dry (the children following their rescue are dried "in the smoke of a fire"). In both myths, the victims are not eaten with the mouth or teeth (no chewing is involved) but apparently with a mouth which resembles the entrance to a womb, which ejects human flesh when it is opened up. Hiatt (1975b: 156) notes that all such "swallowing and regurgitation myths" in Aboriginal Australia (and these form a very important class of myths, all tied in with secret male initiation ritual) depend upon "a perceived similarity between the upper alimentary tract and the female generative organs, that is, a common ability to admit and expel." Both the throat and the vagina

or uterus. In other words, can “swallow” human flesh (as in eating or sexual intercourse) and “regurgitate” it (as in vomiting or childbirth).

At the end of the myth of Mutjingga, the women “hit their own heads so that the blood flowed”. In both myths, therefore, women lose blood, and although in the story of Mutjingga this is not explicitly said to connote menstruation, a connection can be inferred. Among the Murinbata as among the Yolngu, women collectively cut their heads when mourning their dead. In the Yolngu case, at least,

“... the red ochre painted on the body during mortuary ceremonies is said to be (or to signify) the menstrual blood of female clan ancestors. This suggests that the symbolic significance of women cutting their heads in mourning ... lies partly in its analogy with menstrual blood and female menstruation” (Morphy 1977: 318).

In both myths, a swallowing organ branded as “bad” is “killed” (this motif is particularly prominent in Berndt’s version of the Wawilak myth) and has to be replaced by a male-controlled replica or substitute. We will return to this theme later in this chapter.

Here, then, the all-swallowing “Snake” is definitely female – a snake-woman. There is no suggestion of penis-symbolism whatsoever, in a myth whose structure and ritual functions are strikingly similar to those of the Wawilak story. Admittedly, in addition to Mutjingga, Kunmanggur the Rainbow Serpent is a very important figure, being the ultimate ancestor in the mythology of the Murinbata. Yet even this being’s status as a “penis-symbol” is by no means secure. “His” name – Kunmanggur – was also the name of at least one living woman in the community studied by Stanner (1966: 81). Moreover:

“There was a hint in some statements that The Oldest One may not have been Kunmanggur but someone else – a woman – or, if it were Kunmanggur, then ‘he’ may have been bisexual... Even those who asserted the maleness of Kunmanggur said that he had large breasts, like a woman’s” (Stanner 1966: 96).

In the basic myth concerning him, Kunmanggur wanders over the landscape, *bleeding*.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **The bullroarer-complex**

We now come to the main subject of this chapter. The Murinbata say that the roar of the bullroarer is the voice of Mutjingga. But does she “speak” from her mouth, or from her womb? And if her “voice” is an Australian variant of the Dogon “Word” – first “pronounced in front of the genitalia of a woman” – what exactly is the nature of this “Word”?

All over Aboriginal Australia, the basic polarities of which the social and natural universe is composed were thought to be upheld and sustained by means of rituals carried on to the accompaniment of the “voice” of the ancestral spirits. Over immense areas of Australia, this “voice” was thought to be heard in the sound of the bullroarer. According to a number of myths explaining “the origin of the bullroarer, its first sounding was accompanied by the flowing of blood. The accompanying rituals consistently emphasise the linkage between blood-flow and roaring sound. The bullroarers are heard when men ritually bleed. It is almost – we might speculate – as if the pulsating roar were on some level meant to simulate and amplify the heartbeat or blood-pulse itself. In any event, we may recall how, in the Murngin Djungguan ritual – which re-enacts the Wawilak myth – the men donate arm-blood to the accompaniment of rhythmic singing to a beat which keeps pace with that of the blood-flow itself, while men who donate blood for the first time do so as the trumpet Yurlunggur – symbolic of the Serpent – is blown over their bodies (Warner 1957: 274-6). We may also note how in western Arnhem Land, the “spirit of the Mother” is present while the beating of the ubar drum – symbolic of the “Sacred Uterus” – is heard. It is while this drum is beating that everything in the universe is named. And in Berndt’s version of the myth of the Two Wawilak Sisters, the men who take over the “blood” of the Sisters (saying, “we have to make this Snake, because we killed him”), let flow their own “afterbirth blood and menstrual blood” and “reproduce the voice of Julunggul” with a bullroarer made from the wood of a tree which had been split by the snake’s lightning.

An interpretation in terms of our template would run as follows. The bullroarer produces a sound which replicates the word “No” in which culture was born. This “No” is negativity on the sexual plane, temporarily and periodically rupturing all relations of marital intimacy. In doing this, it periodically

restores the supremacy of culture over sex; it restores the situation to which Lévi-Strauss (1973: 412) refers when he comments that “the power of culture disjoins the sexes, to the detriment of nature which prescribes their union; temporarily at least, family links are broken in order to allow human society to be formed.” Another way of saying this would be to note that culture depends on solidarity, and that there is always a conflict or tension between wider networks of kinship-solidarity on the one hand, and the marital “couple” on the other. The primacy of the pair-bond has to be overruled at least temporarily if culture’s supremacy is to be secured.

The bullroarer, as it is used in male initiation rites, periodically re establishes cultural solidarity in its “pure” or “extreme” logical forms, but on male terms. As Lévi-Strauss (1973: 418) notes, “in almost every region where the bullroarer exists, its function is to cause the disjunction of the female sex...”, removing women from the society of men. From the standpoint of the transformational template used here, this is a precise mirror-image of the symbolic function of menstrual blood, which is to cause the disjunction of the male sex, removing men as legitimate marital partners from the society of women. menstrual solidarity, within the terms of our template periodically re establishes cultural solidarity in its “pure” or “extreme” logical form – on female terms.

Our interest here is to examine whether bullroarer symbolism can usefully be interpreted in these terms. More specifically, is the bullroarer conceptualised in native cultures as functionally equivalent to menstrual blood – except that it is inverted politically, so that it is men who “drive away” women with it rather than the other way around?

### **The bullroarer as phallic symbol**

At first sight, the hypothesis seems improbable. The immediately obvious interpretation of the bullroarer complex cross-culturally (see Dundee 1976 for an excellent survey and analysis) is that it is a “phallic cult”. This would fit in with the Lévi-Straussian view that, since its inception, culture has been generated under the power of men (“political authority, or simply social authority, always belongs to men” – Lévi-Strauss 1969: 119). From the inception

of culture, if marital partners were to be disjoined, it was men who in effect had to say “No” to women, driving away female society with symbols of phallic power.

Lévi-Strauss (1973: 411) describes the bullroarer as a “figurative penis”, citing as his authority, in this respect the Melanesian and Australian studies of J. Van Baal (1963). Van Baal has certainly been the most prominent advocate of the phallic interpretation of the bullroarer-cult. He suggests that since the bullroarer symbolises the initiated status and ritual power of men, and since male power is always and everywhere symbolised by the penis, there cannot be any argument on this score (“the bullroarer is so evidently predestined to become a phallic symbol as to inspire the present author with the uncomfortable feeling that he is forcing an open door with his argument” – p. 203).

Let us evaluate this interpretation. We will have to concede at the outset at least a part of Van Baal’s argument. If men have power over women, then invariably the symbols of this power – whatever the precise form taken by these symbols – will be “penis-symbols”. This is admittedly the case: male power is symbolised by the phallus, and any “badge” or “emblem” of male supremacy must be associated with the penis by that anatomically-given fact alone.

But let us consider an extreme theoretical possibility, Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that in a given culture It was reported that men wore on their bodies artificial breasts and vaginas to indicate their masculine status and ritual power. Would we be satisfied if the ethnographer suggested by way of explanation that the adornments were in fact “phallus-symbols”?

Again, a concession can be made. We might perhaps be persuaded that the artificial breasts and vaginas in this particular instance had phallic associations on account of their attachment to men. But then, alongside this all-too-general and unenlightening “phallus-symbol” interpretation, an additional explanation would be required to answer the really interesting question; why should men choose the female reproductive organs rather than

their own to provide the specific models upon which their “phallus-symbols” were formed?

Similar considerations would apply to the interpretation of any myths associated with the reported custom. If these claimed that men’s breast-like and vagina-like adornments were originally derived from women, it would not necessarily preclude the “penis-symbol” interpretation. But we would still want to know why men believed that their unusually-shaped “penises” were originally the characteristic property of the female sex – characteristics which men had to transfer to themselves by artificial means. Why – in other words – the apparent inversion of gender-specific anatomical imagery?

That all this is ethnographically feasible can easily be shown: among the Amazonian Mehinaku – who use their bullroarers to intimidate women – an initiated man wears an array of ornaments of very much the kind just discussed:

“His earrings are conferred in a ritual in which he ‘menstruates’. The feathers for his earrings were in mythic times taken from the vagina of the Sun’s wife. And his prominent headdress is symbolically associated with a woman’s labia. Fully adorned, the Mehinaku male is an icon of female sexual anatomy” (Gregor 1985: 193)

We need to know: Why? Why should “penis symbols” – if this is what they are – look like this?

Now, considerations of such a kind apply with particular force to the arguments put forward by Van Baal.

Referring to the Kiwai (Papua New Guinea), Van Baal (1963: 205) notes, here as elsewhere, the bullroarer’s association with a serpent. He asserts: “the Snake is a phallic symbol”; the “phallic” associations of the bullroarer are thereby said to be confirmed. The author continues:

“Apart from these interesting associations the actual myth of origin of the bullroarer is disappointingly trivial. Its discovery was made by a woman. When cutting a tree a chip of wood flew off with a buzzing sound. She secured a splinter and that night Maigidibu revealed to her in a dream that she should give it to her husband, and gave her the necessary instructions on his behalf”.



Van Baal comments:

“Though by no means uncommon, it certainly is remarkable that the origin of the bull-roarer is attributed to a woman. We will refrain from speculations upon its deeper meaning...” (p. 205).

The same reticence is shown when Van Baal comes to another puzzle. In masculine ideology, a virile phallus should surely be seen as an irresistible attraction to women, not a repellent. Why, then, if the bullroarer is simply a symbolic “penis”, should its sound induce or connote not sexual intercourse (as might have been expected) – but women’s sudden evacuation of the vicinity?

Van Baal’s own response to this challenge seems disappointing. “We will not enter a discussion”, he writes (p. 202), “of the interesting problem why it is always the community of males which sets out to frighten the community of females by quasi-supernatural means.” On the basis of Van Baal’s theory, then, we are simply left with a mental picture of a “penis” which (a) in myths belongs “originally” to women and (b) does not function as a penis at all – but, on the contrary, has the immediate effect of disjoining all marital couples.

Turning to Aboriginal Australia, Van Baal notes the connection, in northeastern Arnhem Land, between the bullroarer and Julunggul of the Wawilak Sisters myth. Julunggul the Snake, we are informed, “is a male symbol” (p. 209). This confirms that the bullroarer is phallic. Myth-versions in which Julunggul is female are not mentioned; nor is there an explanation as to how or why a “penis” should be conceptualised as characteristically a “swallowing” and “regurgitating” sexual organ. These aspects of the mythico-ritual complex are not discussed.

Noting various details which seem not to fit in with the “phallus-symbolism” these, Van Baal begins to adjust as necessary his definitions of the relevant terms – to the point at which, eventually, women themselves become “penis- symbols”. Hence in discussing the Djungkao Sisters, Van Baal comments that the symbolism of these Sisters is overwhelmingly phallic: not only their ritual objects, but also their clitorises are phallic; “the women, too, are living phallic symbols” (p. 209). So not only is the bullroarer a “phallus”; the

ancestral, ritually potent women of the associated myths can be interpreted as “phalluses”. too.

“Even more interesting”, continues Van Baal, having dealt with the Murngin as his first Australian Aboriginal case, “is our second case, that of the Aranda” (p. 209). Here, the author comes close, at first, to admitting defeat:

“... definitely obscure is the identity of bull-roarer and phallus. A slight indication – but certainly no more than a very slight one – may be found in the peculiar shape of the nurtunja, the sacred object worn in ritual by performers who represent mythical ancestors. The nurtunja is described as a sacred pole....” (pp. 209-10).

A pole is elongated and in that respect penis-like. Van Baal admits: “All this, however, does not make a phallic cult, unless it appears that these objects are meant to represent a phallus.” We might add that even supposing “these objects” were “meant to represent a phallus”, little encouragement would be afforded to Van Baal’s case. The nurtunja poles are not bullroarers and so are of little relevance to the discussion.

Van Baal concedes, then, that the ethnography of the Aranda presents difficulties for his interpretation. He goes on to suggest that “the answer” is given in the elaborate myth of the Atjilpa-ancestors – a myth explaining the origin of the two bullroarers (*tjuringa*) used in the Engwura initiation ceremony and bound together to form a single ritual object. Van Baal, as Dundee (1976: 224) has effectively noted, “insists upon calling this object a phallus, despite the fact that the native language term for the object is *ambilia ekura*, amnion, womb!” “But there is more”, writes Van Baal, having described this “phallus”. Recounting the myth of origin of this object, he tells of how the great Achilpa headman of ancestral times – a pregnant, womb-possessing male – takes two pairs of *tjuringa*,

“and discarding the upper ones, changes the lower *tjuringa*. which are female, into male *tjuringa*. From these changed *tjuringa* the *Twanyirrika* originate, the two initiation-demons whose voice is the bull-roarer” (Van Baal 1963: 210-11).

So it turns out that even in Van Baal’s best-case myth, the logic of “political inversion” is impossible to ignore. Indeed, Van Baal – without allowing it to modify his basic position – finally explains:

“The real secret of the rites is the symbolic inversion of the male genital. The penis is called a womb ...” (p. 211).

\* \* \* \* \*

### **The Murinbata rite of Punj**

At the beginning of this chapter, we examined the Murinbata myth of Mutjingga. It is now proposed to discuss its ritual re-enactment in a bullroarer ceremony. This will help us towards an understanding of bullroarer ritual as something more complex and interesting than a display of phallic symbolism in any simple sense.

The myth of Mutjingga is re-enacted in the rite of *Karwadi* (this is the “secret” name; the public one is *punj*). This is described as “the bullroarer ceremony” of the Murinbata (Stanner 1966: 3). The Karwadi ceremony, writes Stanner (p. 5),

“...is extremely sacred and secret. It centres on the showing and presentation of bullroarers to young men who have been circumcised some years before. The bullroarers (*ngawuru*) have the higher degree of sacredness which we may call sacrosanctity. The word Karwadi is the secret name of a provenant spirit also described as The Mother of All or as The Old Woman. The doctrine about her is neither clear nor well-evolved, but the attitude towards her may well be called one of holy dread. She is thought to exercise a rather frightening care of men. The bullroarer is her emblem; the sound it makes when swung is the sign of her real presence; and the emblem is at the same time a vehicle on which complex symbolical conceptions of her are projected.”

The ceremony witnessed by Stanner seems to represent a particular variant of ceremonies generated by a similar logic – localised versions whose precise forms have long since been forgotten – practised in the region since time immemorial.

“In and around Murinbata territory”, writes Stanner (p. 142), “I came unexpectedly on a number of stone structures...” Hundreds of stones, “in some cases thousands”, had been arranged in circles, lines and other patterns over the landscape. No living Aborigines were sure as to their precise significance or ritual function in the past, but “some were asserted most positively to be connected with Kunmanggur, The Rainbow Serpent....” The implication is that at

least some of these stone circles and other arrangements may have been used to provide the theatrical props or dance-ground settings for initiation rituals whose precise forms have long since been forgotten.

In Stanner's account, the celebrants of *Punj/Karwadi* do not use stone circles. But they do "cluster in a shallow, circular hole in the sacrosanct place where the real presence of the Mother is supposed to manifest itself" (p. 44). They "cluster in a compact circle":

"Everyone faces towards the centre. The formation is one in which physical association is intimate. The men sit flank to flank, with knees often crossing, and with arms often flung around the shoulders of neighbours ...."

Stanner (p. 84) adds that the "physical gestures of touching, fondling and embracing between the celebrants" are a significant part of the rite. The participants are temporarily back in the maternal womb – with its warmth, Its blood and its love; but the youths to be initiated are presented with this idea in a negative and frightening form: they are "told that they will be swallowed alive by Karwadi and then vomited up" (p. 7).

It is worth dwelling on this point. In accordance with the pattern common to all such rites of initiation, it is only those on the "inside" of the secret who know that to be "swallowed" in this way is not a disaster but, on the contrary, a temporary experience of a depth of intimacy and solidarity which ordinary life normally excludes. The uninitiated – or the yet-to-be-initiated – are told the usual stories about a monster or an ogress who will, unless they are careful, simply eat them up. As the rite gets under way, the youths' escort commands his charges to stand up in front of men – who stand to them in the relationship of "potential wives' brothers" — who are holding containers of blood. The youths "are allowed to suppose that it is the blood of the Mother" (p. 7). The "potential wives' brothers" smear the youths. They

"smear them from head to foot with the blood: eyes, ears, nostrils, lips and nose are all liberally covered...."

While this is being done, continues Stanner (p. 7), "the assembled men break into a rhythmic chorus of sound, somewhat reminiscent of birdsong and animal noise." The association of menstruation and other blood-shedding with loud

noises (not necessarily those of the bullroarer) is cross-culturally a persistent theme; it will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 14.

The blood is allowed to dry out and cake on the youths' bodies as they stand in the heat and smoke of a fire. This is repeated on the following day. The youths are again anointed with blood – the “blood of The Mother” – and again the cries reminiscent of birdsong and animal noise are heard. But this time, as the blood-anointing starts,

“... men in hiding nearby begin to sound bullroarers. The chorus of cries is maintained and, as the roar comes ever nearer, many of the older men, with shouts of well-simulated fear, cry ‘Karwadi! Karwadi! The Old Woman is calling’” (p. 8).

Stanner mentions at this point: “One man told me that during the bleeding he used to feel weak with fear of the unknown, and that his emotional stress was nearly unbearable when the bullroarers began to sound.” At the very moment when the youths fear most that they will be “swallowed alive”, however, the real secret becomes known to them. They gain possession of their bullroarers only once having passed through this barrier of belief and fear. The voice or body of the “Mother” – the bullroarer – is transformed, in accordance with the usual logic of political inversion, into the badge of male power, and hence into a penis-symbol:

“The secret of the supposed voice of Karwadi is made known when the men with the bullroarers spring suddenly to view. The youths then learn also the true source of the blood. At this point the *nanggun* [potential wives' brothers'] come forward, each with a new-made bullroarer as a gift of right and duty. Each man rubs a bullroarer on the breast and across the loins of the initiate marked with his, the gift-giver's, blood and then thrusts it between the youth's thighs so that it stands up like an erect penis” (p. 8).

After this, the youths may return to the camp, although they “may not go near their mothers' fires” (p. 9). The “highest rite of the Murinbata” is at an end.

According to Stanner (pp. 54, 50), the Murinbata regard the myth of Mutjingga as “a sorrowful story”, and the rite, the “re-enactment of the primordial tragedy.” Mutjingga, they say, was once “truly human”; “The loss to man”, say the Murinbata (p. 43), “was irreparable”. Her “crime” was not that she “swallowed” the ten children alive – it was simply that she did not do it in quite the way men do it today. She did not do it when the youths had come of

age, but swallowed them when they were still small (Mutjingga ‘s act was wrong, but apparently only in that it was premature: she should have waited until the children were grown and ready to become *Kadu Punj*; swallowing them would then have been right” – p. 43). Men feel responsible for The Mother’s death, and seem to be haunted with a certain measure of remorse. They have tried to make amends through the reproduction of her symbolic presence by artificial means. But the imitations of her “voice” are looked upon as somehow inadequate to evoke her presence as it had once been. “Because she died”, say the Murinbata (p. 43), “men now have only the bullroarer, which was made in order to take her place i.e. stand for her and ... to be her emblem, symbol and sign.”

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### **Myths of the origin of the bullroarer**

It is becoming apparent that the “penis-symbol” theory of the bullroarer complex touches on only a fragment of its content and meaning. Taken as a whole, the evidence indicates (a) that the bullroarer is intended as a disjoiner rather than a consummator of marital relations and (b) that the model for this disjoiner is the menstrual flow.

Clearly, there are two polar-opposite aspects of bullroarer symbolism, one of which is certainly “phallic”, and this may be reflected in a division of the bullroarers into two. Among the Wik-Mungkan of Cape York, for example, there is a “female” bullroarer whose name is “in-the-vulva-hidden” or “inside-the-vulva”, and a “male” one, whose name is (less logically, perhaps) “in-the-phallus- hidden” or “inside-the-penis” (McConnel 1935: 70).

The bullroarers of the bonefish clan in this tribe are associated in a myth with two youths who, at the end of an initiation ceremony, break taboos by eating bats (“flying-foxes”) and sharing their food with girls. As a punishment, bats carry off the youths, and the mature girls involved in the crime

“are swept by the tide down the river on to a rock, where most of them go down”, but two find a bullroarer and swing it with great interest, singing as they swing What is this swinging into the clouds that is forbidden? That we two downstream arm swinging?’ Then with the words ‘it belongs to us women really, we have found it! But no matter! We leave it for the men! It is they who will

always use it!’ they place it in the crack of a bloodwood tree and ‘go down’ under the water  
.... The bullroarer is now taboo to women” (McConnel 1935: 68-9).

McConnel (193 83) writes that women’s bequeathing of the bullroarer to men in the beginning of time “is subtly symbolic of the yielding up by woman of herself to man, as also of man’s interest in what ‘belongs to her’”.

It is also interesting that although menstrual blood and the bullroarer among the Wik-Mungkan are distinct phenomena, they are nevertheless conceptualised as comparable kinds of things. “Menstruation is a sign of the attainment of puberty in girls”, as McConnel (1936, 2: 86) puts it, “as is also the bullroarer, the symbol of sex-awakening, in Wikmunkan society.” In one myth, the Rainbow Serpent *pulwaiya* shines “blood-red light on trees and ground”, and “puts menstrual blood at the foot of a bloodwood tree, i.e. makes an *auwa* (totemic increase-site) for menstrual blood, in order that women should always have this blood” (McConnel 1936: 2: 103). In the above myth, it will be recalled, the two women placed the bullroarer in the crack of a bloodwood tree. This kind of tree, then, is the home or source of both menstrual blood and the bullroarer.

Earlier in this chapter, we examined the rite of *punj* which re-enacts the myth of Mutjingga, and noted the bullroarer’s use to replicate the “voice” of the snake-woman who swallowed ten children alive. The mythological belief that the sound of the bullroarer is the Snake’s or Mother’s “voice” – heard by novices at the moment of “bleeding” and at the height of their fear – is paralleled by other myths, both of the Murinbata themselves and of other Aboriginal peoples. One Murinbata myth runs as follows:

“Kudapun, the apostle bird, who was coeval with Mutjingga (in spite of her supposed humanness), shaped the first bull-roarer after her death. He found out that it gave its roar when swung, but the string broke and it fell into deep water. Two young women at fishing brought it ashore in a net. They were mystified by it, and thought it a bad and dangerous thing. Men took them into the bush. ... and killed them by cutting their necks. Thus, true men became possessed of the bullroarer for the first time and preserved it” (Stanner 1966: 43n).

This myth, comments Stanner, “justifies the exclusion of women from the secret.”

A myth from the other side of the continent – from New South Wales – concerns “the nightjar-woman” who was in charge of initiating women.

Men, she devoured in her “magical water-trough”. She was killed, whereupon

“Her voice went into all the trees round which she was chased, and it is heard in the small bullroarer, the ‘munibaar’ at the initiation ceremonies. When the old women hear the small bullroarer they say, ‘That is our playmate calling to us’” (Mathews. quoted in Róheim 1925: 84).

Here again, as in the above myth and in the story of Mutjingga, a feminine “wet” being is killed, her “spirit” or “voice” entering into the bullroarer, from which men reproduce this “voice” to this day.

Another myth, from the Wiradthuri in New South Wales concerns *Dhuramoolan* who, although a “male” being, performs the same “swallowing” functions as those with which we have become familiar. This myth rather beautifully illustrates the logic of deception of the uninitiated discussed in Chapter 9:

***Dhuramoolan***

*A long time ago there was a gigantic and powerful being, called Dhuramoolan, who was one of the people of Baiamai (the supreme being). His voice was awe-inspiring and resembled the rumbling of distant thunder.*

*At a certain age the boys of the tribes were handed over to Dhuramoolan to be initiated. When he brought them back to the camp, it was always observed that each boy had lost one of his upper incisor teeth, as a visible sign that he had been initiated by Dhuramoolan. Baiamai wondered why this was. Dhuramoolan pretended that he always killed the boys, cut them up, burnt them to ashes, which were then collected up, reformed into human shape and restored to life as new beings, but with a tooth missing. But Baiamai was disturbed by the fact that when the boys returned, there were always several missing. He asked why. Dhuramoolan lied, claiming that the missing boy had died from some ordinary disease, but Baiamai was not satisfied and continued to ask questions. The boys themselves were too frightened to anger Dhuramoolan by telling the truth, but eventually Baiamai compelled them to reveal all.*

*Dhuramoolan had been eating the boys. The story about his burning them and restoring them to life was a lie: what really happened was that Dhuramoolan simply removed a tooth from each boy by inserting his own lower incisors under the tooth to be extracted, and*



wrenching it out. It was at this moment that he sometimes chose to bite off the entire face of the boy and devour him.

When Baiamai heard this, he “destroyed Dhuramoolan, but put his voice into all the trees of the forest and told it to remain in these trees for ever.” He then split one of these trees, and made a bullroarer which he fastened to a string and swung round, and it had Dhuramoolan’s voice. It could be made out of any tree, because the voice of Dhuramoolan had been put into them all. Baiamai then told his chief men that for the future they must themselves initiate the youths of the tribes, using the bullroarer to represent the voice of Dhuramoolan. Baiamai thought it best not to let the women know of Dhuramoolan’s crimes, so that they could continue to believe that the monster came and took the boys away, burnt them and resurrected them as before (adapted from Mathews 1896: 297-8).

The threads of deception and double-deception in this myth are somewhat complex, but it is interesting that the men in real life perpetrate upon the uninitiated exactly the crime of “lying” – and in exactly the same form – as is attributed to Dhuramoolan. The men take the boys from their mothers, extract from each a tooth, and return them whilst claiming that they have been killed and restored to life.

The myth of Dhuramoolan, like the other “origin of the bullroarer” myths here examined, associates the “voice” of the bullroarer with a sound released at a moment of “death”. An interpretation consistent with our previous arguments would run as follows. It is the shedding of blood during menstruation – conceptualisable as a form of “temporary death” followed by “rebirth” – which provides the template from which the “deaths” in these myths are derived. The myths say that at each death, something is released into the surrounding trees, enabling pieces of wood (bullroarers) to produce their distinctive sound. If menstruation provided the template for this set of ideas, then the sound emanating from the wood ought to be equivalent to menstruation in some way. In what follows, it will be suggested that the sound of the bullroarer – which is the “voice” of the ancestral “swallowing and regurgitating” being – is at some level indeed conceptualised as the “sound” of the blood-flow itself. It is the auditory accompaniment of the menstrual flow, or menstruation translated from the visual into the auditory code – a pulsating powerful sound in place of a pulsating brilliant colour.

### The sound of the blood

At this point it is worth returning to the Wawilak myth. We will examine in detail how this myth envisages the origin of the bullroarer. Berndt's (1951: 36) version is the most informative in this respect. After the death of the Two Sisters, the men all gather round "to take a picture of" – i.e. make an artificial copy of – the patterns of sound and dance presented by the women and snake:

*When these people had completed the jelmalandji emblem (an immense padded pole representing the 'bad' snake Lu'ningu) they held another meeting 'to think about the Wauwalak'. 'What are we going to do about the blood of those two women?' they asked one another.*

*The most important ceremonial headman, named Nga:ti (that is, termite, sometimes called 'meat' ant, who was responsible for revivifying the Wauwalak), stood up; grasping the blade of his stone-spear, he cut his arm and let the blood flow out. 'We make ourselves like those two women' he said.*

*Then other men got up; while some cut a vein inside the elbow, others cut the inner part of their forearm above the wrist, and all tied ligatures about their upper arms...*

*As they let the blood flow they said 'Ah, very good: that is the blood of the 'Spring' Women (that is, afterbirth blood and the menstruation)'*

*'And what shall we do for the Snake's 'shout' (that is, the sound made by the Julunggul)' they asked."*

They made a second jelmalandji pole to represent Julunggul, but it made no sound:

*"So they took a clean piece of wood from the tree which the Julunggul had split by lightning..., and marked it with the Snake design. They obtained human hair cord, and threaded it through the hole they had bored at one end of the wooden slab. When they swung this object (the bullroarer), they could hear the sound of the Julunggul...."*

Both "the blood" and "the sound" are in this way pictured or recaptured. The men's cutting of their arms, their bleeding and their manufacture and sounding of the bullroarer are evidently seen as linked steps in a single sequence.

But still this is not direct evidence that the blood is actually believed to contain a "sound" which then enters the wood from which bullroarers are made.

For direct confirmation of this more specific point, we require the help of another variant of the myth.

The story of Mumuna – treated by Berndt (1951: 144-154) as a variant of the Wawilak Sisters myth – comes from the Ma:ra tribal group on the southern banks of the Roper River in eastern Arnhem Land:

*“A long time ago an old woman called Mumuna lived alone with her two daughters. By making a smoky fire, she attracted men to her camp, then welcomed them with food and invited them to stay the night with her daughters. Later, while they slept deeply from sexual exhaustion, she dropped boulders on them. The next morning she cooked and ate them, then regurgitated them onto an ant-bed. They did not revive when bitten. Instead, they remained as skeletons, and their bones can be seen today in the form of stones.*

*The attitude of the daughters was equivocal. On the one hand they relished the sexual role that their mother encouraged them to play. On the other, they deplored the old woman’s cannibalism and feared its consequences. In particular, they were disturbed by her habit of hanging up the genital organs of the dead men on a tree and proposing to the girls that they eat them – an invitation they steadfastly refused.*

*Mumuna’s grisly practices were finally put to an end by a man named Eaglehawk, a light sleeper who woke up in time to kill her before she killed him.”*

The conclusion of this myth is best told in Berndt’s (1951: 151-2) own words (the above is an abridgement by Hiatt 1975b: 150-51)

*“‘We’ll kill this ‘old’ Woman’, shouted Eaglehawk; and he killed her, while the Mungamunga (her beautiful daughters) ran away.*

*As Mumuna died, she called out brrr! and that sound went into every tree; her blood splashed on to every tree, and it was that blood that contained the sound.*

*Afterwards, in memory of Mumuna, the Eaglehawk cut down a big tree, and from its wood he made a bullroarer which is the Mumuna (or Mumunga). He tried to get the sound of the dying woman. As he swung it, it ‘turned into a mumuna’; and its sound was the sound contained in the wood of the tree, which had in it the Mumuna’s blood.”*

\* \* \* \* \*

At this point, we may draw together our findings. It was predicted that the roaring of the bullroarer, as the “sound” of the Rainbow Snake or swallowing-regurgitating “Mother”, ought to be in effect the “sound” of menstrual blood. In

testing the hypothesis, a search through a number of “swallowing-and-regurgitation” and “origin of the bullroarer” myths was made. Somewhere within the mythological complex, it was expected to discover an explicit statement that the bullroarer’s “sound” was in fact that of an ancestral mother’s blood, while variants should all be at least consistent with this idea. In fact, the above myth concludes with the statement anticipated: Mumuna’s “blood splashed on to every tree, and it was that blood that contained the sound”; when a wooden bullroarer was subsequently made, “its sound was the sound contained in the wood of the tree, which had in it the Mumuna’s blood”.

To this we may add that the myth of Mumuna is re-enacted in the Kadjari ceremony, in which boys are initiated in the usual way, being symbolically “swallowed” into Mumuna’s womb. At the end of the ceremony, the boys are shown to their mothers and other women “reborn”. They are completely covered from head to foot with a paste made from ant-hill earth, blood and red-ochre, and they shine in the sun. “Look at the colouring they have on their bodies: they are smeared with the inside liquids of Mumuna’s womb!” This re-enacts, writes Berndt (p. 160), the mythical episode “relating to the Eaglehawk and his companions’ smearing themselves after the killing of Mumuna.” The Mumuna’s blood, then – the blood whose “sound” is that of the bullroarer – is explicitly stated to be womb-blood: “the inside liquids of Mumuna’s womb!”

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Blood and “naming power”**

What, then, is the nature of “the first Word” uttered in the universe – that “Word” which, according to the Dogon, was enunciated from a woman’s vagina or womb? What is the nature of that pulsating roar of the Rainbow Serpent – the sound of the bullroarer – which in Australia has echoed down the ages, it might seem, since the beginning of time? It is here suggested that the myths and the rituals which re-enact them preserve a logic which – no matter how much it has undergone transformations or inversions in the meantime – tells us something of the manner in which human language, symbolism and culture really did come into being.

The myths and rituals of northern Australia appear to be only so many different ways of saying one and the same thing. They are saying that all

cosmic and human life depends upon respecting a “voice” which was once womankind’s, but which has had to be taken over by men. This voice “spoke” in a language of blood, and through a mouth which “swallowed” penises and “vomited out” babies in childbirth.

\* \* \* \* \*

Our template for the production of culture specifies only one “word” – that of menstruating women on “sex-strike”. The “word” spoken in blood is “no”. It is a “word” in that it tells men something – namely, to *keep away*.

Now, turning from our template to the realm of Aboriginal myth, we may recall that the cry, “Go away!” “Go away!” is the characteristic shout of the Two Sisters in the Wawilak tale. The Sisters are bleeding from the womb as they cry out in this way. The actual expression used is *kei’wa! kei’wa!*, whose meaning is “Go away!” (Berndt and Berndt 1951: 117n) As noted in the previous chapter, this cry is used in the Kunapipi ritual as recorded at Yirrkalla, north-east Arnhem Land, by Berndt (1951: 55). It is the most sacred cry of “The Mother”; it is her “voice”. When it is spoken, it is always accompanied by the flowing of womb-blood – the blood of “rebirth”. We saw in the previous chapter how the cry *kei’wa!* “is used only by women”, as Berndt (1951: 55) puts it, “and men cannot use it” (for fear of turning into women themselves). Yet men, in addition to taking over the symbolism of women’s blood, have done their best to “steal” even this cry, too. They shout out “*wa! wa! wa!*” to get as close to the original as they dare. They do this at the moment of artificial “childbirth”, when they are removing their blood-covered “babies” from the “womb”. And, just as men must turn away their eyes when women are menstruating or giving birth, here it is the men’s turn: they make the women lie down and cover their eyes and bodies with pieces of bark and conical mats so as not to see. Like women in the intimacies of childbirth, then, the men want the women to “Go away!” And so they shout *wa!, wa!* to the opposite sex (1951: 55).

One more example will suffice to close the case. In the Oenpelli (western Arnhem Land) *ubar* ritual,

“...the theory is that the postulants go out to the ground when called by the voice of the Mother (in this instance, by the beating of the *ubar* and enter her uterus, and thus re-enact an experience

which occurred during their original spiritual conception and birth from the Mother. That is, they return to the Mother, and become sacred by entering her and being in her direct presence, as they were in their (original) state. The Oenpelli theory is that the Female Snake (or Mother) calls; they hear her voice in the camp, and make ready to go out to the sacred ground. The women begin to dance and cry *kaidpa! kaidpa!* ("Go away! Go away!") in answer, while the men drift away and enter the ground, and come into her direct presence; the ngurimal ground is her body, into which they go" (Berndt and Berndt 1951: 127).

This re-enacts a strange myth about a young wife whose sex-strike (combined with infidelity) against her old husband angers him to the point at which he murders her together with her mother. The murderer leaves his victims lying on the ground and goes towards the sacred dance-place. As he approaches, he thinks he can hear his dying victims crying out "Go away! Go away!";

*"What this noise I hear? What that two women calling out kaidpa! kaidpa! he asked himself".*

In fact, however, the people crying out in this way are the participants in the great *ubar* ceremony which is being performed under men's control for the first time (it was previously performed only by women). In a footnote, the Berndts (1951: 117n) explain; "The women, during the performance of a sacred ritual, call out *kaidpa* (literally, 'Go away!') in answer to the cries of the men...." The inversion through which menstrual bleeding in women is transformed into their "dying cry" is found here in yet another form.

On Goulbourne Island, it is an essential part of the *ubar* ritual that the women, at the commencement of the ceremonies, should (a) dance and (b) call out *Kaidpa! kaidpa!* The Serpent-Mother "hears the women in the distance calling out 'kaidpa!'" and is then inspired to fill the dance-ground with her sacred presence (Berndt and Berndt 1951: 127).

So when women call out "Go away! Go away!", this makes "the Snake" approach. It is actually a "call" to the Snake-Mother to fill the dance-ground with her sacred presence. It is certainly not a cry directed *against the Snake herself*.

But now let us cast our minds back to the myth of the Wawilak Sisters, when the Sisters call out "Go away! Go away!" to the Snake. It will be remembered that this cry, and the dancing and bleeding which go with it, have the effect

of making “the Snake” come. This is logical: menstruation says “Go away!” to men, at the same time inviting the presence of women’s “Snake”. But with breathtaking elegance, simplicity and political audacity, the Yolngu male myth-narrators have inverted this whilst leaving the rest of the myth absolutely intact. Following the changes, the myth now means the opposite of what it did before. Women’s menstrual cry “Go away!” is now read negatively. It is now on an “outside” level imagined to be directed not at men (who are naturally not wanted during childbirth or menstruation – they should “Go away!”) but – of all things – at women’s own “snake”.

In the Wawilak myth, then, the Sisters who shout “Go away! Go away!” are in fact generating the serpent’s very presence in doing just that. In fact, the words *kei’wa! kei’wa!* or *kaidpa! kaidpa!* are merely the auditory equivalents of the menstrual flow. They are merely an additional way of saying “Go away!” – an invocation which is already being transmitted by the blood-flow itself. And what the myth (in its “male” ideological interpretation) is inverting is the fact that this message is being addressed, not to the Snake, but (at the most “inside” level) to the community of men. They should not come near. Only a sexual murderer (as the Jarawadpad myth makes clear) would dare violate woman’s space or defy their cry to “Go away!” The Snake is conjured up by the cry *kei’wa! kei’wa!* while male marital partners are driven away. Only to the extent that the symbolic value of the Snake is inverted, so that the “womb” becomes pictured as a “penis”, can the sisters’ cry seem as if it is directed against the Rainbow Snake herself.

We are reaching closer to the identity of the essential “Word.” In the western Arnhem Land “origin of the *ubar*” myths, everything in the world is named as the cry “Go away!” is first heard. It is as if the function of “naming” were to allow the mind to distinguish things from one another, to allow images of polar opposites – sea and land, night and day, “the wet” and “the dry” – to disjoin themselves from one another instead of being conjoined and therefore confused. And it is as if this capacity for disjunction rested, in the first place, on the capacity of women – through their blood-flows – to disjoin themselves sexually from men. It is as if women could say to men “Go away!” not by shouting or speaking but simply – at the most primordial level – by bleeding from the womb, and it is as if this “naming potency” provided the

basis on which the sea could say “Go away!” to the land, the night could say “Go away!” to the day, and all things “wet” could say “Go away!” to all things “dry”. To disjoin polar opposites – the myths seem to be saying – is to create the cultural world, and the menstrual cycle, which periodically and relentlessly disjoins all marital partners, performs this creative role more emphatically and reliably than any other force known. Given this premise, it would follow with faultless logic that If men wish to monopolise naming- power – disjoining themselves periodically from women in order to sustain the polarities which cultural life requires – then they must themselves gain control over “the flow.” The menstrual flow and “naming potency” are one and the same.

“*Kei’wa! Kei’wa!*” – “Go away! Go away!” This cry echoes over the Arnhem Land coasts as the “voice of the Mother” with each ritual re-enactment of the Wawilak Sisters and related myths. Not quite daring to take over this female cry, men use drums, bullroarers and other instruments to imitate the Mother’s “voice”; in addition, they shout out using expressions dangerously close to women’s cries meaning “Go away!” In ritual after ritual, the imitation cry and its female template or model echo each other in a tussle between the sexes which is still very much alive.

It appears, then, that the “periodic sequence of matrimonial unions” (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 422) – the alternation between marital conjunction and disjunction on which culture at the most elementary level rests – is regulated in the first instance not by male-produced artefacts such as bullroarers but by the simple periodicity of the menstrual flow. The bullroarer is men’s answer to the flow of blood which – as the most potent and primordial of periodic cultural symbols – relentlessly disjoins marital partners in order to sustain the primacy of the cultural realm. The primary function of language is not to “name” things abstractly or passively, but to enable realities which are essentially social to separate out and differentiate themselves. Of all the social realities which need differentiation in this way, the most basic – if our template is correct – are those resulting from the bisection of the social universe along sexual lines. The myths seem to be saying that if women could not at times disjoin themselves from men – if they could not introject this binary division into the world – then no other structures of opposition on



which all life depends could possibly hope to be maintained. The self-identity of the collectivity of women – its establishment of its own existence as something separate from men's – appears therefore as the condition of the emergence of culture as such. This self-identity – the myths and rituals agree – is defined by women collectively through their periodic flows of blood. The bullroarer cult – or rather, the various male initiation rites through which men themselves maintain the structures of the cultural realm – is merely an inversion of this. It is the elemental "Word" – the blood-flow which signals "Go away!" to men – organised in men's own hands, and turned against the women from whom it has been derived. The result may seem utterly paradoxical. Yet even the paradoxes serve a function of a kind – in bewildering the minds of those the rituals are designed to oppress.

### **Chapter 11: The raw and the cooked**

The point of departure for this chapter will be the most puzzling remaining motif in the Wawilak Sisters myth – that of the hunted and gathered species which suddenly spring to life, jump from the two women's cooking-fire and dive into Yurlunggur's pool.

An initial interpretation might dwell on the frustration of the sisters, seeing in these events an indication of the women's helplessness in the face of powers beyond their comprehension. Chaseling's (1957: 141-2) version in particular lends itself to such a view. The younger woman has just polluted the pool,

*'...but she was unconscious of what had happened and returned to the camp. So far the camp was an unusually good one, and there being little to do, the young sister rested in the sand and watched the older Woman scrape open the fire and drop a handful of landsnails on the coals to cook. As soon as they touched the fire, however, the snails turned over and ran into the lagoon.'*

*Incredulously the Women stared at each other: 'Did you see that? What happened to the snails to make them run like dogs?'*

*They must be a new kind of snail. Perhaps this is their totem country. Try the snake and goanna, they look dead enough.' But the Sisters had to jump to safety, for when the reptiles fell into the ashes, they shuddered, scattered the fire, and wriggled into the water.*

*In stunned silence the Woman rebuilt the fire. 'You had better cook the yams', the young Sister advised, 'they have no legs and cannot get away.'*

*Yet when the yams were dropped into the fire, they also wriggled out by the hairs that grew on their skin, kicked their way down the slope into the lagoon, and swam away.*

*All the animals, yams, and reptiles escaped in this way, until only a bush-rat and small wallaby remained in a dilly-bag; these had been reserved for special cooking in a stone oven. But the Sisters were so hungry that the young one suggested that they cook them on the coals rather than wait for the oven to heat. No sooner had they*

*touched the dilly bag, however, than the dead animals came to life, kicked and tore it to shreds and bounded into the lagoon.*

*Now there is nothing left to eat. What is the matter with all the food?’*

*‘There must be something in that water.’*

*‘Yes. This might be a Wangarr (Great Spirit) place. I think a big Wangarr snake lives In there and ate all our food.’”*

There is no doubting the women’s surprise and perplexity at all this. Yet such surprise is strange, for did not the women actually predict that such events would occur? It will be remembered that as the story begins, in Berndt’s (1951: 20) and Warner’s (1957: 251) versions, the travelling Sisters come up to each animal and plant and solemnly prophesy: “You will be maraiin (sacred/taboo) by and by”. As Munn (1969: 180) points out, it is when the species subsequently jump into the pool that they complete the prophecy that they will become maraiin and so inedible,,,,,” In other words, the animals’ refusal to be cooked can be interpreted in exactly the opposite way to that superficially implied. Far from telling of the two sisters’ impotence, it describes their power, through menstruation, to categorise food as “sacred” or “taboo” – and, moreover, to predict this long in advance. On this level, what is being described is not merely bad cooking, it is anti-cooking: the cooking-process as a sequence of stages thrown into reverse by the extraordinary powers of menstrual blood. What should be a progression from live meat to dead (raw) meat and then to cooked (edible) meat is inverted so that it moves as a progression in the opposite direction, like an action-replay run backwards, the dead animals anticipated to be cooking in fact leaping from the fire alive.

### **Australia: the blood and the fire**

The reversal of the cooking-process is for the sisters the first indication that something magical is beginning to happen to them. To the extent that this reversal points to their own supernatural power, the myth portrays their blood as a force overcoming the effectiveness of fire. Indeed, not only is the cooking-fire powerless: it is totally inverted and eclipsed in the catastrophic floods and stores which in effect emanate from the sisters’ wombs.

An interpretation consistent with our template would run as follows. The motif of the escaping animals is describing how in the presence of menstrual blood, all food-species suddenly become magically protected. Anyone trying to cook or eat at such a time will have to “face a storm.” The species are now enfolded in the realm of “the wet” – safely inedible and insistently “raw”.

\* \* \* \* \*

Before going on to examine some related myths about cooking and fire, let us examine the extent to which all this is an accurate description of the manner in which food-taboos actually operate in northern Australian traditional life.

**(a) The Wik-Mungkan.** For men among the Wik-Mungkan of Cape York, meat food becomes prohibited from the moment it displays the slightest suggestion of contact or affinity with menstrual blood:

“Any act suggestive of menstrual bleeding makes things *ngaintja* (sacred/taboo). Thus if blood from an animal falls on a woman’s lap, her father and many other male relatives may not eat it. if a young man carries meat on his back or shoulders (he should not carry meat on his head for it is believed that this will make him permanently grey) so that the blood runs down between his buttocks this, to the Wik-Mungkan, is too uncomfortably like menstrual blood to be ignored” (McKnight 1975: 85).

It is not surprising, then, to learn that when men, having killed a game animal, begin to cut up the flesh,

“they make certain that women, especially their daughters, stand well away. Men will not even take fish from a daughter if she has caught it with a fishing line and pulled the line so that it falls on her lap. If a daughter should accidentally sit on her father’s possessions then they are *ngaintja* to him.... I might add that blood from wounds is also considered to be *ngaintja*, though not to the same degree as menstrual blood” (McKnight 1975: 86).

In other words, a man who has killed a game animal and begins to cut it up feels uncomfortably as if the rawness and bloodiness with which he is in contact is that of a menstruating woman. Should such a woman in fact be in the vicinity, the identification becomes impossible to ignore, and the meat may become – like the menstruating woman – taboo. There is, then, a choice: either

the woman is forced to keep away, or the meat remains inedible. To the extent that both menstruant and meat are present together (as they are in the Wawilak myth), all of the meat is protected by a taboo.

It will be recalled that in the Wawilak myth, it is the Rainbow Snake which “swallows” the escaping animals – that is, which protects the species from being eaten or appropriated. Translated into the terms of our template, this appears as a consequence of the fact that the Rainbow Snake itself is inseparable from women’s bleeding (see Chapter 7).

Among the Wik-Mungkan, the Rainbow Snake “is believed to be responsible for women menstruating” (McKnight 1975: 95); It thereby makes women *ngaintja* – taboo – like the Rainbow itself, in fact, anything can be made *ngaintja* by a woman – all she has to do is sit on it or pass over it in such a way that it becomes suspected that her womb-blood may have affected it (McKnight 1975: 85-8). The thing is thereby claimed, or protected from appropriation by others. Despite some geographical separation, it is not difficult to see in this a connection with the “inedible species” motif in the north east Arnhem Land myth of the Wawilak Sisters.

To be sacred in Wik-Mungkan eyes, then, a person or a thing must pass through or under a reputedly-menstruating woman’s legs. Let us now recall that the template would lead us to expect that this “passing through a woman’s legs” should be equivalent to entering or being “swallowed by” the Rainbow Serpent.

Among the Wik-Mungkan, this expectation is confirmed. But to complicate matters, here as elsewhere, the entire complex has been inverted in being taken over by men. Even the principle that to be made sacred, a thing must be “stepped over” by a woman – even this has been in an extraordinary fashion appropriated by men. McKnight (1975: 95) draws together the connections as follows:

“....unborn children are inside a woman and initiates are inside the Rainbow Serpent. Furthermore, children are born through the legs of women just as initiates are born through the legs of men and through the Rainbow Serpent. It cannot be fortuitous that what, in a sense, is passed through the legs in stepping over things can be made *ngaintja*.”

McKnight has in mind the fact that during initiation rites, boys are made *ngaintja* or “sacred” in being passed through the legs of men acting the part of the Rainbow Snake. He is drawing attention to the parallel with new-born babies who are *ngaintja* as they emerge from between their mothers’ legs. It is McKnight’s last sentence, however, which particularly captures our attention, for he is here referring to an odd-seeming custom which sheds much light on the origin of totemic prohibitions generally. Men in everyday life “step over” objects or food items which they covet in order to taboo these objects to rival claimants. As they do so, they emphasise the proximity and taboo-imposing effects of their genitals. It is as if, at the deepest and most potent level, “No!” or “Keep away!” were expressible only in one language – that of genital pollution. Men, it would seem, cannot quite menstruate as they “step over” objects, but they can at least go through the motions. With such fidelity and logical consistency are women’s Rainbow Snake powers inverted and usurped.

**(b) The Tiwi.** Among the Tiwi Aborigines of Melville Island, a girl during her first menstruation is kept away from contact with anything which might remotely be connected with cooking:

“She stays in the bush for five days, during which she cannot dig yams or gather or cook any food. Nor can she touch any food with her hands, but must either use a stick or have someone place the food in her mouth... And she cannot make a fire, for the flames might singe her arm and cause it to break...”

Meanwhile, however, the usual taboos against excessive “wetness” during menstruation also apply:

“She cannot touch any water, even if it is in a container but must wait for someone to lift the container to her lips, for if she touches it, she would fall ill....

She cannot look at salt or fresh water for the *maritji* might be angry and come and kill her.”

The *maritji* are rainbow-snakes – or, to be more accurate, rainbow-goannas and rainbow-crocodiles (the subject of mythical crocodiles will engage us again later in this chapter). These live in swamps and must be avoided by women while menstruating, pregnant or carrying young children (Goodale 1959: 58-9).

Consequently, a menstruating Tiwi woman is caught between two opposite dangers: if she approaches fire too closely it will “singe her arm and cause it to break”; if she approaches certain swamps, the rainbow-serpents or crocodiles might “cause a great ‘sea’ and destroy the land” (Goodale 1959: 59). She is caught, then, between water and fire.

**(c) The Yolngu.** Among the Yolngu of north east Arnhem Land, the Wawilak myth illustrates how menstruation entails the risk of being (a) swallowed by “the Snake” and (b) unable to cook. Here, too, then – at least in myth – women are in a sense caught between water and fire. But in the case of the Yolngu, what is particularly interesting in the ethnography is the suggestion that rules which potentially concern menstruating women apply in fact with particular severity to blood-covered men or boys.

For example, Chaseling (1957: 31—2) records what happened when a sixteen year old Yolngu boy named Marjirry was wounded by his own spear in a scuffle with a kangaroo, which he later killed:

“When he came limping into camp, his friends saw the blood and asked what had happened. Some of them went off to get the meat, but his closest relatives said with genuine feeling: ‘We will not eat that meat; it has Marjirry’s blood on it.’ It was clearly a case of *mumbakuta* (taboo) and the spilt blood had to be ceremonially washed away and his body purified by washing in a totemic well.”

Likewise, in the Djungguan ritual, which re-enacts the Wawilak myth, a boy whose penis-blood has been ritually shed is forbidden to eat any large game until the rainy season arrives (the ceremony being held at the start of the dry season). Informants explain:

“When a man has got blood on him, he is all the same as those two old women when they had blood. All the animals ran away and they couldn’t cook them” (Warner 1957: 278).

The rule is that “a man cannot eat anything when he has blood on him because he is unclean” (Warner 1957: 289). This finds expression in another form: namely, in the rule that a man who has murdered someone – who is contaminated with the victim’s blood – *must not eat cooked food* (Warner 1957: 163). In the Wawilak myth, following bloodshed, the cooking-process fails or is thrown into reverse. The available food remains inedible – or rather, becomes

more inedible than ever – just as the Sisters, being blood-polluted, remain insistently non-available. We might say, then, that the two kinds of flesh – human female and animal – have equally “escaped” into a protected zone. We would expect them, then, to be equally “swallowed” by the Serpent, since this is nothing other than the protective shield afforded by their shared rawness or blood. Moreover, we would expect both kinds of “rawness” or “blood” to be responsible for the arousal of the Serpent. All this is confirmed. It is not only the “raw (bloody) Sisters whose presence generates the Serpent and the flood: it is also the “raw” (bloody, uncooked and resistant to cooking-fire) plant and animal species. When the great Snake emerges from her pool, it is on account of the presence of both the women and the animals:

*“All the totemic animals, reptiles and vegetables, jumping into the well, had disturbed her; and she could smell the afterbirth blood of the elder sister. She lifted her head from the water, with nostrils quivering, smelling the odour of pollution” (Berndt 1951: 21).*

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We may conclude this section by recalling the specifications of the template outlined in Chapter 5. In this, “bleeding/raw” and “non-bleeding/cooked” are polar opposite and mutually exclusive phases of female and animal flesh, alternation between the two phases ensuring the proper circulation of meat food.

More precisely, the template specifies that when women are on menstrual sex- strike, all game animals – which bleed as they are killed – are defined as equally non-available. They are in a real sense included within the solidarity of the sex-strike, being enveloped or protected by the same symbol – that of blood. They are, then, part of the Rainbow Snake, which was shown in Chapter 7 to be none other than women’s menstrual sex-strike itself. True to the template, in the myth, the species are “swallowed” by – that is, incorporated into – “the Snake”.

Moreover, the sex-strike, according to the template, is equally and simultaneously a *cooking-strike*. No cooking can take place while menstrual blood is flowing. True to the template, the myth vividly makes just this point – the animals jump from the fire.



What, then, is the meaning of the “escaping animals” motif? Our template suggests an answer. When meat resists being cooked, the reason is that the flesh is filled with too much life-blood (in the myth, the dead animals literally come back to life); in this respect, such meat is like women who are insistently in their “raw” or “menstrual” state. Being equivalents, the two kinds of flesh share the same fate in the myth. In asserting the potent presence of their blood, both are asserting themselves as the antithesis of fire. The fire appears in the myth, in fact, only to emphasise its opposite, for the animals jump out of it just as the sisters – far from drying themselves out – in fact release an immense flood with their menstrual and afterbirth flows. What follows is not sunlight but the season of floods and storms, not fire but water, not light but darkness – and not marital relationships but kinship, incest and “blood”. The animals jump into the well because that is where – during the “wet” phase of the menstrual cycle – such food belongs. The blood of game animals and the blood of women are in the template’s terms “the same”, and while this blood is flowing, no cooking, no consumption and no marital sex can take place.

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#### **Delineating the template: the Cuiva case**

A brief look beyond Australia – at the Cuiva Indians of the eastern plains of Columbia – will serve to further delineate the “raw” versus “cooked” dimensions of the template central to this thesis. It should perhaps be emphasised here that no claim is being made that such an example – chosen selectively from world ethnography – can in itself prove anything about cultural universals or about the Australian situation. The Cuiva have been selected merely to provide a helpful illustration in building up an adequate concept appropriate to the template used here.

It will be remembered from Chapter 5 (p. 146) that women, fish and raw meat among the Cuiva share the characteristic of being *asuntané*. This refers to a specific smell and feel: *asuntané* is a quality attached to “the gluey stuff on the back of fish, to animal blood, and to menstrual blood”. Women are especially *asuntané* at puberty, when menstruating, and immediately after giving birth. Should men contact women during such periods, they contract an illness

causing them to vomit all their food. Fear of this illness also explains “why men are always quick and careful to wash any animal blood from themselves and why hunters usually leave the preparation of raw meat to women” (Arcand 1978: 3-4).

For our present purposes, the significance of the *asuntané* concept lies in its precise correspondence with a central feature of our transformational template – namely, its equation of menstrual “pollution” with the pollution associated with the rawness or bloodiness of meat. It is as if bloodiness as such were the condition which men had to avoid, regardless of whether the bloody flesh in question happened to be that of menstruating women or that of uncooked fish or game. It is as if a Cuiva hunter had to be equally wary of his menstruating wife and his bleeding animal catch. Both categories of potentially enjoyable flesh are equally prohibited to him.

So much for blood. The opposite phase is symbolised by fire. A feature of the template is that “cooking” is defined as the removal of blood-pollution from flesh (see Chapter 5). In western terms, “cooking” does tend to mean this, but only insofar as it concerns the removal of blood from meat. The template, however, stipulates that what applies to meat in terms of pollution or the removal of pollution should apply simultaneously to women. It would be expected, then, that to the extent that this template manifested itself in traditional cultures, the concept of “cooking” should have a broader meaning. It should refer not only to game animals being made edible but equally and simultaneously to blood-polluted persons making themselves socially-available. A new-born baby, a woman emerging from childbirth or menstrual seclusion – or, indeed, a blood-covered boy emerging from an initiation-rite – should receive the imprint of the phase-switch by being symbolically “cooked”.

Among the Cuiva, a girl’s first-menstruation rite is designed to make her flesh available for sexual consumption by removing its “wetness”. As Arcand (1978: 2-5) writes:

“When a girl reaches puberty the Cuiva say that she has become ‘very wet’. She has left the state of ‘dryness’ common to all children and becoming ‘wet’ is an indication that she has become a woman. The central problem with which the ritual deals is that the young girl, like all women, must periodically be able to become ‘less wet’ in

order for men to approach her. Through the ritual she must be ‘dried’ and brought into the second phase of her periodicity.”

To “bleed” is to be “very wet”, and to be “very wet” is to be dangerous to men. To halt the flow is to become “less wet” (although women are always “wet” in comparison with men). The less “wet” a woman is, the more sexually approachable. The first-menstruation rite is designed to “dry out” a dangerously-wet woman so that she becomes safe for men to approach.

Now, the interesting point is that something remarkably similar applies to food. Each type of food is placed along a continuum and judged as being relatively “wet” or “dry”. At the extreme “wet” end of this continuum is the state of “rotteness” towards which all food tends to move if left alone. Interference is possible, however, in the form of cooking. “Cooking meat”, writes Arcand, “transforms it from ‘wet’ (raw meat) to ‘dry’ (cooked meat)”; in this case “the effect of fire is to reverse the meat’s natural progression towards ‘wetness’”.

The implication is that for both meat and women, the basic alternations are between “the wet” and “the dry” (see previous chapter), this contrast corresponding to that between “the raw” and “the cooked” – an opposition which, as is well-known, is explored as the starting-point of Lévi-Strauss’s *Mythologiques*.

### **Towards a universal structure: the raw and the cooked**

One example in itself would prove little. On the other hand, the Cuiva Indians “express openly”, according to Arcand (1978: 9n.), a major part of what Lévi-Strauss attempts to demonstrate through structural analysis in his *Mythologiques*. Lévi-Strauss (1970: 152) quotes Colbacchini (1919: 28) on the Bororo Indians as follows:

“They believe themselves to be polluted whenever, for some reason or other, and even while hunting wild animals, they happen to become stained with blood. They immediately set off in search of water in which they wash and rewash, until all trace of the blood has disappeared. This explains their dislike of food in which the blood is still visible.”

The Timbira indians fear “the violent abdominal pains that follow the consumption of roast meat, when it is eaten with fingers stained with blood from the hunt” (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 151, citing Nimuendaju 1946: 2467). The symbolic logic which links this kind of pollution with the dangers presented by menstrual blood, and which applies the “raw/cooked” opposition to women and meat alike, is discernible in various parts of the world, including within the folklore of certain areas of England and France.

Lévi-Strauss (1970: 334) writes that in France, in the Upper Forez, Isère, Ardèche and Gard areas, women (and sometimes men) who were thought to have remained unmarried for too long were teasingly reminded of their “rawness” by being made to eat a salad consisting of onions, nettles and roots, or of clover and oats; this was termed “making them eat salad” or “making them eat turnip.” In several areas of England, the penalty was different: the unmarried elder sister of a girl who had already married was forced to dance “In the raw” – i.e. to dance barefoot.

The remedy for such “rawness”, in other cases, was quite literally to be “cooked.” In the St. Omer district of France at the beginning of the nineteenth century, if a younger daughter was married first, “this was a sad day for her poor elder sister, for at some point during the celebrations, she would, willy nilly, be seized upon, lifted up and laid on the top of the oven, so that she might be warmed up, as the saying was, since her situation seemed to indicate that she had remained insensitive to love.” A similar custom existed during Napoleon III’s reign, at Wavrin, in the Lille area (Gennep 1946-58, t. 1, Vol. 2, pp. 631-3; quoted in Lévi-Strauss 1970: 334).

Over immense areas of the world, the same logic gave rise to comparable customs. When women were required, because of their dangerous “wetness” or “rawness”, to disjoin from society or from men, the fact that they were menstruating or shedding afterbirth blood was emphasised, publicised and even exaggerated. When the aim was, rather, to terminate the period of “pollution” or “rawness”, the opposite action was taken, and the female flesh concerned was warmed up or “cooked”. Hence from Cambodia, as well as Malaysia, Siam and various regions of Indonesia, have come reports that a girl during her first menstruation – a phase which had to be accentuated – had to “go into the

shade” and remain out of sunlight to preserve the potency of the supernatural power. On the other hand, a woman who had just given birth – a phase which had to be brought to a close – was “laid on a bed or a raised grill under which there burned a slow fire” (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 335). Pueblo Indian women gave birth over a heap of hot sand, which was perhaps intended to transform the child from its “raw” state into a “cooked person” approachable by society. It was the habit of various Californian tribes to put women who had just given birth into ovens, hollowed out in the ground. After being covered with mats and hot stones, they were conscientiously “cooked”. The Yurok Indians of California used the expression “cooking the pains” – a reference to menstrual periods – to refer to all curative rites. “This rapid summary of customs”, Lévi-Strauss concludes (1970: 336), suggests that “the individuals who are ‘cooked’ are those most deeply involved in a physiological process: the newborn child, the woman who has just given birth, or the pubescent girl. The conjunction of a member of the social group with nature must be mediated through the intervention of cooking-fire, whose normal function is to mediate the conjunction of the raw product and the human consumer, and whose operation thus has the effect of making sure that a natural creature is at one and the same time *cooked and socialised*....”

All this, it would seem, can be put very simply: just as blood imposes sexual and culinary “consumption”-taboos, *so fire is necessary in order to lift them*.

#### **Australia: smoke, steam and fire**

Let us return, now, to Australia. All over the continent, male blood-letting rituals – in conformity with our template – conclude with a fire-throwing ceremony (1938: 167-8). This removes the blood-pollution and permits people to return back into ordinary society once more.

In a sense, then, like meat before it can be eaten, people before they can be approached must be “cooked”. When a Yolngu woman has given birth, she enters the bush with a female relative and places some stones on a fire:

“When these are hot she squats over the fire and the other woman throws water over the stones. The steam is supposed to heal, cleanse and close her uterus and make it small again” (Warner 1957: 78).

In other regions of Australia dense smoke is used instead of steam (see, for example, Meggitt 1965: 276; Berndt and Berndt 1945: 226).

Among the Yolngu, the Ulmark ritual which re-enacts the Wawilak myth is very different from the other rituals (for example, the Gunabibi or Djungguan) in that it emphasises fire more than blood. As we would expect, then, it draws on the opposite phase in the Wawilak myth to that in which blood blots out the cooking-process.

Towards the end of this ritual, men dance over flames from burning paper bark, each man dancing “till he feels the hair burn on his legs and it is too hot for him to continue.” Now, it was shown in Chapter 7 of this thesis that the collective blood-flow is “the Snake”. Fire removes visible blood from flesh just as wounding or menstruation produces it. The cooking-process ought, then, to the extent that it is successful, mark the Snake’s retreat or withdrawal from the scene. And this should coincide with the lifting of food-taboos.

All this is what our template would predict; it is, moreover, what the evidence confirms.

In the Ulmark ceremony, the burning paper-bark is Muit (Yurlunggur’s other name) withdrawing, retreating, losing its blood-polluting power:

“Native Interpretation. – The bark cylinder is the snake and the men sitting in a line on it are Muit too. The bark fire is also the snake. The burning of the paper bark is Muit disappearing. The men dance over the fires ‘so that they must burn their legs so that they can eat any animal’” (Warner 1957: 324).

Following this, the entire ceremonial camp is encircled by fire, which is said to be “all the same as the two women made to cook the animals that ran away.” This fire “is also the snake, and the snake’s tongue” (Warner 1957: 325). But it is the snake losing its power to pollute – losing its power to render animal food “sacred” or inedible.

Yet another fire-ceremony is held. The old men build a stone fire and the men inhale the smoke and squat over the fire in order to allow the smoke to enter their anuses:

“Native interpretation. – When the men inhale the smoke, ‘this means so we can eat any kind of food. When they put their anuses over the fire, this is like the Wawilak women did when that baby was born.’ The women go through this same healing and purificatory rite today” (Warner 1957: 328).

The men, in other words, are “cooking” their genital region like women “cooking” away their blood-pollution following childbirth. The rite ends with yet another big fire being lit. Over this are placed the neophytes

“so that both mouth and anus are supposedly filled with purifying steam. This is to allow the young men to eat the large game which up to this time has been taboo to them” (Warner 1957: 329).

All of this, then, re-enacts in reverse the motif we are here concerned with in the Wawilak myth. The fire-phase is rendered dominant over that of blood. It is as if the game animals and women earlier “swallowed” into Yurlunggur’s pool were now being regurgitated back into the fire-domain so that they could be cooked and eat or be eaten without danger.

In fact, this logic is confirmed in innumerable details of ritual practice and mythic narration, including an important one worth mentioning here. In the Wawilak myth, it may be recalled, the Snake swallows its victims in rains and a flood, but regurgitates them onto an ant-hill. Having swallowed the women in wet and darkness, Yurlunggur

*“waited for daylight. When dawn came he uncoiled and went out a short distance in the bush, because he was too near the water. He wanted to leave the women in a dry place”* (Warner 1957: 254).

Eventually, once the floods and storms had subsided and Yurlunggur had crashed to the ground after rising into the sky, the regurgitation actually took place:

“He regurgitated the two women and the little boys. They were dropped into an ants’ nest” (Warner 1957: 257).

Ant-hills – it need hardly be said – are high and dry, in contrast to waterholes, which sink low and are wet. The regurgitation is therefore a movement from wetness to dryness, corresponding to an emergence from temporary death into ordinary life:

“Some green ants came out then and bit the women and children. They jumped” (Warner 1957: 257).

In Berndt's (1951: 36) version, the person responsible for revivifying the Sisters was called "'meat' ant". We know that the "swallowing" episode taboos the sisters' flesh. Regurgitation – the inverse of swallowing – should consequently lift the taboos, rendering the sisters "available/edible" once more. The swallowing involved entry into "the wet"; the myth now depicts regurgitation as entry into... "an ants' nest". On the basis of formal logic – independently of any ethnographic evidence – we would be led by the "raw/cooked" template to treat this "ants' nest" as (a) "dry" and (b) a means of "cooking". It should be, indeed, a kind of oven.

The evidence satisfies this expectation. In northern Australia, meat is indeed customarily put in ant-beds to be cooked. McConnel (1930: 103) describes this scene among the Wik-Mungkan:

"...preparations are made for the evening meal, which is the big meal of the day. Ant-bed ovens for cooking meat and roots are made by lighting a fire in a hole in the ground and placing ant-bed thereon."

It seems unlikely that the Yolngu narrators of the Wawilak myth could have been unfamiliar with such an association between ant-beds and ovens. We may take it, then, that when the regurgitated Sisters and their babies were "dropped into an ants' nest" their flesh was in fact being "cooked."

### **The raw is to the cooked as the wet season is to the dry**

Let us examine these themes more closely – in particular, the manner in which the "raw/cooked" or "blood/fire" opposition is mapped on to the Aborigines' picture of seasonal alternation.

Ronald Berndt's *Love Songs of Arnhem Land* (1976) takes up and clarifies many of the themes central to the Wawilak Sisters myth and central to the entire cosmology of the inhabitants of this part of Australia. The "religious life" of these people, writes Berndt (1976: 4), "centred on procreation, on the renewal of human beings and of the natural species, and on the continuity of family and community life through mythic intervention and guidance". The "basic concept" was "one of spiritual and material fructification, with sexual



intercourse either directly or symbolically implied as an essential element stimulating or activating this process.” Human reproductivity and the fruitfulness of the natural environment were conceptualised by the Aborigines as interdependent, and were brought within a single framework of concepts and ideas:

“Physiographic features of the countryside were likened to male and female genitals, and some sacred and historic sites bear witness to the erotic activity of mythic and spirit beings who travelled through that country in the Dreaming era. The same is the case with natural species, where anthropomorphic significance may be implied. Imprints in rock, knee marks, tell a story of a mythic act of coitus; a sacred waterhole may symbolise a vagina; a shining white substance on a rock surface may represent semen; and so on” (Berndt 1976: 7).

Everything natural, in other words, was conceptualised as human, just as everything human or cultural was thought to be governed by natural rhythms or laws. And what applied to the landscape itself – to the arrangement of reality in space – applied also to arrangements in time, Alternations between night and day, full moon and dark, wet season and dry – all these and other periodicities were conceptualised as expressions or echoes of the rhythms most basic to the human body and to all human life.

In the experience of the narrators of the myth of the Wawilak Sisters, the year was sharply divided into two opposite seasons. “The outstanding natural phenomena”, writes Warner (1957: 378) of north east Arnhem Land, “are the great seasonal changes which produce heavy rainfall for five months, and for seven months an extremely dry season in which there is no rain and many of the streams, Lakes, water holes and inlets dry up.” The rainy period begins approximately in November and ends in March, although heavy thundershowers and oppressive heat start in October and also occur in March and April after the heavy-rain period has passed. During the period of the rains, tropical vegetation springs up everywhere, and the paths and most of the country are covered with giant spear grass growing to twelve or fourteen feet in height, making movement and communication almost impossible in many places. Moreover, in this period, large portions of the countryside are submerged in a shallow sea of mud and water, with the Aboriginal inhabitants cut off from one another in small groups on the many little islands which then break up the watery expanses. The rainy season is for these reasons classified as socially-

isolating and “bad”, while from an economic standpoint also – since finding any kind of food is very difficult – the period is seen in a negative light. Warner (1957: 404) writes:

“The configuration of native thinking about the rainy season, evaluated under a feeling of comparative ill-being, includes thought of a scarcity of food, unpleasant physical surroundings, a minimum of creature comforts, small horde groupings because of food scarcity, little social activity, as well as the possibility of actual hunger, sickness and privation, and even death from floods.”

The whole region, however, is by comparison with others in Australia extremely fertile (Berndt 1951: 2), and as the dry season arrives, the abundance of game animals and vegetable foods can begin to be enjoyed. The dry season of five to seven months is one of drought and there is usually no rain at all from May to September, and very little in April and October (Warner 1957: 379). The inland lakes dry up, streams disappear and many of the sacred clan water holes become empty. Nevertheless, enough water remains to sustain life, and the disappearance of the lakes and much of the thick vegetation brings with it a capacity for movement and social gathering which seems wholly positive in the Aborigines’ eyes. This is the time of social enjoyment, hunting and ceremonial life, and the period is evaluated as essentially “good”:

“The natives evaluate the dry season as one of well-being; and in the configuration of items within this general attitude are included a plenitude of foods, easy and pleasant surroundings and ample creature necessities, large horde groups, intense and enlarged social activity, and pleasant and exciting behavior, such as hunting and harpooning; all of these might be summarized under things which are enjoyable and pleasant, and of a positive nature” (Warner 1957: 404).

There is in north east Arnhem Land, then, a seasonal alternation of a particularly “extreme” kind, with very pronounced effects on all aspects of human social, economic, sexual and ritual life. All time is essentially divided into “the wet” and “the dry”, and the alternation wet/dry/wet/dry etc. corresponds with an annual rhythm in which scarcity alternates with plenty, flood alternates with drought and darkened skies alternate with sunlight and heat. The Aborigine, writes Berndt (1976: 12),

“projected his own belief system on to the environment in which he lived. He saw within it the same forces operating as he identified within his own process of living.”

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Now, within this context – in which everything is conceptualised in human terms – it is perhaps not surprising to find that the wet/dry alternation between the seasons is felt to be only a translation into seasonal language of the “wet/dry” periodicity at the heart of human reproductive life.

In fact, the Wawilak Sisters myth assumes this as a basic premise. “The reproductive cycle of mating and birth”, as Warner (1957: 398) puts it, “Is manifest in most sections of the...Wawilak ceremonies, is explicitly stated in the Gunabibi symbolism, and is latent in the concept of the season’s fluctuation.” in brief,

“the concepts of the reproductive cycle and seasonal alternation state the same generalization and are given the same symbols in the myth” (p. 398).

The seasonal “flood”, to be more specific, is given the same symbol – blood – as the menstrual flow; the dry season, by contrast, is given the same symbol – fire – as marital relations and exogamous sex (for sex as “fire” and for the sun’s disc as the “vagina” among the Yolngu see Berndt 1952: 50). Into the “wet” phase or category come blood, thunder, storms, darkness, small family groups, incest, menstruation, the absence of cooking and suggestions of hunger, starvation and death by drowning. Into the opposite, “dry” phase come fire, clear skies, lightness, extended networks of intermarriage, ceremonial life and connotations of economic abundance, cooking and feasting.

Now, a woman’s menstrual onset certainly in principle blots out the possibility of the second category or phase. The qualification – “In principle” – is important, for we can admit at the outset that the empirical facts in north east Arnhem Land do not quite fit in with the “pure” logic: menstruation in this area happens not to be particularly feared, and there are rather few restrictions on a woman’s cooking, eating or other behaviour during this period. Nevertheless, Chaseling (1957: 38) describes how, in the Yolngu general area, a menstruating woman may be secluded in her own windbreak, painted with

bands of clay and forbidden to eat “man’s food.” “With undisguised chagrin”, he writes,

“a wife in this temporary quarantine will sit with her husband and his wives round the camp-fire, painted red and with her back turned, and will nibble a yam or shellfish whilst the family consume turtle, kangaroo, or fish.”

Dugong, turtle, fish, birds and other game are regarded as “men’s food”:

“If a women secretly hunted for men’s food at such a time, she would bring trouble on herself and relatives, and the species of game she killed would become scarce; when the men caught nothing they would say: ‘Some woman must have eaten food here’, and within a few hours every woman in the locality would be expected to produce an alibi. The life of her husband would be in jeopardy and sooner or later misfortune would overtake him. In offering condolence to an injured man, sympathisers will observe that, as there seems to be no apparent cause for his misfortune, him wives have probably violated this food law” (Chaseling 1957: 37).

This ties in well with the Wawilak myth, since the blood-polluted sisters were indeed hunting “men’s food”, and the animals did indeed “become scarce” as a result – they escaped into the protective zone of Yurlungur’s pool.

It has been conceded, then, that Yolngu menstrual fears and avoidances are perhaps not markedly severe. Yet from the restrictions which do exist (for example, on sexual intercourse, from reports of observances in neighbouring regions and from the picture presented in the Wawilak and other myths, we may derive an idea of the potential dangers which a powerful menstrual onset – particularly a girl’s first menstruation – is thought by the Yolngu to present.

Let us take, then, the example of a “strong” menstruation (such as a girl’s first onset). It is perhaps not difficult to discern the logic according to which such an onset seems to resemble a cloudburst with its attendant floods: it releases “wetness”, precludes marital relations, prevents general social and sexual exchange, involves the observance of a number of food-prohibitions and cooking-taboos, clouds and charges the sexual and psychological atmosphere – and generally “negativises” much of life as a whole. At its most powerful, menstruation ruptures all relations of consumption, both sexual and economic, bringing the “good times” to an end. The “swallowing” of the earth by

the rainy season's floods is therefore easily and naturally available for use as a metaphor for the effective "swallowing" of human female flesh into the domain marked out by the menstrual flow.

That is one side of the picture. However, the other side is the fact that just as night must run its course if morning and sunlight are to reappear, so menstrual bleeding must run its course as the condition of subsequent availability and fruitfulness – and the rainy season must run its course so that the season of abundance can take over. As Warner (1957: 386) writes:

"The 'swallowing' of the earth by the rainy season is known to be caused by the wrong action of the two Wawilak women in copulating incestuously with their own clansmen and by the older sister's later profaning the pool of the sacred python. This is not considered an unmixed calamity, however, because the rain and water bring the plants and bulbs and flowers which are consumed directly by man or provide the pasturage for kangaroo, opossum, and other animals eaten by man. In other words, the Murngin see the snake's swallowing the women and animals as necessary and part of the scheme of things, and their testimony clearly demonstrates the causal relation between the actions of the Wawilak women and the seasonal cycle."

Had it not been for the menstrual and afterbirth flows of the Wawilak Sisters – flows caused by an act of incest – there would have been no seasonal alternations and therefore no fertility or life. Had it not been for "the snake's swallowing the women and animals", there would have been no wet season and therefore no dry, no incest and therefore no marriage, no death and therefore no birth.

We may conclude this section by noting, then, that the primordial world-creating event – the "snake's swallowing the women and animals" – corresponds to the imposition of the world's first sacred prohibition. It took the form of the feminine and animal blood-flow which envelops "the flesh" and keeps its consumers away. The appearance in the sky of the rainbow connotes the alternation between sunlight and storms, the darkened horizons and the rumble of thunder becoming associated in the mind with the potency of women's and game animals' blood, while sunlight, by contrast, connotes cooking, marital sex and fire.

### **The love-songs of Arnhem Land**

In the Goulbourne Island Love-Song cycle recorded in R. Berndt's (1976) volume on such songs, the connection between menstrual blood and monsoonal rains is conceptualised through images in which the blood itself pours down from the women's reproductive organs into the land's "reproductive organs" – the life-giving waterholes, streams and inlets on which fertility during the dry season depends – and flows thence into the sea, and into the clouds which rise from the sea, returning later transformed, in the shape of the dark monsoonal storms and floods which swallow the hunting-grounds and – as it seems – most of the entire earth.

The fourteenth song in this particular cycle depicts a group of women from "western tribes" whose menstrual flows have been brought on by a deliberate act of collective sexual intercourse with a group of Goulbourne Island men. Note the links between water, rain, menstrual blood and "blood from a speared kangaroo"; note also that the blood is consistently described here as "sacred":

*"Blood is running down from the men penes, men from Goulbourne Islands...  
Blood running down from the young girls, like blood from a speared kangaroo...  
Running down among the cabbage palm foliage...  
Blood that is sacred, running down from the young girl's uterus...  
Flowing like water, from the young girls of the western tribes...  
Blood running down, for the Goulbourne Island men had seen their swaying buttocks...  
Sacred blood running down...  
Like blood from a speared kangaroo; sacred blood flows from the uterus...  
They are always there, at the wide expanse of water, the sea-eagles' nests...  
They are sacred, those young girls of the western tribes, with their menstrual flow...  
They are always there, sitting within their huts like sea-eagle nests, with blood flowing...  
Flowing down from the sacred uterus of the young girl...  
Sacred young girls from the western tribes, clans from the Woolen River:  
Blood, flowing like water...  
Always there, that blood, in the cabbage palm foliage...  
Sacred blood flowing in all directions...  
Like blood from a speared kangaroo, from the sacred uterus..."*  
(Berndt 1976: 61).

“North-eastern Arnhem Landers saw this as an observable progression of inevitable events: coitus among the palms; the onset of the menstrual flow; the attraction of the clouds; the arrival of the Lightning Snake, drawn by the smell of the blood; and finally the coming of the monsoonal season.”

The dark rain clouds rise in the west, spreading across the countryside. In song 20 the Lightning Snake (Rainbow Snake under another name) has just “smelt the blood of the girls” (Berndt 1976: 67) and has consequently risen into the dark clouds, makes its appearance for the first time. There is the sound of thunder “drifting to the place of the Wauwalag Sisters” – that is, to the sacred waterhole into which the ancestral Sisters let flow their blood. In both this song cycle and the Rose River cycle, it is the blood-flow which generates the Snake; as Berndt (1976: 67) puts it, “it is this, in both cases, which brings about the lightning, thunder and rain”.

*"I make the thunder and lightning, pushing the clouds,  
at the billabong edged with bamboo  
I make the crash of the thunder –  
I spit, and the lightning flashes!"*

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“From its association with that blood..., the water itself becomes sacred; and in its foaming ‘cleanness’ it is likened to semen.”



Then, a few lines later:

We could hardly wish for a more definitive statement on the menstrual nature of “the Snake” – its place “the Vagina place”, its mode of action the “eating” or “swallowing” of menstrual blood, its influence stretching and thriving wherever this blood is flowing.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the Rose River song cycle, just as menstrual blood generates the Snake in the form of the annual rains, so fire switches the system back into the opposite seasonal phase. The dry season begins:

By lighting fires, the Aborigines burn away the long spear-grass which so impedes movement and social intercourse during the time of the rains. The sheets of flood-water which have lain across much of the landscape retreat as the grass-fires burn deep into “the Vagina place” of the Snake, sending clouds of smoke high into the sky. “The rainbow serpent”, as Mountford (1978: 23) puts it, “is essentially the element of water, and any sign of its opposite element – fire, even fumes of smoke – is sufficient to drive this mythical creature back to its home under the water.”

Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologiques* (1970) begins with a series of “storm” and “flood” stories which he interprets as inversions of stories about the origins of cooking and fire. Without dwelling on *Mythologiques* here (we will return to it in the final three chapters of this thesis), it is proposed to show that a comparable flood-versus-fire dialectic can be discerned at the core of much northern Australian mythology.

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these implications to our findings on the nature of the Rainbow Snake, the myths will be seen to make sense.

Interpreted negatively, the template assumes that when women are on menstrual sex-strike, they “cannot cook.” Interpreted positively, however, this appears not as a disability but as an expression of strength. The women are not merely “unable” to cook – they are avoiding cooking for the same reason that they are avoiding marital relations. Their blood means that they are “on strike”.

Now, in northern Australia, as we have seen, the menstrual “sex-strike” aspect of the template – that is, the power aspect – is conceptualised through the image of a “Mother” who is also a “rainbow” and a “snake”. If we return to the Wawilak myth, it will be recalled that the Two Sisters are “unable” to cook their food on account of the presence of such a Snake. The snake, ostensibly, is preventing the Sisters from cooking. However, we know (see Chapters 7-8 and this chapter, above) that in this myth, when the “Snake” threatens the Sisters, this image actually results from a “political inversion” through which the women’s own menstrual power is depicted as hostile to them. An interpretation in terms of our template, then, would run as follows. The Two Sisters’ “inability” to cook on a deeper level expresses the fact that they are refusing to cook since they are menstruating and giving birth.

Through their vaginas, then – and this is vital to an understanding of the myths – the two Sisters are depriving men of cooking-fire. It is “as if” their vaginas were hiding or taking away the fire. This image is doubly appropriate, since not only does menstruation preclude cooking in the ordinary sense – it also precludes the “fire” of sexual intercourse:

“In their own sacred shade the women made fire, rindjarei, the sacred fire dreaming, for fire comes from the redness of the women's vaginae. The twirling firestick in its groove is symbolic of coitus, because a man is warmed by lying between a woman’s legs just as he is by a fire, since a woman’s vulva is always ‘hot’” (Berndt 1952: 39).

Although Berndt is here commenting not on the Wawilak Sisters but on the closely-related Yolngu story of the Two Djanggawul Sisters (see end of chapter below), who use their sexual privacy to hide fire (among many other secrets) from men, the point is made. Sexual intercourse is woman’s “fire”. Add to this

the notion that women's vaginas, in their menstrual state, are "wet" and "like" an aquatic snake or monster – and the basic premises of the "origin of fire" myths of northern Australia are now delineated.

These are myths which differ from the Wawilak myth but express the same logic. They tell of how women (or an aquatic monster) deprived men of fire, keeping it in their vaginas (or, in the case of a monster, in some other part of its body), until one day a male culture-hero snatched it away and handed fire to men. The myths conform to a simple basic rule: to deprive or attempt to deprive the world of fire, it is necessary to be by nature "wet":

*The Acquisition of Fire (Kakadu)*

*Two men went hunting with their mothers. While the men caught ducks and plovers on the plain ("dry"), the women collected lily roots and seeds from water pools ("wet"). The women possessed fire, but sought to keep it secret from the men, who were ignorant of fire. The women cooked while the men were away, and on seeing them returning hid the live ashes in their vulvas. The men asked where the fire was. The women denied that there was fire, a row broke out, but the women gave the men cooked lily cake, after which they all ate and slept. Then the men again went hunting while the women cooked.*

*The weather was very hot. The uneaten remains of the birds went bad. The men brought a fresh supply and again saw the fire burning in the distance. A spur-winged plover flew to warn the women, who hid the fire as before. The men arrived, they argued, the women denied the fire. "The men said, we saw a big fire; if you have no fire, which way do you cook your food? Has the sun cooked it? If the sun cooks your lilies, why does it not cook our ducks and stop them from going bad. There was no reply to this." They slept.*

*In the morning the men left the women, found that they could make fire by rubbing sticks, and then decided to turn themselves into crocodiles, of which there were none. They made crocodile heads, pierced their lungs so that they could breathe underwater, practised swimming, and then hid the heads and returned to camp. Again they saw fire, again the plover gave warning. The women wanted to know what the men had been doing, "but the men said nothing at all."*

*Late in the afternoon the women set nets for fish. In the morning when they went to take in the nets, the men arrived first, turned themselves into crocodiles and dived into the water. They hung onto the nets so that the women could not pull them in. When the women felt for what made the nets heavy, the crocodiles dragged them under..." The women drowned; the crocodiles "dived into the water in which they have lived ever since" (from an abridgement in Maddock 1970: 183-4, citing Spencer 1914: 305-8).*

A slightly different version is given by Harney (1959: 53-4):

*Two hunters returned to their camps to discover that their two half-mothers who cooked for them had allowed the camp-fires to go out. Yet the birds they had brought in that morning were nicely grilled and ready to be eaten. The men demanded an explanation. The women lied, saying that they had sung magic songs into the sun, whereupon the old Sun-woman had thrown out hot-wind which had "cooked the goose nice way."*

*Suspecting a lie, the men pretended to go away, but sneaked back to watch what really happened. They saw the women cooking the goose by chanting "sexual songs" over the meat, using "the heat that came from their bodies."*

*Horried at such "incest", the men turned themselves into crocodiles and wreaked vengeance on their "mothers" as these went down to the water to release their fish-traps. The crocodiles held the fish-traps in their jaws, pulled down on them and thereby drowned the women (an encounter with sexual and therefore incestuous connotations – "Crocodile can't eat women, only keep her for sweetheart business...." – Harney 1959: 251.)*

A menstrual interpretation would run as follows. Two women menstruate – that is, they enter the "wet" phase of their cycle. By doing this, they take cooking-fire from the world (since women cannot cook during menstruation). Withdrawing from marital relations into their own "blood", they become scandalously intimate with their offspring (the "incest" motif). They are therefore, as an appropriate punishment, given an excess of their own wrong action. They are "swallowed up" in their own "wetness" and "flesh", becoming incorporated into "crocodiles" who are their own sons (that is, "their own blood", the kin-crocodiles being a variation on the rainbow-snake or aquatic monster theme).

Now, Maddock (1970: 181) comments that "if the fire myths collected from different places in Arnhem Land are examined it looks as though they fall into place as segments of a super-myth on the origins of fire....", this "long and involuted story" not being known by any one group although "each group knows a fragment of the whole..." In this light, we may note that both of the above myths give only a fragment of the story with which we are here concerned. Both emphasise the vagina as the source of woman's "cooking-fire"; both explain how this vagina (presumably with its fire) came to be "drowned" through the agency of crocodiles, in an "eating" or "swallowing" episode (suggestive of

mother-son incest) which recalls the “swallowings” of other myths we have examined. Neither, however, goes on to explain how fire ever came to be rescued from its watery fate and saved for use by men. It is as if the Wawilak myth had ended when the “swallowing” episode was complete – with women, their meat and their incestuous sexual partner, “the Snake”, all immersed in a watery realm (some versions of the Wawilak myth, in fact, do end at this point – see, for example, C. H. Berndt 1970). What is lacking is the final episode of ordinary, “dry”, non-incestuous men’s acquisition of women’s secrets for the benefit of mankind.

Two short myths – also from Arnhem Land – stress the missing aspect:

*The Acquisition of Fire (Dalabon)*

The crocodile possessed firesticks. The rainbow bird used to eat fish raw. Then the rainbow bird climbed into a dry tree. Down he came to snatch the firesticks, but the crocodile had them clutched to his breast. Again and again the rainbow bird tried. At last, he snatched the firesticks. Away he flew. The crocodile could do nothing. He has no wings. The rainbow bird was above. ‘You can go down into the water’, he called, ‘I’m going to give fire to men!’ (abridged from Maddock 1970: 176).

Notice that before stealing crocodile’s fire, the bird climbs “into a dry tree”. Retaining consistency with our previous analyses – that is, assuming this myth to be derived from the same template as the others including the Wawilak story – then the crocodile (which is always involved with a plurality of women) must be a version of women’s Rainbow Snake. It is the embodiment of collective “wetness”. It is defeated, its ability to impose rawness on mankind taken away.

In terms of the template, then, this myth is stating that women’s menstrual cooking-strike will no longer prevent men from cooking meat whenever they want to themselves. Menstruating women are welcome to enter “the wet”; but whenever they do so, from now on, men will not feel under any obligation to go with them. They will not accept that women’s menstruation makes them and the whole world equally “wet” and therefore prohibited from cooking, but will keep themselves “dry” (like birds “climbing into a dry tree” or flying high into the sky). From now on, in other words, men will not respect women’s cooking strike but will simply do their own cooking themselves during women’s periods. They

will have succeeded, thereby, in disengaging themselves from one of the most inconvenient former consequences of women's periods. Whatever women may be doing in such periods – and they can observe menstrual taboos, avoiding “men's food” etc. etc. as much as they like – men from now on will be eating their meat cooked. “You can go down into the water”, as the rainbow bird shouts, “I'm going to give fire to men!” The two “species”, in short, will simply go their own separate ways – existing as far apart as crocodile from bird, terrestrial water from sky.

*The Acquisition of Fire (Djuan)*

*Crocodile and plover possessed the only firesticks in the world. One morning, before hunting, crocodile asked plover to light the fire ready for his return so that the game he brought back could be cooked. But when crocodile returned with a kangaroo, the fire was unlit and plover was asleep. The crocodile abused his companion, snatched the firesticks and ran to the river to put out the fire. But the plover was too quick. He snatched the firesticks back and ran into the hills. Since then crocodiles have lived in water, plovers in the hills. But for the plover, men would have had to eat their meat raw (abridged from Maddock 1970: 180).*

This myth does not add much to the previous one. But (in common with other myths assuming a primordial unity) it suggests that the two species originally collaborated: it was only when an argument broke out that the snatching of fire took place and they both went their separate ways. Given this unfortunate conflict (the myth implies), all fire would have been extinguished in water had it not been snatched from the crocodile in time.

We may now turn to a much more elaborate “acquisition of fire” myth. It is a story from the Port Keats region, Western Australia:

***Kunmanggur the Rainbow-Snake (Murinbata)***

*Kunmanggur the rainbow-snake had two daughters and a son (or alternatively sister's daughters and a sister's son – Stanner 1966: 89). The son – Tjiniman, The Bat – lusted after his sisters. Soon after Tjiniman had been subincised – when his penis was still painful and sore – he came to a place where his sisters had recently been camping. He noticed some of their menstrual blood. At the sight, he had an erection. He hid, waited for the return of the girls, and forced his sexual attentions on them when they arrived.*

*Later, the sisters escaped and after numerous adventures arrived at the camp of their father (or maternal uncle), Kunmanggur, the Rainbow Snake. Tjiniman arrived and organised a big ceremony; he*

*danced so as to make the women desire him. Kunmanggur played on the drone-pipe; everyone was dancing.*

*Then Tjiniman suddenly spoke in the Wagaman language, which no-one understood: "I am going to kill your father, I am going to kill your father". People did not understand and asked: "What is it you say?" "I told Walumuma to get me water", Tjiniman answered. Walumuma brought water in her hands; Tjiniman spilled it without drinking. All this – the misunderstood words, the bringing of water and the spilling of it without drinking – was repeated three times.*

*Then Tjiniman carried out his threat, spearing the Rainbow Snake (who was still playing his drone-pipe) in the back. "Yeeeeee!" cried Kunmanggur, and threw the drone-pipe into the water.*

*At the instant of death, all Kunmanggur's children cried out in grief. The Flying Fox people turned into Flying Foxes, crying "Heee! as they flew into the air. All the birds flew away. Tjiniman ran off and, standing far away, looked back, wondering what they would all do. But no-one sought revenge.*

*Kunmanggur rolled about in agony. He plunged into the water at Naiyiwa, where one of his sons pulled out the spear. He stayed there for one moon. "They made fire and put hot stones to his wound but to no avail; it did not heal; and water came out through the fire." Then he wandered from place to place, accompanied by his people. At many places "his wives and sons dug a hole in the ground, made a fire to heat stones, and tried fruitlessly to staunch his bleeding wounds, and at each such place water came up through the flames".*

*At last, "wearied and angry from his sickness", Kunmanggur arrived at a place near the sea. Slowly, he gathered all the fire from that place and stood it on his head as though it were a headdress. The people said to him: "Why do you do that?" He replied: "Stay silent; I shall take this fire for-ever for myself." He entered the water. Slowly, the water rose upon him to here..., to here... to here... The people cried out to Kadpur the Butcher Bird: "He intends to take that fire into the water there!"*

*Kunmanggur was now far out. The water rose on him to here..., to here..., to here...it was up to his chest. He went to the place known as Lalalarda, where he pushed out his legs to make the creek. Kadpur flew swiftly to where the water was beginning to cover Kunmanggur's head. Pit! (the sound of snatching). He snatched the fire out of the water. But Kunmanggur's fire was out! Finished!*

*Pilirin the Kestrel, who had followed Kadpur and Kunmanggur, flew close to the people. He made fire with fire-sticks – this was the first time man had used the fire-drill. He set fire to the grass on all sides. To this day all that country looks fire-scorched (Stanner 1966: 84-97).*



Kunmanggur now thrashes around in the water and makes it turbulent with foam. He thrusts out his legs and makes creeks, finally creating the big creek which men call Doitpur (“mighty strong mother-mother mother-mother place”). The description of Kunmanggur’s place as a “mother-place” may seem strange – until it is remembered (see above, p. 291) that Kunmanggur, although described here as a “father”, is in fact of uncertain gender and quite possibly feminine. “Even those who asserted the maleness of Kunmanggur”, as Stanner (1966: 93) writes, “said that he had large breasts, like a woman’s”.

From the moment of his or her immersion, Kunmanggur was changed into the form in which “he” nowadays makes his presence felt. He is a fearsomely prodigious serpent, “with sharp protuberances on his spine, and a long tail that curves scorpion-like over his back.” This tail “ends in a hook”. Although in his former life, Kunmanggur had been huge – as big as a boabab tree – of great strength and superhuman powers, but “mild and beneficent”, in his transmogrified form he is “fierce”. It is said that, “using his hooked tail, he lies in wait for people in deep waters, with some ill-disposition towards them, and may ‘sting’ or ‘bite’ or ‘pull’ them...” (Stanner 1966: 97). He seems, then, not too different from the crocodiles of the previous myths.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Discussion.** The above is a story in which, to begin with, a man commits incest with two sisters. Like the Two Wawilak Sisters, they are depicted as menstruating. Clearly, in this phase of the myth, Tjiniman is deeply involved in menstrual pollution: not only does he have an erection at the sight of the two sisters’ menstrual blood, but he himself has just been subincised at the time, his cut penis still being painful and sore. Doubtless, then, he is still polluted with his own blood. All of this is the opposite of any involvement with fire: Tjiniman is not “dry” at all. Just before killing the Rainbow Snake, however, Tjiniman three times refuses to partake of a drink of water – although he pretends to. He lets the water spill. It is as if he had to establish himself secretly as “the opposite” of water before opposing himself to the Rainbow Snake and to all the “wetness” which such a snake implies. Tjiniman’s refusal to drink, in other words, performs the same function as the rainbow bird’s climbing up into a “dry tree” in the Dalabon myth examined

Earlier. It is a preliminary act of self-distancing from the wetness of the aquatic monster who is about to be attacked.

This reversal of Tjiniman's status – from wet to dry – is confirmed by contextual evidence. Murinbata society is divided into two patrilineal moieties, named after *Tiwunggu*, the Eaglehawk, and *Kartjin*, the Kite-hawk. Each moiety was “composed originally of different orders of people in continuous conflict.” Stanner (1966: 32) continues: “Each possessed a vital resource – fire or water – without which the other could not live.” Each would have died from excessive wetness (or dryness) had it not been able to obtain the complementary element from its partner (Stanner 1966: 32). In the Dreamtime, “only Tiwunggu people had fire” (Stanner 1966: 89). The Kartjin people had water. “When discussing the dual organisation with Aborigines”, confirms Falkenberg (1962: 193)

“one will often hear that everything that has to do with water belongs to the Kartjin moiety and everything which is associated with land, fire, and drought, belongs to Ti'wunggu”.

It was from this point of departure that the mythical “conflict” between the two “kinds” of people arose. Kunmanggur of the myth we have examined belonged to the Tiwunggu moiety – the possessors of fire, while Tjiniman belonged to the water-owning Kartjin moiety (implying that their relationship was in fact one of maternal uncle to sister's son). Yet at the conclusion of the myth, the status of each antagonist is apparently reversed: Kunmanggur has lost fire (“But Kunmanggur's fire was out! Finished!”) and is submerged in the sea, while Tjiniman – formerly of the “wet” moiety – has asserted himself as “dry”. It is to be noted that Kunmanggur's fire-stealing opponent flies up into the air (“keeping dry”) as a bird; Tjiniman himself becomes a bat.

The killing takes place in the very heart of a Rainbow-Snake ceremony which Tjiniman has organised. There are echoes here of the killing of Mutjingga, the killing of the “bad” Snake Lu'ningu in Berndt's (1951) Wawilak myth, the killing of the ogress Mumuna and countless other killings of the “original” snake-like source of ritual power (see Chapter 6 above). Tjiniman seems to be confirming that it is through men's trickery in organising what is ostensibly a “rainbow snake” ceremony that the original rainbow snake is actually betrayed and killed.

The next section of the myth is reminiscent of the Murinbata story of Ngun'bal:in, who wandered across the landscape, stopping periodically and menstruating (Chapter 10, p. 286). Kunmanggur wanders across the landscape, stopping periodically and bleeding. In one instance, it is stated that he stays for "one moon". When he stops, attempts are made to counteract the blood-flow by means of fire. But the blood overpowers fire's effects – the bleeding flesh stays raw. There is a minor flood as "water came up through the flames". All of this parallels the flood and the negation of the cooking-process in the Wawilak myth.

Finally, as if in a doomed last attempt to assert the potency of the menstrual "cooking strike", Kunmanggur wades into the water, determined with his blood- mingled wetness to drown out all the world's fire. In the nick of time, however, the bird Kadpur swoops down and snatches away the flames, which he then passes on to men. This culmination of the myth precisely mirrors those discussed earlier, in which a bird steals fire from the crocodile.

### **The myth of the Djanggawul Sisters (Yolngu)**

The final myth which will be discussed here comes from the Yolngu and is closely related to the Wawilak myth. It is not exactly an "origin of cooking-fire" story, but it contains the same elements. The difference is that this myth is not heavily coded. Instead of describing a bird stealing fire from a crocodile or snake, it admits, simply, that men stole the secrets from women. This myth, in other words, reflects the template directly and clearly: women originally held the secrets – including the secret of fire – through their ownership of their own genitals. When these secrets were stolen by men, women continued to possess their wombs and vaginas, but could no longer derive from them their previous ritual and economic power.

In the Djanggawul myth, two sisters are depicted as having created the world. Each has a supreme possession: a uterus. Every effort is made in the myth to emphasise the potency of these reproductive organs. They are depicted as filled with great quantities of children who are released in childbirth in large groups, they are depicted as streaming with blood – particularly afterbirth blood; and they are described as trailing immensely long clitorises along the

ground (Berndt 1952: 10-11). These clitorises render the Sisters sexually self-sufficient. They do not need men. An informant explains that they

“....may originally have been bi-sexual, so that their clitorises were actually penes which they used to impregnate themselves by inserting into the vagina; for the ‘clitoris-penes’ were sufficiently long to curve round and use for coitus” (Berndt 1952: 11).

To the extent that they are depicted (in some versions) as accompanied by any man, it is only their younger brother, over whom they have ritual authority and with whom they enjoy incestuous relations. “Surely, I listen to your words”, says this Djanggawul Brother to them in one song, “for you are my great leader: I always follow you....” (Berndt 1952: 226, 236).

As in the Wawilak myth, the sisters wander over the landscape, giving things their names (see Chapters 8 and 10). In the words of one of Warner’s (1957: 337) informants:

“....they gave all the trees, stones, birds, animals, everything names. They named the mud and everything. That is why we have names for these things today. We did not name them ourselves”.

Sacred objects known as *rangas* fell out from their wombs at various named places as the women wandered on their journey. For example, a particularly large *ranga* fell from the younger sister’s womb at the Yaor-yaor well of the Naladaer people on Napier’s Peninsula:

“....those two women squatted down there and a stone *ranga* fell out of the womb of the younger one. This stone can be seen a short distance from the well. Anyone can go touch it. That stone is bigger than a house. Women do not know it is a *ranga*” (Warner 1957: 339).

At Nguruninana on Elcho Island, the sisters left magic “dreamings”, the most important of which was the red ochre dreaming. The sisters are said to have spoken here: “We leave this red ochre, so that all the people may get it from us” (Berndt 1952: 44-5). Red ochre, according to Berndt, “is symbolic of the afterbirth blood shed by the two sisters”, and is also associated with the redness of the sun. Today, red ochre from Elcho Island is traded far inland and all along the coast.

The myth states – true to the template used in this thesis – that when the sisters possessed the *rangas* (that is, the ritual power conferred by their own sexual organs, they were thereby enabled to compel the men to hunt for them:

*“In the old times men used to get food for women and the women sat down on the inside and looked after the rangas (Warner 195?: 339- 40).*

We will return to this theme at the end of this chapter.

To continue with the myth: after a period in which the Sisters exercised untrammelled power, an event happened, reminiscent of the fate of the Wawilak Sisters in the parallel myth. The Sisters were deprived of their power, yielding it to men. More specifically, in the case of this myth, it is stated that the two sisters were robbed of their symbolic sexual organs and the contents of these, including the secret of fire.

Let us look at the manner in which this event is described. The sisters, in Berndt's (1952: 39) version, camped in a sacred shade – a place of seclusion and intimacy, prohibited to men. Meanwhile, a number of men who had earlier emerged from the sisters' wombs were hiding nearby. They enviously watched from afar as the sisters held a sacred *nara* ceremony “which was their ‘own business’, to which the men could not come” (Berndt 1952: 39). It was during this ceremony that the women “made fire, *rindjarei*, the sacred fire dreaming, for fire comes from the redness of the women's vaginae”. Berndt (1952: 50) adds: “....the sun's full disc at midday is termed *dagu*, *ganbai*, or *dala*, vagina or vulva, and it is from the vulvae of the Sisters than the sun's rays come....”

After their ceremony, the women

*“hung their fighting dilly bags, decorated with tasselled pendants of red parakeet feathers, on the limb of a tree, and went out to collect shell-fish.”*

The elder sister had made the decision to leave. She had said to the younger:

*‘We had better put our dilly bags in this shade, and leave them here for a while.’*

*‘What are we going to do?’ asked the other. ‘If we put them here, what are we going to do?’*

*‘Well, replied the elder Sister, ‘we can look around for mangrove shells.’”*

So they both abandoned their “dilly bags” In the sacred shade, with the sacred fire still burning there, and went to collect shells.

As soon as the women had gone, the men crept up:

“The men sat listening in their shade; and when they heard no noise, no singing or dancing, they said to one another, ‘All right. It is no good that we are men. It is no good that women should have that sacred bag and all the dressings, and we should have nothing. We’ll take over from those women.’ They all agreed, ‘Yes’.

So they came up to the women’s sacred shade and went inside; and there they found all the dreamings, all the rangga and clan patterns. They began to dance and sing the sacred songs which they had learnt by listening to the women, and which are still sung today in the dua nara. As they sang they looked in the direction the women had taken, but saw no sign of them. Then they took down the sacred dilly bag of the women and danced with it” (Berndt 1952: 39).

The sisters were still out collecting shell-fish, when suddenly they heard a djunman bird crying aloud.

“What is it crying for?”, asked the younger sister:

*“‘That bird cries to let us know’, answered the other. ‘Perhaps something has happened to our sacred dilly bags. Maybe the fire has burnt them. We had better go back and look.’*

*They left what they were doing, and ran back towards their shade. The dilly bags were gone, and on the ground about the shade were the tracks of the men who had stolen them.*

*‘Sister, look!’ called the younger Sister. ‘What are we going to do now? Where are our dilly bags?’*

*‘We had better go down and ask the men’ said the other, ‘it’s nothing to do with them.’*

*They hurried off, down towards the men” (pp. 39-40).*

The same scene is depicted in a rendering in song, this time with an emphasis on the theme of fire – the “sacred fire dreaming” left by the women in their shade:

*“We shall see what has happened to our basket.  
The long-drawn cry of the djunmal bird has warned us: perhaps the fire has burnt it..  
Yes, indeed, Sister, let us go now, and look!  
Quickly, indeed, go and look!  
There is nothing here, Sister! But we left the sacred basket hanging here!  
Only the tree, the claypan tree, is standing alone!  
It must have fallen down, and been burnt in the fire.  
Yes, Sister, indeed, it must have fallen somewhere!  
Go quickly, run fast to look for the basket..  
It must have been burnt in the fire.*

*There is nothing here, Sister!  
We must ask the others: for here are the footprints of our Brother Djanggawul,  
and the galibingu. They may have taken it from us!  
Go, pour the shells from our basket on to the glowing coals of the fire.  
Why do they take the sacred basket from us, leaving only the shells?  
We tip them upon the flames, the smouldering claypan wood...  
We leave them, so we may look for that sacred basket...  
Why do they take it from us in stealth, like children playing?  
Why do they act like children, playing?  
Why didn't they ask us? Why did they do it?  
They came sneaking along and stole our basket, quietly, without asking'''*

The sisters look for the culprits;

*"They hurried off, down towards the men. As they came running, the Djanggawul Brother and his companions looked up from their shade and saw them.*

*'What shall we do?' thought the Brother. He picked up his Jugulung singing sticks (stolen from the Sisters), and began to beat rhythmically upon them, while they all sang.*

*As soon as the Sisters heard the beat of the singing sticks, and the sound of the men's singing, they fell down and began to crawl along the ground."*

The story concludes by confirming that what have really been stolen from the women are their symbolic "vaginas" – or, to use the terms of the template, their rights to control their own sexual availability. The sisters, forced on to the ground by the power of the men's songs, console themselves with the thought that at least their reproductive organs are still there:

*"The men had taken from them not only these songs, and the emblems, but also the power to perform sacred ritual, a power which had formerly belonged only to the Sisters. They had carried the emblems and dreamings in their ngainmara (conical mats), which were really their uteri; and the men had had nothing.*

*The Two Sisters got up from the ground, and the younger one said to the elder, 'What are we going to do? All our dilly bags are gone, all the emblems, all our power for sacred ritual!'*

*But the other replied, 'I think we can leave that. Men can do it now, they can look after it. We can spend our time collecting bush foods for them, for it is not right that they should get that food as they have been doing. We know everything. We have really lost nothing,*

*for we remember it all, and we can let them have that small part. For aren't we still sacred, even if we have lost the bags? Haven't we still our uteri?'. And the younger sister agreed with her.*

*In this way, the Two Sisters left all their dreamings at that place."*

Among the dreamings left behind was the "sacred fire dreaming" of the Nara ritual – fire whose source, we may recall, was "the redness of the women's vaginae".

A final detail is worth noting. The template used in this thesis specifies that women's sex-strike and cooking-strike powers performed an economic function. The menstrual prohibition of raw meat compelled men to bring back their meat to women, ensuring thereby the necessary circulation of meat food. We would expect, then, that the breaking by men of women's powers in this respect should also have economic consequences. It should imply that women can no longer use their ritual power to compel men to bring them food. In fact, given the transfer of women's ritual power to men, we would expect an economic inversion to accompany the other inversions, with men now using their "stolen" ritual power to compel women to bring food for them.

Warner's (1957: 339-340) version confirms that this is the native view. The defeated Sisters concede:

*"It is no good now for us to try to get those baskets. We must work hard now. We women must get the food for the men from now on', said the big sister to the little one.*

*'Yes, sister', said the little one, 'we can't do anything now. It's our own fault.'*

*They went back to their camp and told all the women always to make plenty of food for the Narra time. Women do that now. The men who had stolen the ranga talked to each other. They said, 'It is a good thing we took this ranga from those women, because now they can get food for us.'*

*In the old times men used to get food for women and the women sat down on the inside and looked after the rangas...."*

Berndt's (1952: 232-33) song-version succinctly expresses the same idea. The Brother Djanggawul declares, following the women's defeat:



*“Now they may grind the cycad nut for us, whitening their hands in its flour: it is better that way!”*

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*Part III: One myth only*

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### **Chapter 12: The Sleeping Beauty and other tales**

The European fairy-tale, The Sleeping Beauty, tells of a king and queen who yearned for a child. Eventually, a baby daughter was born:

*Her parents celebrated with a feast, to which the Wise Women or Fairies were invited. There were thirteen of these in the kingdom, but as the King only had twelve golden plates for them to eat out of, one of them had to be left at home.*

*The feast was held in splendour, and then the Wise Women bestowed their blessings upon the child. The youngest ensured that she would grow up to be the most beautiful woman in the world, the next promised that she would have the spirit of an angel, the third gave her grace, the fourth decreed that she would dance perfectly, the fifth that she should sing like a nightingale. And so the blessings went on. But after the eleventh fairy had bestowed her gift, the doors of the banqueting hall suddenly flew open and the thirteenth fairy burst in. Seeing that no place had been laid for her, she turned her blessing into a curse. "The King's daughter", she declared, shall in her fifteenth year prick herself with a spindle and fall down dead."*

*Having uttered her terrible curse, the thirteenth fairy disappeared. The king and queen were distraught, and everyone was crying. But the twelfth Wise Woman, whose blessing had yet to be given, came forward to offer help. She had not enough power to undo the evil spell, but she could soften it. Instead of dying when she pricked her finger, the girl would now only sleep for a hundred years.*

*The good fairy cast her benign spell, but the King was still not satisfied. He determined to evade the consequences of the curse: every spindle in the whole kingdom was to be burnt; on no account was his daughter to bleed.*

*When the girl reached adolescence, however, the inevitable duly occurred. On her fifteenth birthday, when the King and Queen were not at home, Beauty was exploring the great palace when she came to an old tower. She climbed up the spiral stairway and at the top reached a little door. Pushing this open, she found herself in a little room; and there inside was an old woman with a spindle, busily spinning her flax. Fascinated by the spindle merrily rattling round, the young girl reached out to grasp it – and pricked her finger on it. She began to bleed, and fell into a deep sleep.*

*The curious thing was, however, that the dreadful event did not simply send the girl herself into the world of dreams. It affected the entire palace and the entire kingdom. All normal life was suddenly terminated. The King and Queen, who had just come home, fell into a deep sleep along with the whole of the court. The horses slept in the stable, the dogs in the yard, the flies on the wall – all stopped where they were. Even the fire that was flaming in the hearth went still, and the cook, who was just going to hit the scullery boy, let him be and went to sleep. Everyone joined the princess in her magical trance. It was as if time itself stood still.*

*For a hundred years, all were frozen in their positions. And as the years passed, an immense forest surrounded by an impenetrable hedge of thorns grew around the palace. In the surrounding neighbourhood, people almost forgot about the existence of the mysterious palace deep in the woods.*

*Yet legend maintained that behind the hedge of thorns was a palace in which lay a sleeping princess. From time to time, young men on hearing the legend would attempt to cut their way through the hedge in order to win the reputedly-lovely sleeping bride. But each would-be suitor was caught in the thorns, which clutched together as if they were alive. As the years passed, more and more suitors were trapped and died.*

*At long last, when a hundred years had passed, a suitor who had heard the legend decided to try his luck. This time, as he approached the hedge, large and beautiful flowers replaced the thorns, and the branches parted of their own accord to let him through, closing again as he passed. He found the palace, entered inside, stepped over sleeping bodies and eventually found Beauty herself. He kissed her, she awoke from her sleep, the entire palace woke up with her, the two were married and the couple lived happily ever after (adapted from Little Briar Rose, Grimm and Grimm 1975: 237-41).*

### **Discussion: blood, time and “the curse”**

We now come to an intriguing finding of this thesis. This fairy tale – along with others of its kind – is in its logic entirely and consistently menstrual. Like Jack-and-the-Beanstalk, Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella and countless other magical tales, it is about “this world” – the world of ordinary marital and domestic life – about “the other world”, and about the transition between the two. “The other world” is a strange place of enchantment in which marital sex is impossible. The structure of fairy tales takes the form of a movement between realm and realm. Something triggers this movement between worlds, and this “something” – as will here be demonstrated – is usually a flow of blood.

Where blood is not explicitly involved, it can almost always be shown that some substitute for blood is being used.

Let us review the story of *The Sleeping Beauty*. In seeking an understanding of the symbolism, we may take as our point of departure a passage by Bettelheim (1978: 232):

“The thirteen fairies in the Brothers Grimm story are reminiscent of the thirteen lunar months into which the year was once, in ancient times, divided... the number of twelve good fairies plus a thirteenth evil one indicates symbolically that the fatal ‘curse’ refers to menstruation.”

A consistently menstrual interpretation along these lines would run as follows. The background is the perennial problem of how to fit a fixed number of lunar months into the 365¼-day solar year. “The earliest calendar year”, writes Lyle (1986: 243), “was not the solar year of 365 days, but the lunar year consisting of twelve lunar cycles, to which an intercalary month was generally added every two or three years to keep the months in line with the natural seasons”. The number of days in a lunar cycle varies between twenty-nine and thirty – on average 29½ – so that a year was either 354 days (twelve lunar months) or 383½ days (thirteen lunar months). In other words, for as long as the year was divided up into observational lunar months – a sequence of directly-observed “moons” – there was no way in which the number “13” could be avoided. At the end of each twelve moons, a part of the thirteenth always made its presence felt, and some place for it in the calendar had to be found. The only way to establish the solar year as fixedly consisting of twelve month-like periods was to divide it into schematic “months”, arbitrarily adjusting the length of each to ensure that twelve of them totalled just 365 days. This, of course, is a feature of the modern Christian (Gregorian) calendar. The thirteenth month has been effectively suppressed. In folklore, however – at least in Europe – the suppressed month, and with it the number thirteen, remains associated with those older pagan traditions which took account not only of the sun but of the moon as well. This liminal, half-excluded thirteenth month finds reflection in “the persistence of the number thirteen” as the standard number of “witches” (“Wise Women” or “Fairies” as Grimm’s tale puts it) in a Coven in pre-Christian European traditions of ritualism (Murray 1921: 16.)

A dispute also exists as to whether menstruation should be considered a blessing or a curse. Retaining consistency with our previous analyses, we will assume the existence of an early tradition according to which menstrual bleeding was associated with the moon – and therefore with the number thirteen – and was considered a manifestation of women's ritual power. Menstruation was, in other words, included among the other blessings with which a woman could be endowed. The newer custom – and certainly the Christian one – has been to attempt to suppress this manifestation, just as the thirteenth month has been suppressed. In both respects, lunar time is being denied.

This, then, is the background to the story. The story itself tells of how a king and queen attempted to reject the “blessing” of menstrual bleeding altogether. All they wanted – or rather, all the king wanted (for we are not told of the queen's attitude in all of this) – was for the baby daughter to grow up to become a perfect wife. The blessings given by the “good” fairies are all “marital” ones: they are the attributes which any would-be suitor would look for in a bride – good looks, grace, dancing skills, a melodious voice etc. etc. No husband would be attracted by the menstrual condition of his bride, and so the thirteenth fairy with her own peculiar gift is spurned. The king, we are told, has only twelve places laid.

But the menstrual blessing cannot be ignored. If suppressed, it simply makes its presence felt in malevolent form. It takes on the nature of a curse. Menstruation in its normal or traditional form is a periodic but purely temporary “death” to marital and domestic life. The injured and angered thirteenth fairy utters her curse: when the girl comes of age, no force on earth will prevent her from bleeding. But in this case, she will bleed until she dies.

The commutation of this death-sentence determines for the princess a fate somewhere between normal monthly seclusion and permanent death. The menstrual seclusion will last for a hundred years. And the penalty to be paid by the king and queen is to be subjected to the full rigours of the traditional menstrual spell – in exaggeratedly prolonged form. The traditional logic was for menstruation (particularly, we might suppose, a royal person's first-

menstruation) to cast its spell widely over society, the ban on marital sex lasting for several days (or at most a fortnight). According to the template outlined in Chapter 5, the menstrual “sex-strike” launched society into a profound process of metamorphosis, as profound as the transition between waking life and sleep. But this certainly did not last for a hundred years. The century-long seclusion featured in *The Sleeping Beauty* is a community’s punishment for its attempt to escape seclusion altogether.

The menstrual spell is a cyclical occurrence, just as is seasonal change. Time, in the traditional view, is itself cyclical. The king, in attempting to destroy all spindles, is symbolically attempting to suppress the spinning by women of the threads of time – threads which wind like yarn around a spool. We may also infer that he is hostile to “spinsterhood”. A traditional occupation for unmarried or secluded women may have been spinning, so that a woman who never married became seen as permanently a “spinster”. Be that as it may, when the princess explores the unfamiliar stairway and discovers the old witch spinning flax in her turret in the sky, she is contacting the world of seclusion and discovering for herself the ancient feminine mistress of lunar time. Like the thirteenth fairy, this old woman brings menstrual bleeding as a gift – or, if socially-rejected, as a curse.

The girl “pricks her finger.” She bleeds, as any girl of her age eventually must. The King was foolish to try to banish the spinning-wheels or spindles, for time cannot be suppressed – every girl will come of age and bleed, her cycle itself being among the most ancient of all clocks. And as the princess bleeds, the ancient power of the blood strikes out with a vengeance against all who had believed they could defy it. The whole palace, the whole kingdom is plunged into another realm beyond waking life. All normal domestic activities cease. It is as if time stood still. Those who believed that they could alter the ancient calendar, they could abolish the thirteenth month, they could suppress the hallowed logic of menstrual time are now put firmly in their place. They will be excluded from time’s flow for a hundred years.

As the princess sleeps on, it is as if her blood had erected around her an impenetrable barrier to her ever getting married. Would-be suitors are kept at bay by a deadly hedge of thorns. She herself is now in menstrual seclusion of



a particularly rigorous, long-lasting kind, with the whole palace in seclusion with her.

But every period of seclusion – even a hundred-year one – must eventually expire. And when the time has come, lovers are free once more to approach. The spell breaks, the thorns turn into flowers. The hedge parts, allowing the young hero to enter and deliver his kiss. The sex-strike and the cooking-strike are over; the palace servants resume their domestic chores. Marital relations are resumed, and are celebrated in the palace with a royal wedding and feast.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Jack and the Beanstalk**

Two versions of this story will be drawn on here. The earliest known published version appeared in London in 1734, under the title *Enchantment demonstrated in the Story of Jack Spriggins and the Enchanted Bean* (Fenwick 1796: 32-45). However, this version seems to have been forgotten; all later tellings seem to derive from a version printed much later – in 1807. This was a sixpenny booklet called *The History of Jack and the Beanstalk* and is abridged below (Opie and Opie 1980: 214-26). It should be added that another version published in the same year – *The History of Mother Twaddle, and the Marvellous Achievements of Her Son Jack* – is broadly similar, but ends with Jack killing the giant and marrying the damsel who had welcomed him and protected him in the giant's house (Opie and Opie 1980: 213). Jack moves, then, via a monster-slaying, from a relationship with his mother to one with a wife.

The 1734 publication is significant in that it is the earliest known version, and substantially different from the others, allowing a perspective on the familiar versions which all stem from the same printed source (Opie and Opie 1980: 212). In this alternative version, Jack's initial incestuousness is stressed. We are told that though Jack "was a smart large boy", nevertheless "his Grandmother and he laid together, and between whiles the good old Woman instructed Jack in many Things..." The woman says to her grandson:

*“Jack, says she, as you are a comfortable Bed Fellow to me, I must tell you that I have a Bean is my House which will make your Fortune....”*

The old woman accidentally loses the bean from her purse; it falls into the ashes of the hearth, where the cat finds it just as Jack is making his grandmother’s fire:

*‘Odds Budd’, says Jack, I’ll set it in our Garden, and see what it will come to, for I always loved Beans and Bacon; and then what was wonderful! the Bean was no sooner put into the Ground, but the Sprout of it Jumped out of the Earth, and grew so quick that it gave Jack a Fillip on the Nose, and made him bleed furiously....”*

Bleeding “furiously” from his nose, Jack runs to his grandmother crying “Save me! I am killed!”; she tells him that now her enchantment will be broken in an hour’s time, whereupon she will be transformed. Angry at Jack’s theft of her bean, she tries to thrash him, but he climbs up the Beanstalk, which is now a mile high, and escapes. As her hour expires, the old woman turns into “a monstrous Toad and crawls into a cellar on her way to the Shades.

Meanwhile Jack climbs and climbs. The template used in this thesis specifies that food should not be available to him, on account of his nose-bleed. Little attention is usually given to the motif in the familiar version in which Jack (after a scolding from his mother) is sent “supperless to bed.” In fact, however, there is more to this than meets the eye. The version we are now examining lays laborious stress on Jack’s hunger, which afflicts him from the moment he loses blood. Jack calls at an inn in a town on one of the beanstalk’s leaves:

*“Here he thought to rest for a Time, and goes strutting like a Crow in a Gutter: What have you to eat Landlord, says he’ Everything in the World, Sir, says the Landlord: Why then, says Jack, give me a Neck of Mutton and Broth: Alas, says the Landlord, to morrow is Market Day, how unfortunate it is’ I cannot get you a Neck of Mutton to Night If it was to save my Soul: Well then get me something else, says Jack. Have you any Veal? No, indeed, Sir, not at present; but there is a fine Calf fatting at Mr. Jenkinson’s, that will be killed on Saturday next. But have you any Beef in your House, says Jack? Why truly, Sir, says the Landlord, if you had been here on Monday last, I believe, though I say it that should not say it, you never saw so fine a Sir Loin of Beef as we had, and Plum Pudding too, which the Justice who dined here, and their Clerks and Constables entirely demolished, and though I got nothing by them, yet their Company was a Credit to my House! Zounds, says Jack, have you nothing in the House? I am hungry, I am starving....”*

Jack hears a cock crowing and demands that this be killed and broiled; the Landlord refuses because the cock “belongs to the squire”. Jack asks for a hen to be killed; but all the hens are incubating eggs, which should hatch in a week. “Have you no Eggs in the House?”, asks Jack. “No, Sir, indeed”, answers the Landlord, “but Jest Eggs, which we make of Chalk”. “Why then”, says Jack, “what the Devil have you got?” “Why to tell you the Truth, Sir, I don’t know that I have any thing in the House to eat...” At this point, the narrator explains: “Thus was poor Jack plagued by the Enchantment of his Grandmother, who was resolved to lay him under her ill Tongue, so long as her Power lasted.”

At last, however, the old woman’s spell breaks; at this point, the marital phase is entered. While the old grandmother turns into a toad, Jack finds himself at last in the presence of the opposite kind of woman – a “fair lady” who is called “Empress of the Mountains of the Moon”; she used to be the grandmother’s black cat. It is explained that this beautiful woman is entirely at Jack’s disposal, and that he now has the full power of possessing all the pleasures he could desire. The couple go to bed and “play their Rantum scantum Tricks until the next Morning”. Jack is so tired from his amorous exertions that he sleeps long in the morning, dreaming about killing the giant Gogmagog and rescuing “several thousand young Ladies” from being crushed in the monster’s jaws.

\* \* \* \* \*

The later version will be more familiar. Jack sells his mother’s cow “for a few paltry beans”, which the old woman angrily throws into the garden. Not having anything to eat, “they both went supperless to bed”. In the morning, Jack sees a huge beanstalk growing in the garden and climbs up it to the sky. Jack finds himself in a barren world: “he concluded that he must now die with hunger.” He arrives at a castle and is taken in by a woman at the door; she agrees to hide him in the oven where he will not be seen by her husband, a giant who eats only human flesh. The giant enters and declares that he can smell fresh meat, but Jack remains safe in the oven. Having eaten his usual cannibalistic meal, the giant falls asleep. Jack escapes, seizes a magic hen which lays golden eggs and climbs with it down the beanstalk to his mother. Some time later, Jack

resolves to climb to the sky again. His mother refuses to give permission, so Jack “rose very early, put on his disguise, changed his complexion, and, unperceived by any one, climbed the beanstalk.” The complexion-change is achieved with “something to discolour his skin.” He is soon back at the castle, is not recognised by the giant’s wife and events are repeated – this time with Jack stealing gold and silver in two bags. On the third occasion, it is midsummer’s day. Jack disguises himself completely, goes to the castle and this time escapes with the giant’s magical harp. The harp cries out to warn the giant, who wakes up and chases the boy down the beanstalk. But as Jack reaches the ground he fetches an axe, chops down the stalk and brings the giant crashing down to his death. Jack and his mother live in wealth and comfort to the end of their days (Opie and Opie 1980: 214-226).

**Discussion.** Bleeding from the nose may be regarded as a technique of “male menstruation” (nose-bleeding for this purpose is common in Papua New Guinea; see, for example, Read 1966: 131). The story of Jack and the Beanstalk may in this light relate to some long-forgotten tradition of male initiation in England.

The relevant menstrual magic is stated in the myth to be derived from an incestuous relationship with womankind: Jack acquires the bean from his grandmother, or in exchange for his Mother’s cow. He is under the spell of this relationship as his nose bleeds and as he climbs the beanstalk. The immense, growing beanstalk doubtless has phallic connotations. These, however, are inseparable from the incest-motif: the magic is sexual, but it is also menstrual and symbolic of the mother-son connection. This is not marital sex.

True to the template, while blood is flowing, food becomes inedible (see previous chapter). While under the spell, Jack is hungry (this is stressed in all versions) and when he arrives at the castle he is in fact (to use the language of so many Australian Aboriginal myths) “swallowed”. He is taken into an oven, a pot and/or other receptacles in the giant’s kitchen. Far from eating, he is himself almost eaten alive. His flesh is raw, the odour of blood exciting and arousing the giant. “Fee! Fi! Fo! Fum!”, as the English Yurlunggur thunders in the pantomime versions, “I smell the blood of an Englishman”

Three trips are made into the giant's kitchen, and three treasures stolen. When Jack "changes his complexion" and hides in a symbolic womb (the oven) he is undergoing a role-change similar to that undergone by women in entering menstrual seclusion, and when he emerges and escapes from the monster's jaws in possession of the treasures, it is as if he were "reborn". The stolen goose, gold and harp take the place of the stolen blood and fire – or the stolen sound-making instruments or ritual paraphernalia – featured in the "primitive matriarchy" myths analysed earlier in this thesis (see Chapters 6 and 11). The number 3 appears frequently in myths of this kind. A lunar/menstrual interpretation would be that this is because once a month, the moon is absent from the sky for a period which corresponds, ideally, to the time of the menstrual flow. The "third time lucky" motif derives from the idea that the moon is "lucky" – i.e. it arises from its temporary "death" – on the third night after its first disappearance.

When Jack has travelled to the sky three times, he chops the beanstalk down, ending the menstrual/incestuous spell and the possibility of further journeys to the sky. A lunar interpretation can be placed on the fact that this occurs on midsummer's day. When the lunar light/dark cycle is mapped onto the seasonal cycle, midsummer appears as "full moon". This is the traditional time of emergence from seclusion – a moment often marked by ceremonial love-making (see Chapter 5).

### **Little Red Riding Hood**

If Jack-and-the-Beanstalk relates, possibly, to an ancient English ritual of male initiation, Little Red Riding Hood by the same token probably relates to a feminine counterpart – a first-menstruation rite whose theme is a major change of status conceptualised as a metamorphosis, change of identity or change of "skin".

This tale, which has a long French tradition, was told from the late Middle Ages up to the present. Its prominence between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries was connected with the great superstitious belief in werewolves current in the period; in the course of numerous werewolf trials, thousands of men and women were persecuted and killed on the charge of being secret wolves

(Zipes 1983: 28-9). Werewolves, as is well-known, are apparent humans who undergo a metamorphosis and reveal themselves temporarily to be wolves, the process being connected with the changing phases of the moon.

Menstruation, as shown in Chapter 6, is associated with the idea of temporary death – death followed by rebirth. It may also be viewed as a change of “masks”, “skins” or roles (the “change of complexion” in Jack-and-the-Beanstalk is a male version of this). In this thesis, such themes have been viewed as expressions of the transformational template outlined in Chapter 5. In retreating into seclusion together, women lose their former identities and become incorporated (as if “swallowed. into a larger identity of both human and animal “blood”. When they emerge once more, they regain their separate identities as if being regurgitated and restored to new life.

The focus of dramatic interest in Little Red Riding Hood is the extraordinarily-changed appearance of what the heroine takes to be her grandmother. The old woman has suddenly grown enormous eyes, ears and teeth, as well as a ravenous cannibalistic appetite. In the early French oral versions from which Perrault derived his familiar literary tale (Zipes 1983: 28), the werewolf invites the young girl to join in the cannibalistic feast. The wolf

“... arrives at the grandmother’s house, eats her, and puts part of her flesh in a bin and her blood in a bottle. Then the little girl arrives. The werewolf disguised as the grandmother gives her the flesh to eat and the blood to drink.” (Zipes 1983: 28).

The little girl then obediently eats her grandmother’s flesh and drinks her blood.

Like Jack’s nosebleed, this detail once again indicates the power of the template. It expresses the basic structural fact underlying all these tales – namely, that in order to travel to the world beyond (in order to be initiated) it is necessary to bleed or come into the most intimate contact with blood – in this case, maternal blood. Wearing a red head-covering may be regarded as symbolic of this.

Zipes (1983: 29) points out that the blood-drinking episode “acts out an initiation ritual...” “In facing the werewolf and temporarily abandoning herself to him”, he continues (p. 30),

“the little girl sees the animal side of her self. She crosses the border between civilisation and wilderness, goes beyond the dividing line to face death in order to live.”

Seeing “the animal side of herself” is explicable in the template’s terms: to menstruate is to bleed “as if” bitten by a carnivore or pierced by a spear. It is to adopt an identity symbolised by blood and shared by women and wild animals alike. “Facing death in order to live” refers us – in the template’s terms – to menstruation as a “temporary death” from which rebirth ensues.

In the familiar version, the cannibalism-motif is less explicit, but both the girl and her grandmother are conjoined in “excessive” maternal intimacy (reminiscent of Jack’s incest) in the monster’s belly. They emerge once more as separate individuals only after the wolf is cut open and they are rescued. From this point on, the girl enters a new life. As Bettelheim (1978: 179) comments:

“Little Red Cap and her grandmother do not really die, but they are certainly reborn. If there is a central theme to the wide variety of fairy tales, it is that of rebirth to a higher plane.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Cinderella**

The following is Charles Perrault’s version of this “best-known fairy story in the world” (Opie and Opie 1980: 152):

*There was once a girl who lived among the cinders of the hearth place and was called “Cinderella” as a result. Her mother had died and her father had remarried. Cinderella’s step-mother and two step-sisters continuously taunted her and made her work for them: it was they who forced her to wear rags and to sleep in the fireplace.*

*One day it was heard that there was to be a royal ball. The two step-sisters and the step-mother dressed up in their finery; Cinderella was forbidden to go. While everyone was at the ball, however, a fairy godmother appeared and conjured up a magical means of travel to the ball, together with clothes of silver and gold cloth. Unrecognised, Cinderella arrived in splendour at the royal palace and danced with the prince. The spell broke at midnight,*

*whereupon Cinderella had to run home in rags, leaving her glass slipper behind. The prince toured the kingdom, searching for the woman whose foot would fit the slipper he had retrieved. At last, he arrived at Cinderella's home. The step-sisters tried on the slipper in vain, while Cinderella's tiny foot fitted perfectly, qualifying her to become the prince's bride (abridged from Opie and Opie 1980: 161-65).*

### **The spirits of blood and fire**

The dramatic interest of this story centres on the relationship between Cinderella and her step-sisters. A vast number of versions of Cinderella have been recorded (Cox 1893). In all of them, the contrast between the “good” and the “bad” bride or brides can be shown to concern the contrast between the two roles of womankind discussed earlier in this thesis: namely, her marital availability on the one hand, and her menstrual solidarity and (from a male point of view) “unattractiveness” on the other.

Cinderella's association with fire is unambiguous. Even if we leave aside versions in which she is explicitly the bringer of cooking-fire to a cold hearth (Cox 1893: 490-98), the evidence is plentiful. In the familiar version, she sleeps every night in the fireplace; in a Scottish version, she hides “behind the cauldron” (Cox 1893: 128); in an Armenian version, she “sits in the stove” (Cox 1893: 142). In short, there is no doubt that she is, as Cox (1893: xxxvi) puts it, “the guardian of the hearth”.

Role-exchanging is also a prominent theme. In some versions, the “good” and “bad” sisters exchange dresses, so that one is taken for the other (Cox 1893: 144). Even in the familiar version, Cinderella is unrecognised by anyone at the ball. All this can be interpreted in terms of the template: the exchanges of roles, slippers and clothes in the myth appear in this light as expressions of a lunar logic of metamorphosis and alternation between opposite states.

In what follows, it will be shown that these opposed states or roles are linked with “blood” and “fire” as symbols of marriage and kinship respectively.

What is certainly noticeable is that Cinderella lacks menstrual attachments or solidarity. She is detached (by death) from her Mother and also gets married;



the other two sisters (note that there are two of them – their sisterhood defines their identity) do not marry. They stay with each other and with their Mother. That is, they put kinship-bonds first. In terms of the template, then, whereas we would expect Cinderella to be “cooked” as a mark of her marital availability, the other two sisters ought to be labelled “bloody” and “raw” on account of their primary attachment to “their own blood”.

The fact that Cinderella’s flesh is “cooked” is suggested unequivocally: Cinderella sleeps every night in the fireplace. But do the other sisters really menstruate?

The answer is that they do. In Grimm’s version (pp. 121-28) – paralleled in this respect by hundreds of others (Cox 1893) – the following events take place during the final slipper-trying episode. The king’s son has arrived with the slipper, which the two step-sisters are determined to try on:

*“The eldest went with the shoe into her room and wanted to try it on, and her mother stood by. But she could not get her big toe into it, and the shoe was too small for her. Then her mother gave her a knife and said: ‘Cut the toe off; when you are Queen you will have no more need to go on foot.’ The maiden cut the toe off, forced the foot into the shoe, swallowed the pain, and went out to the King’s son” (Grimm and Grimm 1975: 126).*

The prince now rides off with the eldest sister. However, they have to pass the grave of Cinderella’s mother, on which grows a tree with two pigeons perched in its branches. As the prince and his bride pass, the pigeons expose the false bride’s bloody secret. They sing out to the prince:

*“Turn and peep, turn and peep,  
There’s blood within the shoe,  
The shoe it is too small for her,  
The true bride waits for you.”*

It is therefore not because the sister is “ugly” that the prince rejects her. In fact, he is perfectly prepared to accept her as the beautiful woman with whom he had danced at the ball. He rejects her purely and simply when he is informed that she is bleeding from her “shoe” (an obvious vagina-symbol – see Dundes 1980: 47). Grimm’s narrative continues:

*“Then he looked at her foot and saw how the blood was trickling from it. He turned his horse round and took the false bride home again, and said she was not the true one..”*

The other sister tried on the shoe and – when it did not fit – cut off her heel. This, too, deceived the prince until he was informed by the pigeons of the blood in this sister’s shoe:

*“He looked down at her foot and saw how the blood was running out of her shoe, and how it had stained her white stocking quite red. Then he turned his horse and took the false bride home again. This also is not the right one, said he...”*

Cinderella is summoned and the shoe fits her like a glove. “No blood is in the shoe... The true bride rides with you...” the two pigeons confirm (Grimm and Grimm 1975: 127).

So Cinderella is “cooked”, whereas her sisters’ wounds are bloody and raw. An Icelandic version clarifies this contrast even more starkly. The two ugly sisters are sent off to fetch cooking-fire from the cave in which it dwells, but each comes back unsuccessfully – one with a cut and bleeding hand, the other with her nose bitten off. The beautiful youngest daughter, however, arrives in the cave, finds the fire, cooks some bread and meat “well and carefully”, and comes back with the gift of cooking. She then marries a prince who, in his former incarnation, had been the terrifying monster guarding the secret of fire in his dark cave (Cox 1893: 490-98).

Not only is Cinderella “cooked”, whereas her step-sisters are bloody and raw – she is also associated with light, whereas the step-sisters are left in the dark. Grimm’s version has it that Cinderella’s dress, when she goes to the ball, is of gold and silver. A Norwegian version specifies that the three dresses correspond to “sun, moon and Star” (Cox 1893: 490-98). The bleeding Sisters, by contrast, in Grimm’s version have their eyes plucked out by the two pigeons which settle on each of Cinderella’s shoulders as she gets married in the church. Just as Cinderella (in Grimm’s version) had been forced by her step-mother to separate a bowlful of lentils from the ashes into which they had been thrown, so now the prince has separated lightness from the dark, beauty from ugliness, “the good” from “the bad.”

A further significant feature in Grimm’s Cinderella is that the royal ball lasts for three nights. Three times, Cinderella’s appearance is transformed; three times, she dances with the prince in her dazzling finery but is

recognised by no-one; three times she runs home afterwards to hide, allowing her face to become dirty and putting on rags. The significance of a spell which lasts for three days has been touched on already, in our consideration of Jack-and-the-Beanstalk. Cinderella's three trips between home and the ballroom and her disguising of her identity in fact match closely Jack's repeated trips to the sky and his discolouring of his face so as not to be recognised. In Cinderella, too, the motif of incest is present. The "ugly" sisters are associated with "blood" and matrilineal kinship; Cinderella has no female kin and instead prioritises marriage. Not only is she not incestuous: she makes a strong point of escaping from incest – the motif of Cinderella's father's incestuous advances and her escape from them is quite explicit in numerous traditional versions (Cox 1893). In Grimm's version, she has to repeatedly escape, in fact, from her own father, who is in league with the prince in attempting to catch her before she is ready for marriage. But she escapes, in a process which involves not merely hiding but also the exchanging of one identity for another. After the ball, the prince tries to accompany her home:

*"She escaped from him, however, and sprang into the pigeon house. The King's son waited until her father came, and then he told him that the unknown maiden had leapt into the pigeon-house. The old man thought: 'Can it be Cinderella?' and they had to bring him an axe and a pickaxe that he might hew the pigeon-house to pieces, but no one was inside it"* (Grimm and Grimm 1975: 124).

Cinderella has escaped through the back of the pigeon-house, left her dazzling dress on her mother's grave and seated herself back among the ashes in her grey gown. This happens twice. It is only on his third attempt that the prince succeeds in catching Cinderella, by pouring pitch on the staircase of the ballroom so that her shoe gets stuck in it for him to retrieve. The suggestion is that Cinderella is only ready for marriage after her three trips to the ballroom and her three escapes. It is all a matter of timing (as Perrault's version confirms, with its story about Cinderella's obligation to return from the ballroom at midnight). Had she allowed herself to be caught earlier, this would have been to violate the special three-day period of magical self-transformation which she had been given by her mother's spirit. Once her three days of disguises, escapes and hiding were over, marriage could properly ensue.

**Chapter – 13: Amerindian variations**

In each one of our four fairy tales, then, blood turns out to be involved in the casting of a spell. This spell is of a kind which carries away young men or women from marital life into another realm. The enchanted realm is an inversion of the normal one: instead of eating, one is treated as food; instead of marrying, one returns to the womb; instead of being awake, one is immersed in the realm of dreams. And the process of moving from world to world involves a profound transformation of the self: one falls into a deep trance or sleep (*Sleeping Beauty*), the nose bleeds, the face is blackened (*Jack-and-the-Beanstalk*); huge eyes, ears and teeth render the familiar face unrecognisable (*Red Riding Hood*); dazzling clothes and finery suddenly turn back to rags and vice versa (*Cinderella*). There is a moving to and fro – or a bobbing up and down – between states:

***Cinderella***: between dazzling splendour and dark humiliation or even blindness, between fire and blood, between marital union and the bonds of kinship, between the “true” bride and the “false”;

***Jack-and-the-Beanstalk***: between earth and sky, poverty and wealth, mother’s hearth and giant’s oven;

***Red Riding Hood***: between the real mother-figure and her false counterpart; between the inside and the outside of the wolf’s belly;

***Sleeping Beauty***: between sleep and waking life, stillness and movement, curse and kiss,

Of course, in any conceivable plot or story-line, events would have to occur, and it would be easy to contrast all the events and situations with one another in various ways. This would not prove anything, for any tale whatsoever would be consistent with the pointing out of contrasts of such a kind.

What makes matters much more interesting is that in the case of magical tales, constraints do seem to apply. The term “magical tales” refers to stories of the kind already discussed in this thesis — myths of primitive matriarchy and

other stories purporting to explain the nature or origins of ritual power. Magical tales – in short – are those originating within the context of magical ritual; they are stories designed, literally, to enchant.

In this context, it is not at all the case that the imagination of the story teller is permitted to invent any sequence at will. In particular, the central argument of this thesis would be demolished if a single accurately-recorded traditional magical tale depicted a person's bleeding as the immediate prelude to legitimate marriage. In every case without exception, it will be found that blood triggers not marriage but its opposite (incest "swallowing" etc.). Moreover, whenever any one of the previously-mentioned pairs of contrasts enters the story, it does matter which way round it is. Assuming menstruation to be coded negatively (as it usually is), the pairs of contrasts include:

<b>Menstruation</b>	<b>Emergence from seclusion</b>
Raw	Cooked
Blood	Fire
Wet	Dry
Darkness	Light
Incest	Marriage
Kinship	Affinity
Hunger/being eaten	Feasting
Curse	Kiss
Ugliness	Beauty
Rags	Riches

If the story-teller were at liberty to invent any event or situation and make it combine with any other, then items from either side in these columns could be selected at random and strung together to form a story. But the story teller is not free in this sense – not free, in any event, if the aim is to produce a tale expressive of magical power.

It will be found that the constraints which operate are those specified in the template outlined in Chapter 5. Accordingly, a hero cannot get married and suddenly find that he is hungry. Hunger goes with menstruation, not marriage. A plot about a hungry newly-wed husband might, therefore, make an interesting story, but it would not be magic. For magic to work, marriage, cooking and feasting have to occur together, just as incest, rawness, hunger and being eaten or swallowed occur together. This is because menstruation, according to

the template, generates kinship-solidarity at the expense of marital coupling, making cooking, feasting and marital sex all dependent upon a successful outcome of the sex-strike” and the hunt. This “initial situation” – it is here argued – is the point of departure for menstrual symbolism in human culture generally, it is a logic of periodicity faithfully preserved at a structural level within the world’s traditional magical myths.

The story-teller, consequently, cannot take one element from one of the above two columns without having to imply or connote all the others. This does not mean, of course, that every single item must be explicitly referred to in every telling of every tale. The story-teller has much freedom in this respect: that he or she can make a selection of the contrast-pairs which are to be exploited in the tale. For example, a choice might be made as to whether the story concerns the struggle between beauty and ugliness, or the conflict between earth-dwellers and the celestial beings. Or the narrator may choose whether to emphasise the conflict between light and darkness, or that between fire and blood. These kinds of choices can be made. But once made, the selected contrast-pairs can be related to one another only one way round. No-one has ever heard of a menstruating cook, a marriage celebrated in the belly of a wolf, a true bride whose bridal gown is stained or a false bride who remains in purest white, menstruation on midsummer’s afternoon or a honeymoon during an eclipse or storm. It is often thought that in magical myths, anything at all is allowed. In reality, the constraints – although seemingly-subtle and unobtrusive, and although they have hitherto eluded precise specification – are rigid, consistent and identical throughout the world.

### **The bird-nester**

The subject of *universal* constraints shaping the construction of myths brings us, naturally and inevitably, to the later theoretical achievements of Claude Lévi-Strauss. In the remainder of this thesis it is hoped to show that Lévi-Strauss’s intuition concerning the existence of “universal structures” was not misguided. Such structures do exist: yet it can be argued that despite the monumental endeavours of his *Mythologiques*, Lévi-Strauss himself does less than justice to his own initial insight concerning them. The “universal structures” whose influences he discerns prove elusive to his grasp; he can

argue plausibly for their presence, yet never states at all concisely what they are. The shapeless immensity and scale of *Mythologiques* and its lack of a concrete conclusion prove, ultimately, more a liability than an asset, since we are led to the suspicion that Lévi-Strauss himself is uncertain as to the nature of the structures in which he wishes others to believe.

In this and the following two chapters, it will be 'shown that the constraints partially uncovered by Lévi-Strauss in his *Mythologiques* can be more fully and succinctly presented and are capable of precise description. They are in fact quite adequately defined by the transformational template already outlined in Chapter 5.

At this point we may turn to the "bird-nester" motif with which Lévi-Strauss begins and ends his extraordinary and epoch-making study of North and South American Indian myths. The "key myth" of the entire four-volume work is a story told by the Bororo Indians of Central Brazil (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 35-37). It may be thought of as an Indian Jack-and-the-Beanstalk.

*In olden times, the women used to go into the forest to gather the palms used in the making of penis-sheaths which were presented to adolescent boys at their initiation ceremony. One youth secretly followed his mother into the forest as she did this, caught her unawares, and raped her.*

*As punishment, his angry father forced him to steal three noise-making instruments (a bell and two rattles) from the souls inhabiting the other world. The boy journeyed three times to the land of the dead, returning safely with the trophies thanks to the help of various animals who took his side.*

*Then his father made the boy climb up a steep rock-face to the sky, using a pole as ladder. The father claimed that some macaws were nesting in the face of the cliff and the boy was to capture them. But when the boy had reached the nests the father knocked the pole down, stranding the bird-nester in the sky.*

*Feeling hungry, the boy set off along the top of the rock and began to look for food. But when he had killed some lizards, which he strung around his waist, they went rotten, producing such a smell that he fainted. While he was asleep, vultures – attracted by the rotting meat – came and ate the lizards, and then began eating the boy himself. His hindquarters were completely gnawed away.*

*Before they had devoured him completely, however, the vultures lifted him into the air and deposited him at the foot of a mountain. The hero regained consciousness "as if he were awaking from a dream."*

*Having tried to eat food without success – the food passed straight through his body without being digested, owing to his lack of a rectum – the boy moulded himself an artificial behind of dough. Having thus stopped himself up, he ate his fill.*

*When he returned to his village, neither his grandmother nor his younger brother recognised him – he looked like a lizard. However, he revealed himself to them, resuming his human appearance. That same night, a violent thunderstorm extinguished all the fires in the village except his grandmother's. Next morning, everybody had to come to her for hot embers to rekindle their fires.*

*Finally, the hero changed himself into a deer and rushed at his father who was out hunting, killing him. The boy dropped his dead father into a lake, in which cannibalistic fish devoured all but the bones. The boy then killed his father's wives, including his own mother.*

### Discussion

The Bororo story of the “bird-nester” can be interpreted as follows. The myth is an American Indian version of Jack-and-the-Beanstalk. In both stories, we have an incestuous relationship with the mother (with the implication that mothers cannot be trusted to control their own sons), followed by a trip to the sky, hunger, the experience of being treated as food, descent from the sky and revenge upon the personage held responsible for the suffering endured. In both cases, we have the motif of three trips to the other world, and the stealing of three trophies. And in both cases, we have a disguised reference to male menstruation: in Jack-and-the-Beanstalk, Jack's blackening of his own face (In the familiar version) or his nosebleed (in the earliest published version) connotes menstrual bleeding and what may be termed “skin-change”; in the Bororo “bird nester” story, the hero's lack of a behind and consequent incontinence may refer to a male ritual substitute for menstrual blood-loss. If this were the case, then just as bleeding from the nose would be interpretable as one means of simulating “menstruation”, so inducing diarrhoea would appear as another. In support of this, we may note that in his own analysis of this myth, Lévi-Strauss (1970: 124-135) links menstruation, as a potentially-excessive degree of “openness”, to various other kinds of “incontinence” or “lack of control over bodily orifices”. Certainly, the condition of the Bororo “bird-nester”, whose food runs straight through him as if he had no rectum at all, would be a familiar initiatory experience in the eyes of many South American tropical forest peoples. The next section below will illustrate this



with an example from the north-west Amazonian Barasana, among whom male initiation involves drinking yagê – a beer which induces diarrhoea (Stephen Hugh-Jones 1979: 200-01).

In order to emerge from her seclusion, a menstruating woman must, in effect, cease to be “open”. She must, so to speak, stop herself up. At the end of his ordeal, the “bird-nester” stops himself up with a behind made of dough; it is suggested that in this, he is mirroring the role of a menstruating girl stopping up her flow as the condition of emergence from seclusion.

The Bororo bird-nester performs or is involved in a number of operations, each of which is quickly followed by its opposite. He goes to the land of the dead, but comes back miraculously alive. He climbs a steep cliff-face, but is later carried down again. He has his hindquarters removed, but then succeeds in stopping himself up with dough. He is slowly eaten alive, and is unable to eat food himself, but later eats his fill. He faints, and then wakes up again. Rains fall, putting out almost all the fires, but on the following morning the fires are all kindled again. The hero becomes a lizard but then resumes his human form again. These changes of state can be tabulated in this way:

First state	Second state
Death	Life
Sky	Earth
Open	Closed
Eaten	Eating
Hungry	Full
Asleep	Awake
Rain	Fire
Animal form	Human form

The elements in the first column are all those appropriate to the menstrual phase, while those in the second are appropriate to the marital phase. The initial states are those brought upon the boy by his initial act of incest with his mother. The myth does not tell us whether the hero eventually finds a wife, but we know that he negates the possibility of further maternal incest, since he kills his mother. A further reversal concerns his relationship with his father. Initially it is his father who sends him to the likelihood of a watery death (the land of the souls can be reached only by flying over a lake) and

who subjects him to the suffering of being eaten; at the end, the boy drops his dead father into a lake where he is eaten by carnivorous fish.

### **Male menstruation among the Barasana**

Lévi-Strauss does not interpret this myth in terms of its function within the context of male initiation ritual. Nonetheless, it can be shown that the elements in the first column above correspond to the experience of entering the seclusion of a male initiation-rite (or the seclusion of menstruation), while those in the second column correspond to emergence from this state.

The Bororo bird-nester myth is explicit about its own connection with male initiation ritual. As the myth opens, the boy is about to be initiated. Why? The myth immediately provides an answer: the youth rapes his mother as she is obtaining the necessary penis-sheath. Women, then, cannot be trusted to exercise proper sexual control over their own sons. Men must therefore do it for them. So the boy's father now takes the necessary action. The young bird-nester's adventures are a punishment for his incest, and, we might say, "take the place of his initiation. He would have been initiated; Instead he is sent to the world of the dead, stranded in the sky, eaten alive etc. We may take it, then, that these adventures are in fact a coded reference to the experiences involved in initiation itself. The "bird-nesters" temporary "death" (encounter with "rotteness", fainting, being eaten etc.) followed by "rebirth" (waking up, resuming his human form etc.) would then correspond to the usual logic of male initiation-rites discussed earlier in this thesis.

In this context, a detailed account of Bororo male initiation ritual might help us in understanding the myth. Crocker (1985: 66, 106) gives a sketchy description based on informants' memories: initiation involved an encounter with the *aigé*, a kind of Bororo Rainbow Snake. Lévi-Strauss (1973: 414-15) writes that this monster gave off a vile stench of rotteness; it lived in rivers and marshlands, and its voice was the sound of the bullroarer. Australian and Amazonian analogies – particularly in the light of the argument of previous chapters – would lead us to expect an equivalence between this vile-smelling *aigé* and the "smell" and "rotteness" of "death" associated with menstruation.

Given the difficulties in reconstructing an adequate picture Of Bororo male initiation, however, we may at this point turn for help to one of the most thorough modern studies of male initiation ritual to have been conducted in the South American tropical forest region. This is Stephen and Christine Hugh Jones's account of *He House* among the Amazonian Barasana (see above, Chapter 6, pp. 200-201). In addition to being good ethnography, this happens also to be one of the few accounts of fieldwork in South America designed to test some of the theoretical findings made by Lévi-Strauss in his *Mythologiques*. It is here proposed to elaborate on the description of *He House* presented in Chapter 6.

*He House* means “menstrual house” – or rather, it means the large communal dwelling in which men menstruate in a seasonal ritual designed to bring on the annual rains. The rite of *He House* is in essence a three-day collective menstrual period undergone by men. It is of particular relevance to the themes of this thesis, not least because on the level of symbolic intention, everything which happens in northern Australian male initiation ritual is precisely mirrored among the Barasana, although the materials and techniques used in embodying these intentions (for example, the use of red paint instead of blood or ochre) do differ from their Australian counterparts.

Prominent in the rite of *He House* are a variety of flutes and “trumpets” (in fact large megaphones). These trumpets, which represent a great Snake – an anaconda – produce “a terrifying noise”, compared to thunder; this noise is made by the player blowing with pursed lips down an open tube “and is thus like an amplified fart” (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 200). An intrinsic feature of the trumpets is that they are “open-ended”; they are said to “open up” women at puberty (causing them to menstruate). If a child should see the trumpets (or other *He* instruments), its anus would be opened up disastrously – it would suffer from violent diarrhoea until it wasted away and died. Consistently with this, initiation – which involves contact with the trumpets – does “open up” boys (rather – we may note – as the “bird-nester” has his behind eaten away). A feature of *He House* is that the participants drink *yage* beer to give themselves diarrhoea. It also makes them vomit (p. 200). It is clear that this male activity of self-opening and cleansing by the release of vomit and excrement is conceptualised as a counterpart to the more natural “self- purifying” process of female menstruation (pp. 200-01). A girl's vagina is

“opened up” for the first time when she reaches puberty and has her first menstrual period; myths say that the first “opening up” of women for menstruation was achieved by means of the trumpets (p. 266).

At the beginning of this chapter, it was pointed out that in four of the most familiar European fairy-tales, blood was involved in the casting of a spell. This is certainly the case – at least metaphorically – in the rite of *He House*. The climax of the rite is the melting of beeswax in a sacred wax gourd. The wax “has a specific association with menstrual blood”, while the gourd container is “like a womb containing children”. The melting of the wax produces a symbolic menstrual flow which brings on the annual rains (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 167, 178). During the ritual, the novices and others are covered with red paint “identified with menstrual blood” (p. 184); women are not to touch this paint or they “will immediately start to menstruate”, their blood being this paint (p. 76).

*He House* is not only a “metaphorical menstruation” (C. Hugh-Jones 1979: 153), it is also “a symbolic act in which adult men give birth to the initiates” (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 132). In order to give birth, men “must first be opened up and made to menstruate” (p. 132). The boys to be born are metaphorically “swallowed” by an immense snake – an anaconda (p. 218). The boys are made “dead” by being coated with black paint, said to make the flesh rot (p. 77). When the youths have been “rotted” with this black paint, they are then “sat down....in a foetal position with their knees drawn up to their chests” (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 77). That is, they are now fetuses inside the maternal womb. It is an extremely vulnerable condition – an exposed state which is “compared to that of crabs and other animals that have shed their old shells or skins” (p. 120). This is to be understood in the context of the belief that menstruation, like *He House* as a whole, “is an internal changing of skin” (p. 183). The boys in their vulnerable condition are like crabs or menstruating women in the process of self-renewal.

The boys are subsequently reborn and are then carried by the men exactly as if they were newborn babies. Finally, they are ritually “cooked” by being bathed in smoke (p. 83).

For about two months after the rite, black paint remains on the Initiates, who are subject to rigid dietary, sexual and other restrictions. The boys are said to be dangerous and contaminated “like menstruating women”; any woman who touched the boys in this state would be penetrated by *He* “in the form of an anaconda” (p. 87).

In her discussion of the logic involved in all of this, Christine Hugh-Jones notes the contrast between the organised reproductivity of men and the isolated, randomised reproductivity of women. The nub of the matter is that *He* House as “male menstruation” brings men together as an organised group – in starkest contrast with female menstruation, which “sets women apart in an order which is purely random (C. Hugh-Jones 1979: 155, 159).

In order for the rains to be brought on, then, collective menstruation among humans must occur. It is an implication of the myths that originally, this task was performed by women, in the beginning, say the myths, came “*Romi Kumu*, Woman Shaman, the prototype shaman from whom all shamans derive their power...” (p. 100). Using her magic vagina, which contained both water and fire, she created the seasonal cycle by first submerging the world in a flood, then burning it in a universal conflagration (p. 263). The rain season is “the menstrual period of the sky” (p. 179), the rain itself being *Romi Kumu*’s blood. The time of the onset of the rains is associated with the Pleiades and with the moon (p. 192); among the neighbouring Desana, this is the moment when the huge anacondas rise up vertically out of the water to “assure themselves of the changing seasons” (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1968: 74).

The shedding of the blood-like rain is conceptualised as a cosmic renewal, a moment of “cosmic skin-change”, consistent with the idea that *He* House “succeeds in renewing the natural processes of the world” (C. Hugh-Jones 1979: 156). The renewal of women, being associated with the moon, is also associated with the opposition between day and night”; it is equally associated with the alternation between wet season and dry (C. Hugh-Jones 1979: 156). *Romi Kumu* is old in the evening, yet by painting herself with menstrual blood and then bathing to wash it off she “changes her skin” and becomes young again each morning (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 264). Seasonal and lunar rebirth or renewal

express the same logic in which death is overcome. These notions are summed up by Stephen Hugh-Jones (p. 250) when he writes that women

“are semi-immortal: through menstruation, they continually renew their bodies by an internal changing of skin – hence they live longer than men – and through childbirth they replace themselves with children. These processes are thought of as being akin to the succession of seasons and the growth of animals and plants in the natural world. The key to female creativity is seen to lie in the fact that women, like the world of nature, are periodic and cyclical.”

The myths say that the ancestors of humanity had the chance to remain immortal but lost it by failing to respond properly to *Romi Kumu's* womb. *Romi Kumu* had offered men her immortality-conferring “gourd” (that is, her vagina) However, men’s response was unwise. “I’m not going to eat from your vagina, it is very bitter and smells”, was the response of Old Star when offered the gift of eternal life. *Romi Kumu* therefore put the magic gourd back between her legs and offered men an imitation (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 264-5). This is the gourd used in the ritual of *He House* today. It is “not the real one but the left-over gourd which gives life but not immortality” (p. 182). It is said that when men foolishly declined *Romi Kumu's* offer, snakes and spiders stepped in, ate from the “smelly” vagina and acquired thereby the power to change their skins periodically instead of dying. Men were left only with the artificial gourd. Since then, when men have died, they have not come back to life (S Hugh-Jones 1979: 264-5).

The boys who, in the ritual, are coated with black paint and are said to “die” and then “come alive”, are said to be following in the footsteps of the Moon, who was the first to die and be reborn in this way (p. 274). Yet the men know that what they do is in some sense only an “imitation” of the real thing. “We were directly told”, writes Christine Hugh-Jones (p. 154), “that *He wi* is like women’s menstruation but that women really do menstruate while *He wi* is *bahi kemoase*, imitation”. The women say: “The men make as if they too create children but it’s like a lie” (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 222).

### **The interchangeability of myths and rites**

It would be beyond the scope of this thesis to detail the extent to which the Hugh-Jones Barasana ethnography validates and delineates the transformational

template outlined in Chapter 5. The aim here is simply to draw on *He House* to assist us in decoding one of the key myths of *Mythologiques*.

The Barasana have their own rich corpus of myths through which to conceptualise and organise the experiences involved in *He House*. However, it is an interesting finding of this thesis that it hardly seems to matter which magical myths are selected as keys to comprehend such processes. It will now be argued that since all magical myths derive from the same template, and since this template is also the point of departure for the corresponding rituals, a “good fit” is automatically guaranteed in advance. In fact, almost any fairy-tale from neighbouring tribes – or even from European folklore – might be usable among the Barasana as an aid to the comprehension of the magic of *He House*. To say – as will now be argued – that the Bororo “bird- nester” myth might be similarly serviceable is therefore not to make any special claims about the relationship between this particular myth and the *He House* rite. Almost any other fairy tale might do beautifully: it is nevertheless true that this myth works beautifully, too.

Let us recall the key features of the “bird-nester” myth: the hero’s maternal incest and rape, his punishment by his father, his three errands to the world of the dead and so on. Although some inventiveness and shifts of emphasis may be required, we will see that it is by no means difficult to force the features of *He House* into the conceptual box provided by this myth.

Without claiming complete ethnographic fidelity at every point, the following is one suggested way in which such a “fit” might be artificially accomplished. Beginning with the incest-motif, we are forced to concede that no Barasana boy in being initiated would actually rape his mother. But the ritual of *He House* (a) brings a boy into intimate contact with “menstrual blood” and with a “womb” from which he is “reborn” and (b) gives him power over all women, including his mother. In the rite of *He House*, no Barasana boy – to continue – would be punished by his father by being sent on three errands to the world of the dead. But each *He House* novice is compelled to spend three days in a menstrual hut in which he symbolically joins the ranks of the dead. He comes back from this seclusion in possession of the emblems and paraphernalia of male ritual power (rather as the “bird-nester” returns with two rattles and a

bell). No Barasana youth has to climb a cliff-face to the sky. But entering *He* House is certainly travelling to another world. The “bird-nester” is deceived by his father, who knocks away the pole and thereby imprisons his son. Deception of the uninitiated is an important element in *He* House as in all male initiation ritual; and once in the secluded sphere, no escape is allowed before the allotted time. The “bird-nester” is extremely hungry; so is the Barasana boy (who is not only kept on a restricted diet but is made to vomit up his food).

The “bird-nester” is asphyxiated with the stench of rotten lizards; the Barasana boy is covered with black paint – paint which “is the colour of rottenness and death, and makes the wearer dead”; the boy’s flesh is said to rot (C. Hugh-Jones 1979: 149). The “bird-nester’s” rear is devoured by vultures, so that, in the absence of a rectum, all his food passes straight through him; the Barasana boy’s anus is “opened up” as he drinks the diarrhoea-inducing beer. The “bird-nester” stops himself up with an artificial behind made of dough; the Barasana boy is taught “control over bodily orifices” – that is, taught how to become “stopped up” as an essential aspect of his education (which involves being alternately open” and “closed” in accordance with definite rules – S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 202). The “bird-nester’s” adventures immediately precede the onset of a thunderstorm which extinguishes almost all fire; *He* House immediately precedes the onset of the annual rains. The “bird-nester’s” identity is concealed as he assumes the form of a lizard; the Barasana boy undergoes “skin-change” and is said to be “like” various animals as he is concealed from his younger siblings and female kin. The “bird-nester” is brought down from the sky and “wakes up”; the Barasana boy finally emerges from his seclusion and from his trance-like state of temporary “death”. The “bird-nester” restores his own powers and uses them against his parents’ generation; the Barasana boy finally emerges from his ordeal as a socially- mature man who need defer no longer to the adult world. The “bird-nester” ends up in possession of male ritual power – which includes powers of life and death over women. He kills his father. Through his temporary “death”, the Barasana boy has been reborn with power over all women – including his mother – and with the prospect of standing in his father’s social place.



A seemingly-plausible “fit” can, then, be claimed. Yet if this is so, it is not because of any quality peculiar to the “bird-nester” story – it can be shown that countless other myths would serve in its place. We may even be confident that if the Barasana had to make do with the story of Little Red Riding Hood or Jack-and-the-Beanstalk, they would find a way of interpreting either of these, too, in terms of *He House*. In any event, it can be shown that these European fairy tales contain all the necessary ingredients.

We have related the “bird-nester” story to *He House*. To complete the demonstration, the above-mentioned two fairy tales will now similarly be related to *He House*, bearing in mind – of course – the somewhat-forced nature of the “fit” which is being claimed.

#### **Little Red Riding Hood and *He House***

Let us take Little Red Riding Hood. A Barasana boy might feel that he was – in becoming initiated – taking the part of the heroine in the story. He would be playing the role of a girl. This would not necessarily seem unnatural: to the extent that they are “menstruating” and “giving birth”, all the participants in *He House* are men playing female roles. The girl’s red cap might seem significant: obviously – it might be assumed – it referred ‘to the red paint used in the rite. The “false grandmother” might also seem disturbingly familiar: the “Mother” who is really a sinister male might seem uncannily reminiscent of the boy’s somewhat-frightening male relatives – including his father – claiming to offer intimate contact with “menstrual blood” and Vagina Woman’s womb. By the same token, Red Riding Hood’s becoming swallowed alive might also seem perfectly familiar, for does not a boy in *He House* get swallowed by a giant snake? Finally, the episode in which the wolf’s belly is slit open and its victims released might be read as an obvious reference to what happens at the end of *He House*, when everyone emerges from womb-like seclusion and returns to normal life.

#### **Jack-and-the-Beanstalk and *He House***

Jack-and-the-Beanstalk might seem to the Barasana familiar in much the same way. Jack obtains magical beans from his mother or grandmother; all magic among the Barasana has similarly been obtained from an ancestral mother

figure (Vagina-Woman). Jack shows incontinence in bleeding from the nose; the Barasana boy undergoing initiation is painted red, and experiences diarrhoea. Jack is hungry; so is the participant in *He House*. In the giant's house, Jack seems a miniscule figure; he is popped into the giant's oven. The young participant in *He House* is said to be reduced to the size of a foetus; he is secluded in a special small compartment within the communal house. The giant smells Jack's blood and wants to eat him; the Barasana boy is covered in symbolic menstrual blood and is swallowed by a snake. Jack escapes, stealing a trophy, and repeats this three times. For three days, a Barasana boy remains in *He House*; he gains magic trophies which were stolen from women at the beginning of time. Jack blackens his face before climbing the beanstalk; a boy in *He House* undergoes "skin-change" associated with being painted black. Jack chops down the beanstalk; *He House* comes to an end. The world outside *He House* seems as far removed from the world inside as the earth seems from the sky.

## Conclusion

The Barasana, then, have their own rich corpus of myths which clarify the logic of their rituals. It might have been rewarding to have studied them here. Yet there is no need. For our purposes it hardly seems to matter precisely which magical myths are selected as keys through which to understand rites such as *He House*. The myths are all products of the same general logic, and can be made to function more or less equally well.

In fact, the Barasana would probably feel at home not only with many of Grimm's fairy-tales, but also with the myths of Aboriginal Australia or with much of the mythology of ancient Greece. They could certainly draw significant comparisons with their own mythology – which itself is not a rigid doctrine of faith but a fluid social awareness, rich in contradictions, disputes and variations, and expressed through an indefinite number of myths and tales which have been overheard from neighbouring tribes, borrowed, exchanged, incorporated into more familiar tales, half-forgotten, distorted and amended in the manner common to story-tellers throughout the world. There is no rigid, point-by-point, inevitable correspondence between any one particular myth and any one particular ritual sequence. Rather, a basically lunar logic – that of the template central to this thesis – is at a deep level governing the practice

of magical ritual everywhere, the operation of this logic spinning off ritual practices and fairy tales in an endless variety of forms. If there can always be discovered an impressively-precise structural correspondence between any one spin-off and any other – whether between myth and myth, myth and rite or one rite and another – it need not be because of any special relationship between them. No one myth need stay anchored to one ritual, nor need any one localised ritual be explained by any one myth or set of myths. All are at the deepest level equally illuminating of one another because they all lead back to the same logical source. As products of a single lunar generator of collective thought and practice, all are, from an external patriarchal standpoint, absurdity or lunacy of much the same general kind.

### ***Chapter 14: The wives of the Sun and Moon***

This chapter will decode a Plains Indian myth called The Wives of the Sun and Moon. The analysis will develop many of the themes and findings of earlier chapters – including the notion of the menstrual flow as having a “sound”.

#### **The sound of the blood**

We may begin with some theoretical background on the question of sound. Chapter 10 presented evidence suggesting that noise-making instruments such as bullroarers produce what is, in effect, the “sound” of the menstrual flow. It will be recalled that within the terms of the template, menstruation disjoins marital partners, conjoins kin, should occur during darkness (the darkness of the moon) and is incompatible with cooking (see Chapter 5). The sounds of ritually-potent noise-making instruments ought, then, to mirror these effects: they should disjoin marital couples, conjoin kin, occur during darkness and hinder the cooking-process. Before turning to The Wives of the Sun and Moon – the major focus of this chapter – let us check the extent to which these expectations are confirmed. We may take as our point of departure some of the cross-cultural findings of *Mythologiques*.

It is often assumed that Lévi-Strauss’s findings in *Mythologiques* are formal or “algebraic”, in the sense that the elements in his equations are devoid of fixed specific content. Lévi-Strauss (1970: 240) himself notes that while the myths seem universally to have some astronomical significance, for example, they cannot be explained by such astronomical content. “The truth of the myth”, as he puts it,

“does not lie in any special content. It consists in logical relations which are devoid of content or, more precisely, whose invariant properties exhaust their operative value, since comparable relations can be established among the elements of a large number of different contents.”

From this, we might conclude that “the mind” – or “the logic of the concrete” – uncovered through the analysis tells us rather little in substantive terms. We are told nothing of any pan-American world-view, cosmology, model of social structure or template which might be thought to underlie the superficial differences between the myths, rituals and social systems of the Americas and beyond:

“We have to resign ourselves to the fact that the myths tell us nothing instructive about the order of the world, the nature of reality or the origin and destiny of mankind. We cannot expect them to flatter any metaphysical thirst, or to breathe new life into exhausted ideologies” (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 639).

The conclusion of *Mythologiques* is merely that the human mind succeeds in coping with differences by setting them in grids through which they appear as inversions or other logical transformations of one another. Nothing specific about cultural traditions is shown; anything which happens in one culture can be totally different in another; the only uniformity in the myths or traditions is the reality of systematic differentiation itself, and the only lesson to be gleaned from *Mythologiques* concerns the pervasiveness of this logical or mathematical differentiating activity of the human mind.

That is one possible conclusion. Yet a closer reading indicates that at numerous points in his argument, Lévi-Strauss posits relations between terms which remain constant for all myths and all cultures of the Americas. A case in point is what he calls “the theme of noise as being antipathetic to cooking, a theme which has played a major part throughout this work, and which has assumed increasing importance since the point at which we first encountered it (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 307). By “noise”, Lévi-Strauss is referring primarily to the raucous or staccato sounds made by what he terms “instruments of darkness” – clappers, rattles, drums, bullroarers and other sound-making devices prominent in ritual and usually connoting “stench”, “rotteness” and “death” (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 359-422). Such frightening sounds, all over the world, seem to have been used to mark moments of cosmically-significant “death” – including, in mediaeval Europe, the death of Christ on Good Friday (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 405-06), and in ancient China, the winter solstice:

“In China, every year about the beginning of April, certain officials called Sz’huen used of old to go about the country armed with wooden clappers. Their business was to summon the people and command them

to put out every fire. This was the beginning of the season called Han-shih-tsieh, or 'eating cold food.' For three days all household fires remained extinct as a preparation for the solemn renewal of the fire, which took place on the fifth or sixth day after the winter solstice... This annual renewal of fire was a ceremony of very great antiquity in China....since it dates from (at least) two thousand years before Christ" (Frazer 1926-36, 10: 137, quoted in Lévi-Strauss 1973: 406).

Why the noises made by clappers and other instruments should be felt throughout the world to connote "anti-fire" is not fully explained, although menstrual blood features prominently in Lévi-Strauss's discussion of this theme (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 361-2, 373, 362-3). Lévi-Strauss (1973: 406) retrains from deciding "whether or not the din made by the instruments of darkness survives as a relic of neolithic or even palaeolithic customs, or whether its occurrence in widely scattered areas merely shows that man, when confronted with the same situations, reacts with the help of symbolic representations suggested to him, or perhaps forced upon him, by the underlying processes which control his thought the world over...."

Be that as it may, to add to the complexity of the problem, noise seems to be persistently associated (in the mythology of the Americas and beyond) with incest and a range of other phenomena which include eclipses, darkness, storms, "unruliness and the flowing of blood. Lévi-Strauss links a vast array of myths from widely separated regions of Indian America in order to demonstrate an internal logical association between such phenomena, which fall into something like a single division of native experience. They are all not only compatible, but may even appear as interchangeable elements. After a preliminary demonstration of this, Lévi-Strauss (1970: 312) presents a Brazilian (Shipaya) version of a myth which sums up his case. In common with similar versions stretching across the Americas (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 219), it tells of how Moon has sexual intercourse every night with his sister, without revealing to her his identity. She rubs his face with genipa juice, the stain later exposing his identity, whereupon he escapes to the sky and becomes the Moon. The spots on the moon are the stain left by his sister, who (and here this particular version makes its own specific contribution) at first rises into the sky with her lover but then quarrels with him and crashes to earth "very noisily". A rival brother orders arrows to be shot at the moon, wounding it:

“The moon’s blood was of all colors, and men and women were bespattered with it as it streamed earthward. The women wiped themselves with an upward movement, so that they came under the moon’s influence. The men, however, wiped themselves clean with a downward movement. The birds bathed in the different colored pools, and each species thus acquired its characteristic plumage (Levi Strauss 1970: 312).

Lévi-Strauss takes the “moon’s blood” to indicate an eclipse.

Lévi-Strauss (1981: 218-19) treats the first part of this myth as representative of a “vast group” of similar stories (it appears in virtually identical forms “from the extreme north to the extreme south of the New World”) and at this point notes “a fact of supreme importance. This is that all the myths of the Americas are logically derivable from this one widespread and almost invariant story: “We might even say”, he writes, “that it constitutes the most plausible initial state for the whole series of transformations....”, firstly because of its widespread distribution, secondly because it is not the kind of story which can vary to any great extent. In other words, if a single story had to be chosen as the starting-point from which all the interlinked myths of the Americas have been derived, this would be a very strong candidate for selection.

Regarding the Shipaya specific version (presented above), Lévi-Strauss comments that it “covers the complicated course we have followed by putting several myths end to end in order to move from noisemaking to eclipses, from eclipses to incest, from incest to unruliness, and from unruliness to the coloured plumage of birds” (1970: 312). The final reference is to the widespread Amerindian use of birds’ feathers as body-adornments indicative of male ritual power, their brilliant colours deriving, mythologically, from spilled menstrual or other blood (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 306,-317).

Lévi-Strauss dwells on the Shipaya myth because, taken as a whole, it confirms a persistent link between noise (in this case, the sister’s crashing to earth “very noisily”) and the phenomena he lists.

He further connects these linkages to the fact that in many parts of the world, loud noises are traditionally made not only (a) at midnight in

midwinter or on New Year's Eve but also (b) during eclipses of the sun or moon. "In twentieth century Europe", he comments (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 301),

"where scientific knowledge is so widespread, it is no longer conceivable that an eclipse should be greeted by noisemaking. Nevertheless the practice still survives in cases where there is a break, or a threatened break, in the cosmological sequence... In Lithuania, where even up to the present century, children were told to beat pans and other metal utensils with sticks in order to drive away the evil spirits during eclipses, the spring festivities are still marked by a certain rowdyism. On Good Friday young men create a din by breaking furniture, such as tables, bedsteads, etc. And in the past it was customary to break the furniture of deceased persons with a great deal of noise.... Customs such as these are part of a universal system, unmistakable vestiges of which still survive in Western countries – for instance, the smashing of china and exploding of fireworks in Italy on New Year's eve, and the chorus of automobile horns that ushers in the New Year in Times Square, Piccadilly Circus, and the Champs Elysées..."

\* \* \* \* \*

In this thesis, it was noted in Chapter 5 (pp. 157-58) that throughout much of native America, the period of an eclipse was one in which all cooking was thrown into reverse, the fear being of contamination stemming from the "blood" of the sun or moon (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 298-9). Since eclipses are also an occasion for noise-making (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 287), the incompatibility between noise-making and cooking is confirmed by another route. We can take the argument a step further by noting that cooking, as we have seen, coincides symbolically with marital availability and legitimate (as opposed to incestuous) sex (Chapters 5 and 11). If cooking is upset by noise, then – given the equivalence between marriage and cooking – the same should apply to marital sex. This, too, is a finding made by Lévi-Strauss in his *Mythologiques*. Without entering into the complexities of the argument here, suffice it to note that in much of traditional Europe the *charivari* was a custom in which loud noises – such as the banging of saucepan-lids – were made outside the bedroom of a honeymooning couple to indicate what the community regarded as the union's incestuous or otherwise-illegitimate character (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 287). Lévi-Strauss in turn links this custom to the previously-noted din accompanying eclipses (1970: 288-71, a din comparable with the mediaeval European use of "instruments of darkness" which "may have been intended to represent the marvels and terrifying noises which occurred at the time of the death of Christ" (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 405). From no matter which angle matters



are approached, in other words, death, fasting, the absence of marital sex, the absence of cooking-fire and the making of a din seem. to go together, standing jointly in opposition to the quietness or calm of harmonious marital relations and of proper cooking. In ritual attitudes to noise, we have, then – as far as Lévi-Strauss is concerned – not a content-free algebraic formula but what is referred to as “a universal system...”, unmistakable vestiges of which still survive in Western countries.

These findings of Lévi-Strauss are interesting in that they precisely fit the template central to this thesis. The described attitudes to noise would make sense if we were to assume that in the “initial situation” which the template defines, noises amplified the impact of menstrual bleeding during women’s monthly sex-strike (which may be what the myths are referring to in linking noisiness to “unruliness” – Lévi-Strauss 1970: 311-12). In seeking possible reasons for this we may note, perhaps, that a “sex-strike” might logically require noise. This would be the case if what were required were the opposite of calm and a relaxed atmosphere – if the whole point were to produce sufficient tension for marital conjugality to become in practice difficult or impossible. If that were the aim, then the more “frightening” the sounds, the better. It is not easy for love-making to proceed when the air is filled with terrifying crashes and bangs.

In fact, if – as seems to be the case – there is nothing intrinsically or physiologically repellent about menstrual blood, the introduction of such sounds may have been a cultural necessity. menstruation in itself – as a biological phenomenon – does not inhibit male sexual advances. If such an effect is to be achieved, the blood-flows must be rendered inhibiting through collective, cultural action. It is suggested that loud noises amplifying the menstruation-signal traditionally help to achieve this. In this context, it is interesting that Lévi-Strauss (1973: 373) illustrates the use of “instruments of darkness” by drawing particular attention to a Tucuna custom in which a girl, on perceiving signs of her first menstrual period, hides in a bush and responds to her mother’s calls “by striking two pieces of dry wood together.” If we return, moreover, to mythological depictions of “the rule of women”, men’s initial fear or even terror in the face of the “sounds” of the menstrual flow was a theme – we may remember – of certain of the “primitive matriarchy”

myths discussed in this thesis in Chapter 6. We may in particular recall the Yamana image of terrifying women who (in the days of woman's power) used to emerge periodically from their Great Kina Hut, their faces painted so that their husbands could not recognise them, beating the floor with dried skins "so that the earth shook" and frightening away all men with their yells, bawls and roars (see above, p. 180).

In any event, the template central to this thesis assumes perpetual alternation between two states – marital conjunction prevailing during one phase of the lunar cycle, disjunction during the other. In this context it is interesting that Lévi-Strauss himself (1973: 157) regards the opposition between *lune de miel* (honeymoon) and *lune de fiel* or *lune d'absinthe* (bitter moon) as inseparable from "the contrast between total and exclusive conjugal union and its reinsertion into the pattern of social relationships". One kind of "moon", then, cements a woman and her lover exclusively within the couple-relation; the other sends each partner back into wider social circulation. In this alternation, cultural effort and intervention alternate with the absence of such effort:

"...the power of culture disjoins the sexes, to the detriment of nature which prescribes their union; temporarily at least, family links (that is, those of husband and wife – C.K.) are broken in order to allow human society to be formed" (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 412).

The coming together of the sexes, in other words, may be taken as "natural" (in terms of the template, it is what happens if nothing is preventing it). Disjunction, however – as Lévi-Strauss points out – requires the expenditure of collective energy and a special signal (in the passage just quoted, Lévi-Strauss is discussing the marriage-rupturing functions of the bullroarer. At the simplest conceivable level, the contrast, then, is between the presence of a signal, and its absence. It is the dark or "bitter" moon – representing culture, self-restraint and solidarity as opposed to sex – which requires its presence.

To Lévi-Strauss's insights we may add that menstruation, culturally- interpreted, provides a moon-linked visual symbol which either "is" or "is not". The introduction of a minimal auditory dimension would result in a signalling-system which – preserved in ritual traditions – would account for the findings of Lévi-Strauss just discussed. Loud noises would have been made

during the menstrual flow, once every dark moon, their function being to help disjoin marital partners. If we make that assumption, we are provided with a model of auditory human “language” in its simplest conceivable form – for it would follow that in the “initial situation” as now defined by the template, the minimal necessary auditory dimension of ritual “language” would have been constituted not out of differentiated kinds of sound (as is the case in fully-articulated language), but merely out of the presence or absence of sound or noise of any kind.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **The clinging woman**

We are now equipped to address the major topic of this chapter. In the third volume of *Mythologiques* – “The Origin of Table Manners” – Lévi-Strauss turns to a number of myths featuring a “clinging woman”. This character is a toad- or frog-wife who attaches herself tenaciously to the body of her male partner and refuses to let go. Usually, she is contrasted with a different, more attractive kind of female partner. As we will see, in the comparisons which certain of the myths draw between the two kinds of “wives”, an important consideration seems to be the ability of each to produce loud cracking noises with her mouth and teeth.

These myths are particularly interesting because their basis in menstrual cyclicity is explicit. In this chapter, it will be shown that the “clinging woman” contrasts with the “attractive woman” as menstrual pollution contrasts with marital availability. The myths express men’s fears of excessively-“clinging” kinds of male-female relationship. They voice concern at the possible consequences of turning marriage into a static, permanent bond instead of a periodically renewed, monthly honeymoon; frequently, they express this concern in an astronomical code featuring the moon, the sun and other heavenly bodies (see Lévi-Strauss 1973: 282-3 for the potentially disastrous consequences of an indulgent attitude towards “the woman mad about honey” – that is, the dangers of allowing the “seductive” woman to tempt mankind into anything but a strictly-temporary “honeymoon”).

In examining these myths, Lévi-Strauss discerns a fear that the menstrual cycle might come to a halt – fixing the world in “continuous day or continuous

night” (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 506) – or alternatively speed up, with equally disastrous results. As he puts it, women’s

periodic rhythm could slow down and halt the flow of events, or it could accelerate and plunge the world into chaos. It is equally conceivable that women might cease to menstruate and bear children, or that they might bleed continuously and give birth haphazardly. But in either case, the sun and the moon, the heavenly bodies governing the alternation of day and night and of the seasons, would no longer be able to perform their function” (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 506)

Lévi-Strauss notes all this, but comes to a conclusion consistent with his patriarchal standpoint. In common with the belief-systems he is examining, he interprets culture as something invented and sustained since its inception by men; he views the myths under discussion as confirming this. As he interprets them, the stories assume men’s responsibility for menstrual regularity, Men from the beginning of the human story have tried to make women menstruate and give birth “on time”. But since time immemorial, women have rebelled. By menstruating haphazardly, women have always threatened to upset men’s orderly schemes and plans, with the risk of undermining the entire cultural enterprise and plunging the universe into chaos (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 221-2).

One view, then, is that human culture, including menstrual synchrony, was invented and shaped since the beginning by men. The Other – which is argued here – is that culture is based primarily on solidarity, that this solidarity is in the first instance sexual, that women’s ability to go “on strike” is the primordial guarantee of their sexual solidarity, that the necessary periodic “sex strike” takes the form of collective menstrual withdrawal, and that in the cultures responsible for the myths which Lévi-Strauss examines, all of this has been broken down and usurped on the level of form and symbol by men, the stories and associated rituals leaving a record of this. In what follows, it will be argued that a re-analysis of some of the basic myths studied by Lévi-Strauss in his *Mythologiques* lends more support to this second view than to the first.

### **The wives of the Sun and Moon**

As the centrepiece of the third volume of *Mythologiques*, Lévi-Strauss (1978. 214-218) presents an Arapaho story called “The Wives of the Sun and the Moon”.

It is in analysing this story that he presents his arguments concerning the centrality of the menstrual rhythm to Amerindian mythology as a whole. The tale tells of two brothers and their two wives. These wives are expected to eat noisily – a strange form of “table manners” alluded to in the title of this volume of Lévi-Strauss’s work. The two brothers are sky-dwellers; their wives live on earth. One brother is Moon; the other is Sun. One wife is a human female; the other is a toad. Out of these oppositions and alternations – between earth and sky, male and female, sun and moon, human and animal female forms – the thread of the narrative is woven.

As the story opens, the two brothers – Sun and Moon – are debating from the sky which kind of marriage is best:

*“Moon intended to look for a human woman or a ‘resurrected woman’; Sun wanted a water wife, for he maintained that humans looked homely and ugly about their faces: When they look up towards me, their eyes almost close with a mean appearance. I cannot bear to see their disgusting faces. Batrachians are much prettier. When a toad looks at me, she does not make faces like a human woman” (Levi Strauss 1978: 215).*

So women, in the eyes of the celestial beings, were divided into (a) water-women” or toads, and (b) “resurrected women” or humans. We will consider the possible meanings of these two terms later. Sun rejected “resurrected women” since these unavoidably squinted when looking up at the sun.

The two brothers told their parents that they wanted to marry in order to settle down – once married, they “would be more often at home. They descended to earth and went their separate ways, Moon seeking a human wife and Sun searching for a toad:

*“The elder went downstream and the younger upstream. They set out the night of the disappearance of the moon, after the full moon. Their journey lasted six days. They had two days of cloudy weather, two days of rest (holy), and two days before the new moon.”*

Moon came upon “a huge camp circle”. He turned himself into a porcupine, showed himself to some pretty young human women who were walking near the camp, and began climbing a tree. His trick worked: one of the human women, coveting his magnificent quills, began climbing the tree after him. He passed through a hole in the sky and she followed him. Hastily, Moon now covered the

hole in the sky “so that his wife might forget the position of the entrance”. He did not want her to return home to her kin. Moon showed off his lovely wife to his parents.

Some time later, Sun arrived – without his wife:

*“Sun explained that, being shy, she had remained on the bank of the Eagle River. The old woman went after her: she noticed a toad leaping towards her, suspected the truth, and spoke graciously to the batrachian, who changed into a woman and agreed to follow her. As she suffered from incontinence, her father-in-law gave her the name of ‘Water-woman’, or ‘Liquid-woman’. Nevertheless she was given just as warm a welcome as the other one” (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 216).*

Sun was embarrassed, however. He looked contemptuously at the wrinkled skin of his new partner, could not take his eyes off Moon’s beautiful human bride – and regretted his foolish choice.

Attempts were now undertaken to train the two women in agricultural tasks and other wifely duties. The human wife learned quickly; she was given a digging-stick and started to dig...

*“The ‘Liquid-woman’, on the other hand, remained idly seated on her bed, with her head turned towards the wall, and was paralysed by her timidity. In vain did her parents-in-law encourage and reassure her: nothing did any good” (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 216).*

Whereas the human woman took the digging-stick and helped her Mother-in-law, the toad-wife “remained passive and did nothing.”

The old parents of Sun and Moon now organised a chewing-contest. Their aim was to see which wife could make the most noise as she chewed a piece of boiled tripe:

*“The human wife relished the food, chewing noisily and cracking it nicely. The toad woman slyly put a piece of charcoal in her mouth; but since she had no teeth, there was no sound from her mouth. While she was chewing away, black saliva dribbled from the corners of her mouth. Moon laughed vigorously” (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 216).*

The human wife, making cracking noises with her mouth, won the contest.

Suddenly – Without any warning or indication of previous pregnancy – the human wife started giving birth. “Come over quickly”, she cried, gasping for

breath. The mother-in-law ran to her, felt her body and was astonished to discover a well-formed baby struggling for life under her limbs.

Everyone was delighted at the newborn baby's beauty, apart from the toad-wife, who sulked. Moon stared at the toad scornfully. In a fit of anger, she retaliated by rushing at Moon. "Because you criticise me inhumanely", she cried, I will be with you all the time. In this way people will see you plainly hereafter" (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 217). She leaped onto Moon's breast and adhered to it.

The women's parents-in-law were pleased with the human wife's child, but criticised her timing and lack of any warning in giving birth. "I am very proud of your success", as Sun and Moon's old father put it,

*"but I don't like this method of sudden deliveries, for it is not human. Ten moons should elapse between conception and birth. The last month in which the woman had her period is not counted. You then count eight months without a period, followed by a tenth month in which the confinement takes place accompanied by a discharge of blood. By counting in this way on all ten fingers, a wife knows that she has not been fertilised unawares by some wild beast. She can warn her mother and husband long in advance" (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 217-18).*

In Lévi-Strauss's summary of this speech, there follows a stipulation that "each bleeding will last from the first to the last quarter of the moon, that is, the same period of time which elapsed between moon's departure to look for a wife until his return" (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 218).

## Discussion

This myth presents a number of problems. What can be the meaning of the lesson in gynaecology from the old father? What social significance can be given to the motif of "marriage with the Sun" or "marriage with the Moon?" What do the terms "water-woman" and "resurrected woman" mean? Why does the toad woman cling to the moon? Why does the human wife give birth without warning? And why should the wives be asked to eat tripe in such a way as to make the maximum amount of noise? Lévi-Strauss suggests a series of separate answers to each of these questions, many of them complex. This chapter will suggest a less complex, unified explanation.

To clear away at the outset a source of possible confusion, we may begin by considering the stipulation regarding the timing of menstruation. “And each bleeding”, says the old man as he teaches the wives the rules of life, “will last from the first to the last quarter of the moon...” (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 218). The inference is that ideally, the blood-flow Should extend throughout the greater part of each month, its duration covering the period of the full- moon. This would be inconsistent with the template (Chapter 5), which makes menstruation occur at dark moon. The solution, however, is simple. Levi- Strauss’s version is in fact erroneously transcribed: the recording by Dorsey (1903: 221) – Lévi-Strauss’s source for this myth – reads: “Bear in mind that the time shall be from the last quarter to the first quarter of the moon”. Here as elsewhere, menstruation occurs, then – as the template would predict – during the moon’s three-day disappearance from the sky. This is the time when Moon, no longer visible in the heavens, is assumed to have descended to earth in search of his bride.

Let us now turn to the motif of the clinging toad. The episode in which the frog-wife or toad-wife denounces Moon and leaps onto his breast is given by Dorsey in two versions:

1

*“The toad got mad at her sister-in-law and jumped to the breast of the moon, and has remained there ever since. That is what is seen on the face of the moon. That picture, visible to the naked eye, is the flow of the woman. The toad’s appearance corresponds to that of a pregnant woman” (Dorsey 1903: 177).*

2

*“Oh, pshaw, you make me tired of your foolishness; because you hate me and criticise my appearance inhumanly I will be with you all the time. In this way people will see you plainly hereafter”, said the frog woman, leaping up and landing on Moon’s breast and adhering” (Dorsey 1903: 220).*

To this, Dorsey (1903: 220) adds the following note:

“So the moon bears the picture of Water-Woman.... The ‘face of the moon’ bears the mark of the first menstruation of the woman.

He also notes: “The appearance of the toad on the belly indicates pregnancy of the woman”. The clinging toad-wife or “water-wife” is, then, menstruating



and/or pregnant. If she is pregnant, however, it is strange – for she never produces a baby.

We have, then, a menstruant who attaches herself to the Moon, her blood-stains explaining the origin of the spots on the moon. The idea that menstruating women copulate with the moon is in fact a widespread Amerindian belief (Goldman 1963: 180-1; C. Hugh-Jones 1979: 156-7; Karsten 1935: 218); versions of the stained-moon motif are also widespread in Amerindian mythology. Indeed, as was noted earlier, if Lévi-Strauss had to choose a starting-point for the whole series of transformations examined in *Mythologiques*, he might well select the pan-American myth of which this Arapaho episode is a local version. The common element in all of these stories is that the spots on the moon are caused by genipia juice, menstrual blood or some other dark staining fluid; in almost all cases, Moon's lover is his own sister, who stains him in order to reveal his identity (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 312; 1978: 389; 1981: 219). The "clinging toad" motif in the myth just examined is a variation on the theme, suggesting, incidentally, what is otherwise not explicit in this myth – namely, the incestuous or kinship nature of the relationship between the toad-wife and Moon.

In other Amerindian myths featuring such a character, the toad-wife is depicted not only as clinging tenaciously to her partner but as preventing him from eating anything so that he gradually starves – and as excreting all over him (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 28, 54). She is also presented not as a producer of babies but as a child-stealer (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 61-3, 71). Assuming the toad-woman to be symbolic of womankind in her withdrawn or polluted state, all this conforms with the template: feminine pollution (which can be symbolised by urine or faeces) prevents the consumption of food. We have already seen why a menstruating woman should be conceptualised as someone whose "incontinence" has the effect of "starving" those with whom she comes into contact (see above, Chapter 11). Moreover – turning now to "child-stealing" – the "sex strike" featured in the template would inevitably involve babies' and children's being withdrawn from circulation along with their mothers. In the observed ethnographic record, taboos associated with maternal blood are factors which may indeed keep a father at least temporarily away from his wife's newborn

child. The blood may assert the infant's connection with its mother and her kin – but from the standpoint of an excluded father, this may seem tantamount to deprivation or even “stealing” (we may recall here the Australian myth of Mutjingga, accused by men of “stealing” ten children left in her care – see above, Chapter 10, pp. 289-90). Likewise, when a woman goes into menstrual seclusion, she may (like the Two Sisters in the Australian Wawilak myth) take her offspring with her. Certainly, a woman's blood at least metaphorically conjoins her with her offspring and kin, her husband being excluded and thereby deprived (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 404).

Remaining with the “clinging toad” motif, Lévi-Strauss presents an important clue to the meaning of this when he notes, early on in volume 3 (1978: 77), that “the reader must already have been struck by the ‘lunar’ aspect of myths featuring a clinging-woman or a frog-woman.” It is a problem which occupies much of the argument of the third volume. The “lunar aspect” refers to the fact that the key myths in *The Origin of Table Manners* all concern a woman who is (a) frog-like (or toad-like) and (b) persistently associated with the stained appearance and/or periodic darkening of the moon (1978: 225, 242). Moreover, the myths all concern a hero “who” – to quote Lévi-Strauss commenting on one example (1978: 178) – “finds himself between two kinds of women, and two forms of marriage”.

Now, what are these “two kinds of women and “two kinds of marriage”? A Hare Indian myth begins:

*“The demiurge... had two wives, one close, his own sister who was as sensible as he was; and the other very remote...” (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 147).*

A Taulipag myth is a variation on the theme:

*“Kapei, the moon, has two wives, both called Kaiunog, one in the east, the other in the west. He lives alternately with each. One feeds him well and he grows fat; the other does not look after him and he becomes thin. He moves backwards and forwards between the two, putting on weight with the first wife, then returning to the second and so on. The women are full of jealous hatred of each other, and so live far apart” (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 46).*

The waxing and waning of the moon, then, may be explained as the result of two different kinds of relationship with women. In the above myth, one kind of

“carriage” involves feasting and fattening, the other, fasting and growing thin. The fact that the wives are mutually incompatible yet bear the same name hints that they may connote alternative aspects of one and the same being – just as waxing and waning are alternative modes of being of the moon.

Lévi-Strauss, however, derives less from the “two wives” (1978: 178) or “two moons” (1981: 599-602) motif than might have been expected. “What do the myths proclaim?”, he asks – and answers:

“That it is wicked and dangerous to confuse the physical differences between women with the specific differences separating animals from humans, or animals from each other”.

Social life, he continues,

“demands, on the contrary, that as human beings, women, whether beautiful or ugly, all deserve to obtain husbands.”

The myths, Lévi-Strauss hastens to add, stress such egalitarian morality, even though in doing so they “cannot but reveal a mysterious fact that society tries to ignore:

all human females are not equal, for nothing can prevent them being different from each other in their animal essence, which means that they are not all equally desirable to prospective husbands”.

So although it is only three paragraphs later that he notes the strikingly “‘lunar’ aspect of myths featuring a clinging woman or a frog-woman” (Lévi Strauss 1978: 77), a moral is attributed to these mythical contrasts which appears to have no bearing on the moon. The “toad-wife” – according to this reading – is simply womankind when considered to be “ugly”.

In pursuing this and other lines of interpretation, Lévi-Strauss fails to follow up the numerous clues which indicate that the “toad” and “human” females are counterposed as secluded to available – or as wet to dry – this contrast articulating with the alternating presence and absence of alimentary and sexual taboos. Neither, when considering the markedly-contrasting “wives” of the Sun and Moon in the Arapaho myth just examined, does he suspect that the choice might be between womankind as polluted and womankind as maritally available. He does not suspect that “Liquid Woman” might mean menstruating woman, although his comments at times come tantalisingly close to saying as much (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 225). And he misses the inference that the term

“resurrected woman” refers to womankind when maritally available – when emerged from the “temporary death” of her seclusion or confinement. Instead, here as elsewhere, he follows a more complex line of reasoning:

“The term *thawwathinintarihisi*, ‘resuscitated woman’, which refers to the human woman, presents a problem: it could allude to the belief in an era when humans, having become immortal, will be periodically rejuvenated every spring..., or to the belief that certain humans are reincarnated ancestors” (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 221).

Lévi-Strauss presents very little evidence in favour of these possible allusions. Each of them implies a belief in rebirth which could be conceptualised, perhaps, as “like” that of the moon or of a woman emerging from seclusion. Neither, therefore, would necessarily be inconsistent with the interpretations suggested here. Yet the myth itself in no way supports these particular formulations: there is no indication at all that the “human” woman is supposed to represent an immortal being or reincarnated ancestor. There is no suggestion that she is anything other than simply “human” – a woman, as opposed to a toad. In any event, neither of Lévi-Strauss’s interpretations of the term “resurrected woman” would seem to be particularly relevant to the general thrust or message of the myth, whose moral evidently has something to do with the timing of birth and menstruation. In what follows, it will be shown that Lévi-Strauss’s comments fail to bring out the essential nature of this myth – namely, its simplicity and elegant consistency in setting out the solution to a genuine social problem.

#### Two marriages, two worlds

We are now in a position to present a succinct and convincing interpretation of this myth. Each wife – liquid and human, toad-like and resurrected – represents not a particular individual character but Woman or Womanhood in a general sense. There are two of them simply because there are two aspects of womanhood – one “available”, the other “not available” – one “like a wife”, the other “like a sister”. That each is only a half-picture or aspect of a composite image of womankind is indicated by the fact that neither forms a whole: one gives birth but neither menstruates nor shows any signs of pregnancy; the other menstruates and looks pregnant but never gives birth. One presents only the “positive” aspects of her sex (beauty, availability,

fecundity), the other only the “negative” ones (pollution, non-availability, sterility).

Like all magical myths and fairy tales, then, this story is presented in black-and-white. It is about two worlds, two kinds of relationship with the opposite sex, two categories of men and two categories of women. The myth depicts womankind from a male point of view, according to which her menstrual side is definitely negative. We have seen in this thesis that the menstruating woman is linked to a man not as his wife but as his mother or sister, is associated not with dryness but with wetness, and that her blood is symbolically the blood of the animal world. The onset of menstruation involves an exchange of one role (“skin”, “mask”, “disguise”) for another – light for dark; it may also be conceptualised mythologically as a temporary “death”. In menstruating, therefore, a woman may be conceptualised mythologically as metamorphosing herself into an animal, as temporarily “dying”, and as emphatically “wet”. The wife who in the myth is described as “water woman”, “liquid woman” and “toad” confirms these patterns: the toad-wife, quite simply, is womankind in her menstrual phase.

Not unnaturally, this toad-woman is depicted in the myth, as an extremely reluctant wife. It is not explicitly stated that she is “on strike”. But she is evidently rebelling against her role as wife: she lingers by the river, she is slow to arrive, she is “shy”, she refuses to perform marital chores, She does not make herself look attractive, she secludes herself indoors on a bed with her face to the wall, she is “incontinent”, she dribbles black saliva from her mouth – and she stains the white face of the moon. Each one of these characteristics may safely be read as a euphemistic allusion to menstruation and menstrual seclusion.

The other wife is womankind in a different skin – in the phase following her emergence from seclusion, her re-awakening to marital life, her “resurrection” from “temporary death”, her resumption of sexually-attractive wifely appearance. Instead of secluding herself, she digs outdoors; instead of withdrawing from housework, she eagerly works and learns. The “good wife” and the “bad wife” are polar opposites as different as light from dark, day from night or sun from moon. As Lévi-Strauss himself puts it (1978: 221), “the

human wife and the animal wife are different from each other both physically and mentally. Everything predestines the one for her vocation as wife and mother; everything precludes the other from such a vocation.”

Just as there are two kinds of female partner, there are two kinds of male. There is the male to whom a woman relates in her menstrual phase, and the male to whom she relates in marriage. The myth depicts these two opposite phases or aspects of mankind as the characters Sun and Moon. Assuming the Sun to be “dry” in comparison with the Moon, the first – to retain conformity with the template – would be expected to relate to a woman in her “dry” phase or state, while the second should relate to her in the “wet” (in numerous traditional cultures, girls during first-menstruation not only cannot attach themselves to the sun – they are not even supposed to look at the sun or at the daytime sky at all – Frazer 1900: 3: 204). Normally, that is, while an “available” woman should be with her husband, we might expect a menstruating woman to attach herself to kin (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 404). The correspondences, in other words, should look like this:

Moon	Sun
Dark	Light
Water-woman	(Fire woman? Sun woman?)
(“Temporarily dead” woman?)	Resurrected woman
Frog woman	Human woman
Lazy woman	Hard-working woman
(=Menstruating woman)	(=Maritally available woman)
(=Woman clinging to kin)	(=Woman united with husband)

The menstruant should, then, attach herself to Moon – as indeed happens when the toad-wife clings to Moon’s breast, stains him and announces her intention of staying there.

In fact, however, the Arapaho seem to be in a state of some confusion over all this. They say that the world’s first menstrual flow was Indeed caused through intercourse with the Moon (Dorsey 1903: 170-7). Yet when this point is made, it is specified that it was the human wife whose moon-intercourse caused the flow. The Arapaho say, then, on the one hand that it was the frog (producer of the moon’s menstrual stains), but on the other that it was the human wife who produced the first menstrual period. In the myth we have examined, we have

just noted that the Moon “should” have been the celestial body to have chosen the frog-wife as his bride, leaving the human woman to Sun. In fact, however, the frog-wife was chosen not by Moon but by Sun, although the frog ends up attaching herself to Moon. Correspondingly, Sun at first rejects human wives on the grounds that they squint, although later he changes his mind. Ambivalence, uncertainty and the switching of partners seem, then, to characterise the sexual choices made.

The theme of uncertainty in fact strikes the reader immediately on encountering this myth. Let us return to the beginning of the story. Sun and Moon are engaged in earnest debate as to which kind of wife is best for each. What are we to make of their deliberations? A full answer may not yet be possible, but one thing can surely be inferred at the outset. The very fact that Sun and Moon are debating who should relate to whom indicates that the myth is addressing itself to a problem. Clearly, the answer is not – or is no longer – self-evident.

From the standpoint of the template used in this thesis, Sun and Moon after their debate attach themselves to womankind the wrong way round. A union of incompatibles is arranged – a union of fire and water, Sun and Water-woman. Moreover, a woman who is not menstruating is chosen by Moon. This cannot be right or natural. An exchange has taken place, Sun taking Moon’s normal wife and Moon taking Sun’s. This, in any event, is what the template would lead us to infer.

That the inference is correct is nicely confirmed by another Arapaho telling of exactly the same myth. Here, it is revealed that Moon has tricked Sun into giving him the “human” wife, foisting the toad-wife onto his unfortunate brother. The natural and original order of things has been reversed:

*“The sun and the moon were two stars. One day they had a discussion about the respective merits of human women and water animals. Moon praised the latter and Sun the former, because, he said, their bodies resemble ours. Moon first of all pretended to agree, and since his brother showed some misgivings he persuaded him to change his choice. Had he not said that human women were ugly, because their faces wrinkle when they look at you? Let him therefore take a water-wife; Moon would make do with a human wife” (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 208).*

So Moon only obtained the human wife by trickery – otherwise, his wife would have been the frog. This indicates that the frog, in finally adhering to Moon's chest, is asserting a kind of poetic justice – she should have been Moon's partner all along.

### **The establishment of non-periodic marriage**

We may now present our findings. The entire myth makes sense once it is seen in the light of the template central to this thesis. The myth – like the template – assumes an “initial situation” in which a woman is with mankind in his brother-role while she is menstruating or giving birth, and with mankind in his husband-role during her marital phase of accessibility. This, however, is in the process of being changed. The two brothers, Sun and Moon, decide to settle down at last – so that they will “be more often at home”. Lévi-Strauss (1978: 219) comments:

“Among the arguments put forward by the brothers in favour of marriage, the most important is the one relating to a regular, sedentary life. Once they ‘settle down’, as the saying goes, the sun and moon are often together, instead of going their separate ways, and they help their parents. In relationship to each other, the brothers were then, at first, distant; marriage brings them close”.

We need not discuss here the myth's implied linkage of this change with agricultural tasks, whose performance seems to be emphatically required by the father-in-law. What is important is that a woman now gets married and has to stay. As the myth puts it, she climbs up to another world, and then finds that the hole in the sky has been hidden (in fact, it is blocked up by a potato plant – Dorsey 1903: 222), so that she cannot return home. Her wifely aspect shows willingness to stay, but what of her menstrual self? The new arrangement is that a woman should remain with her affines even while menstruating or giving birth. Pollution or no pollution, blood or no blood, she is no longer allowed to go home. She has to be induced to stay, despite her own traditional tendency to withdraw, and despite her “unattractiveness” in this phase. The myth pictures this beautifully. The toad-wife shows reluctance to leave her natal home, and is clearly mentally withdrawn” even while physically present among her parents-in-law. Yet she has to be accepted and induced to stay. As the myth puts it, despite her unappealing features as compared with the human wife, “she was given just as warm a welcome as the other one.”



The new form of marriage is patrilocal: the wife has to leave home and live among her husband's folk. In the myth, both wives are in effect imprisoned in the sky. But just as it is womankind in both her aspects who is now retained in marriage, so, by the same token, a woman's marriage now binds her simultaneously to both capacities of her husband. A husband, now, is not merely a lover who has to leave during menstruation or the pollution of childbirth. He is not merely a "visitor" who returns regularly to his own kin. He is now, as the myth puts it, "more often at home"; he is "settled down"; and in this new situation, he performs the functions of both sexual partner and kin. Correspondingly, a woman's marriage now compels her – pollution or no pollution – to give birth among her husband's people, so that her child will be theirs.

Indeed, from this standpoint, her husband has become a kind of "brother" as well as a husband in the more traditional sense. A non-menstruating woman is now carried to the moon. The myth points this out: Moon and Sun, instead of occupying completely different worlds, are depicted as residing in the same household, so that marriage to one is, in effect, marriage to the other. At the beginning of the story, the two brothers made their separate choices and went their separate ways ("the brothers were then, at first, distant"- Lévi-Strauss 1978: 219); at the end of the tale, they are pictured as each occupying the same household space at the same time ("marriage brings them close" – Lévi-Strauss 1978: 219). In other words, sun-marriage and moon-marriage were at first opposites, each woman alternating between one and the other; the new form of marriage combines elements of both in one and the same relationship, negating periodicity and alternation between opposite worlds. It is as if Sun and Moon, day and night, darkness and light, winter and summer were now combined, fixed simultaneously in the same space and time.

### **The all-purpose wife**

The final part of the myth can now be explained. Womankind in her traditional "resurrected" phase was "pure" wife. That is, she displayed all the capacities appropriate to the state of marriage, but none of those traditionally associated with kinship-solidarity. The toad-wife is just the opposite: she is pure anti-wife. We are specifically told by Dorsey that "the toad's appearance

corresponds to that of a pregnant woman”, while the spots on the moon are menstrual stains left by the clinging toad (Dorsey 1903: 177, 220). We may assume, then, that all the characteristics which the human wife omitted to display before giving birth were omitted because these are or were the prerogative of the toad-wife. Everything to do with menstruation and pregnancy belonged, traditionally, not to woman in her marital aspect but to woman as mother and sister. That is why the human wife neither menstruated nor showed signs of pregnancy, giving birth “suddenly” and “without warning”. According to the traditional logic, such things would have been of no legitimate concern to a woman’s husband or in-laws – who, indeed, would have had to avoid the polluting blood.

The myth depicts this cleverly: the toad-wife is, in a sense, pure menstruation, pure pregnancy, just as the human wife is pure marital attractiveness without menstruation or pregnancy. The new form of marriage, however, demands (a) that blood-pollution should be tolerated (the frog-wife has to be given “just as warm a welcome as the other one”) and (b) that a wife should give birth for her husband and his kin. How can a woman who never menstruates and is never pregnant produce a child? For Europeans, such a question might seem absurd. Given a traditional logic according to which the very term “wife” by definition means womankind while she is not menstruating, not pregnant, however, such a problem might seem very pressing and very real.

The solution, here as elsewhere, is to combine opposite roles in the same person. The woman who is a wife must now simultaneously present herself as the person who gets pregnant and bleeds. The human woman must incorporate the capacities of the toad-wife inside herself. This explains why she has to be “taught” to menstruate and to show signs of pregnancy. She has never done such things before. She has always been attractive as a sexual partner; now she must also perform for her in-laws reproductive functions – the functions of a kinswoman. She must become, in short, the all-purpose wife. It is small wonder that the toad-woman erupts into fury the moment her rival’s baby is born. Her prerogatives are being stolen from her. The toad-wife is womankind in her menstrual, maternal and sisterly aspect, angry at being betrayed. She is every man’s sister, bitter at being denied a role, furious that even the glorified function of childbirth is now being credited to her brother’s wife. All she can

do is insist that, despite everything, sibling-unity is at least as indestructible a bond as marriage has now become. Moon has attempted to divest himself of her. She jumps upon him, clings to him and states that she will adhere to him for the rest of his life.

### **The noisy meal**

The only remaining feature of the myth to be explained is the strange incident of the chewing-contest. Why should two wives be told to compete in the task of “eating” in a manner productive of noise? This problem is a difficult one – so difficult that Lévi-Strauss in fact devotes much of the third volume of *Mythologiques* to an exhaustive attempt to solve it (the volume is entitled *The Origin of Table Manners* on account of the strangely-noisy eating habits of the wives of Sun and Moon).

Lévi-Strauss’s (1978: 323) suggested explanation is that the wives are expected to show that they can be good cannibals – eaters of human flesh every bit as voracious as are their in-laws. This seems a weak explanation. Firstly, the in-laws are not depicted as cannibals. Quite the contrary, they are depicted as eminently moral personages (Lévi-Strauss derives the cannibalism motif from completely different, Mandan and other, myths). Secondly, even if they were cannibals, we would still need to know why cannibalistic eating should have to be noisy. Thirdly, any explanation should reveal some internal connection between the various intended or subconscious messages of the myth. Lévi-Strauss’s interpretation fails here, since it is far from clear why cannibalism should appear in a myth whose basic concern is evidently with the timing of menstruation and childbirth. It is here suggested that cannibalism is not really at issue – except in the sense that menstruation itself is always liable to be coded as bloodthirsty “cannibalism” in Amerindian mythology generally (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 268). In fact, menstruation might have been coded as cannibalism in Arapaho mythology just as it is in Red Riding Hood, Mutjingga, The Two Wawilak Sisters or any other magical “monster” or “swallowing” tale; it just so happens that in the myth we are now concerned with it is not so encoded, with the consequence that cannibalism need not enter this particular discussion.

The mystery clears when we remember the other characteristics being demanded of the human wife, and remember the manner in which the toad-wife is being robbed of her former prerogatives. Let us suppose that this myth is being consistent, and that the chewing-contest incident is just another means of depicting the process of transferring menstrual, kinship and reproductive value from womankind as “toad” to woman as wife.

The stealing of noise-making powers from monsters is a theme already familiar to us. In many parts of the world, myths state that the original owners of sacred bullroarers, rattles or other noise-making instruments were women. Later – say the myths – these instruments were stolen by men for their own ritual use (see Chapter 6).

Now, when the myths depict women as owners of noise-making powers, these women are not “good wives”; they are not women in their maritally-available state. They are women in their menstrual, ritually-polluting phase. Translated into the symbolism of the Arapaho, they are women as “toads”. In a sense, then, taking such myths as a set, “toad-women” are being deprived of sound-making powers.

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The story of The Wives of the Sun and Moon is attempting to come to terms with the problems presented by a profound sexual and social change. In place of a system in which men alternated between sisters and wives, the menstrual flow periodically rupturing marital relations and sending men (actually or metaphorically) back to their kin, people are now (to use Lévi-Strauss’s phrase) “settling down”. Marriage is being made into a permanent, settled state. In terms of the template, what this means is that the ritual potency of women’s monthly “sex-strike” is being overridden. Given a tradition in which one of the conditions of society’s magical potency was the potency of the menstrual flow, this means that there is now a danger of ritual power as such becoming lost.

The traditions link menstrual periodicity not only with the moon but also more generally with the periodicity of cosmic rhythms. For this reason, the collapsing or telescoping of sex and kinship – sun-marriage and moon-

marriage – into one relationship seems to present dangers on a cosmic scale. The danger is of the collapse of periodicity in the wider universe, with night and day, winter and summer, dark moon and full all becoming confused. It is to avoid this outcome that men step in with the purpose of retrieving the ritual potency of women's monthly sex-strike – but in a form detached from menstruating women themselves.

It was noted at the beginning of this chapter that loud and frightening noises can be regarded as an auditory dimension of the symbolism of menstruation. In terms of the template, these noises feature as the sound of women's menstrual "sex-strike". But in the myth we are examining, marriage is becoming established as a permanent bond. A woman becomes married to her partner and remains with him. The question which the myth is addressing is whether this new situation is compatible with the cosmically-required preservation of ritually-potent "noise". Can a woman who remains always a "wife" provide men with the source-material from which to ensure the alternation of day and night and of the seasons? In the past, it would have been woman as "toad" who "dribbled black saliva" to the accompaniment of the necessary "noises", and who thereby prompted the rotation of the moon and other celestial bodies. Now, however, the toad's functions are being usurped by the "human wife". The questions for society then become these. Can the necessary noise-making powers be safely transferred from womankind as uncooperative menstruant to womankind as obedient and dutiful wife? Can the toad be successfully marginalised without society's loss of her traditional noise-making powers? Carefully, an experiment is set up. Both kinds of "wife" are invited to prove their worth with the physiological organs with which they are endowed.

The outcome of the contest, not surprisingly, validates marriage in its new form. The experiment provides the reassuring message that the "human wife" is quite capable of what is required. Not only can she produce babies and learn to menstruate. She can also produce, with the strong "teeth" in her "mouth", the necessary ritually-potent sounds (for copulation as "eating" and for the motif of the *vagina dentata* see Lévi-Strauss, 1966: 105-6; the motif of the all-devouring "rolling head", intimately associated with menstrual "cannibalism", is a variation on the *vagina dentata* theme – Lévi-Strauss 1978: 94-97; 1981: 140, 267-8). The human wife's success means that not just some of the former

prerogatives of the toad-wife can be usurped by the human wife – all of them can be taken from her. The toad-wife is depicted as being without teeth; it is said that try as she might, when she chewed “there were no musical notes from her mouth” (Dorsey 1903: 219); all that emerged was black dribble – which no doubt symbolises menstruation as little more than incontinence and an ugly nuisance. The human wife wins even this contest hands down.

### **The sun dance**

Confirmation of the above analysis is contained in the story’s ritual re enactment. The myth we have been discussing was merely one version of a tale known, apparently, among all the Plains Indians of North America. And where it was known, it was the basic story told in explanation of the renowned “Sun Dance” ceremonies which most of these tribes – including the Arapaho, Cheyenne, Siksisa, Cree, Dakota, Assiniboin, Mandan, Crow, Ponca, Omaha, Pawnee, Kiowa, Shoshoni and Ute – periodically held (often around the time of the summer solstice). This ceremony, according to G. A. Dorsey (1910: 651), was “not only the greatest ceremony of the Plains tribes, but was a condition of their existence.” Its “fundamental object”, writes the same author (p. 649). “seems to have been the overcoming of certain cosmic elements.” In fact, it was designed to safeguard the world against being burned up by the sun. Despite its name (“Informants thought the term ‘Sun Dance’ had originated with the white man” – Huger 1952: 149), it was aimed against the Sun, or at least aimed at tempering or controlling its fire. It was used to assist the prayers of the medicine men in bringing on the storm clouds and the rain (Huger 1952: 93).

Regarding the timing of the ritual, Dorsey (1903: 22) writes:

“During the ceremony of 1902, certain interesting events were noted which seemed to be more or less directly concerned with the moon. Further inquiry was then made as to the proper time of the ceremony and the information was volunteered by one of the priests that ‘the proper time of the beginning of the ceremony was from seven to ten days after the new moon and hence an equal number of days after the menstrual period.’”

This Arapaho ceremony, then, was related inversely to menstruation and the dark moon, (as also inversely to the winter solstice). The priests set this time because “the menses are unclean and a source of bodily injury to the

people...” (Dorsey 1903: 22). This was paradoxical, however, because a basic feature of the Arapaho “Sun Dance” was the drinking of ‘medicine water’ – a red-coloured liquid symbolic of menstrual blood (Dorsey 1903: 177). According to one informant, “menses is called ba’ataana that is ‘medicine’ or supernatural” (Huger 1952: 72).

The ceremony lasted eight days, covering therefore the period of the full moon. There were usually three or four preliminary days of fasting, followed by four days of singing and dancing at night. Among all the tribes, there was a division of the ceremony into secret and public phases. The secret rites occur first and are held in, or close to, a “secret tipi” (“rabbit tipi”); by the time this has been erected, an immense camp-circle, three quarters of a mile in diameter, has been formed in a horse-shoe shape, with the opening to the east (just such a camp-circle delights Moon as he descends to earth in the myth; it is here that he finds his wife). On the last day of the secret rites, performed by only a few priests, a great lodge – sixty to one hundred feet in diameter, also with an opening to the east – is built in the centre of the circle. The centre-pole of this lodge is high enough to reach, symbolically, far towards the roof of the sky, and is forked at the top. In a sequel to the Arapaho foundation-myth just examined, the “human wife” decides that she wants to return home from the sky; she lets down a rope which runs out before she has reached earth, suspending her “about the height ‘of the centre fork” (Dorsey 1903: 222).

On the night following the erection of the rabbit-tipi, a Crier commands the people to be silent and to remain indoors. The drumming and singing, which had been carried on during the evening up to this time by several of the warrior societies in different lodges here and there in the immense camp-circle, now suddenly ceases. All in the rabbit-tipi now bite off a small portion of dog root – symbolising semen (Dorsey 1903: 176) – and chew on it; incense fills the air; a sacred song is chanted. The wife of the Lodge-Maker puts on a buffalo robe containing pieces of rabbit-skin, fur side out, and – under this robe – takes off her clothes. A second song is sung; “an air of intense emotion” is felt by all in the Lodge. A man called “the Grandfather” now gets up and is followed out of the Lodge by the enrobed woman. They make a sunwise circuit, stepping over the incense; they proceed northward in the darkness to a

point about half-way between the Lodge and the camp-circle. The woman, “with an exceedingly rapid movement”, then throws her robe or buffalo blanket on the ground and falls, “thus exposing her body to the moon” (p. 176). She does this twice, and then leads the way back to the lodge, “tightly enveloped in her buffalo robe”, halting four times. Both she and “the Grandfather” then transfer a piece of the chewed root into the mouth of her husband.

Two nights later, a similar pattern is repeated. But this time the woman has actual sexual intercourse with the Grandfather, “the woman facing the moon”. It is said that this giving away of the wife is from the Old-Man of Day to the Old-Man of Night...” (p. 176). The woman, then, is being transferred from Sun to Moon. When the sexual intercourse occurs, the woman

“exposed her body to the moon. Moon was married to the human woman, and so the first intercourse happened... The first menstruation happened with the woman who eloped with the moon, by their connection” (Dorsey 1903: 176-7).

Symbolically, then, this is menstrual sex.

Once this rite is completed, the public phase of the ritual begins. To the western side of the lodge an altar has been erected. This varies, writes Dorsey (1910: 650), “from the simple buffalo skull and pipe on a cleared circle of earth, as among the Ponca, to an elaborate arrangement of a buffalo skull, an excavation with a dry sand-painting, upright sticks with rainbow symbols, and various bushes and young trees, as among the Cheyenne”. In the Arapaho case, a buffalo skull is painted red on its left side, black on the right. The red symbolises blood. On either side of the skull is a sod of earth with a bush on each one. “Those bushes”, writes Dorsey (1903: 120), “are called garter-snake or rabbit weeds, which means the blood, for the reason that they bear red berries, etc.” The sods “are obtained from swampy places” and “typify the old woman and the grandchild, or river with stream” (Dorsey 1903: 119). The reference here is to the “human woman’s” child, cared for (in a later episode of the myth) by “Old-Woman-Night”. Old-Woman-Night is – as Lévi-Strauss (1978: 224) notes – “sometimes identified with the moon”.

Placed on this altar, next to the buffalo skull, is the “most sacred possession” of the tribe – a wheel about eighteen inches in diameter, “one end



of which tapers like the tail of a serpent, the other being rudely fashioned to represent a serpent's head" (Dorsey 1903: 12). The disc itself represents the Sun, while around it is the Snake, said to be a "water snake" which is "found in rivers, in lakes, near ponds, and in buffalo-wallows" (Dorsey 1903: 13). In the ceremony, "this lake or pool of sweet water is represented...."; it is "the water which surrounds the earth" (Dorsey 1903: 13). The term "sweet water" is also used for the "medicine water" which (as noted earlier) symbolises menstrual blood (Dorsey 1903: 17). This is the source of rain. Inside the Wheel are markings indicating the oppositions of summer and winter, day and night; these markings were used by Old-Woman-Night (that is, the Moon) in her tipi or lodge, a lodge which, while not described as a menstrual hut, sounds very much like one – its Moon-woman occupant "made ditches inside of the tipi, extending to all directions, to catch her food-animals" (Dorsey 1903: 121). The markings in this lodge or tipi divide the universe into four sections (summer/winter; day/night); these are "the four elements of life; the four courses; the four divides" (Dorsey 1903: 14). The whole wheel is placed on the altar next to the buffalo skull, whose red and black markings are a "picture of the creation of the earth" (Dorsey 1903: 121).

As the public ceremony begins, dancers are painted and decked with sage or willow wreaths and, forming a line, dance towards the forked centre-pole to the accompaniment of a drum-beat, whistles and singing. The drum which is used "is spoken of as water and is said to come from the rain clouds" (Dorsey 1903: 42). A "scrotum-shaped" rattle is also used. After an interval, which may be a day, the paint is removed from the dancers. Then it is renewed and the dancing resumes. There is an alternation between paint and its removal, dancing and rest, almost to the end of the ceremony.

During this time, people are fasting, and frequently many of the men are undergoing self-laceration. Young men fix rawhide ropes into their breasts, fastening the ends to sticks thrust under the skin, and then attach the other ends of the ropes to a buffalo skull or tall pole. The men then drag the heavy skull around, its horns catching in the ground so that the flesh of the men tears out on the skewers; alternatively, they lean back and suspend themselves from the tall pole, again tearing out their flesh. Either way, the men's flesh profusely bleeds. "The suspension of the wife (eloped with the moon) is

imitated by the piercing and suspending of the dancers” (Dorsey 1903: 177). Such self-laceration, then, is a variation on the “male menstruation” theme.

Up to this point, there is no mention of general sexual license – the very special Moon-intercourse symbolising the onset of menstruation earlier mentioned seems to come into a different category altogether. But on the night of the fifth day – which must have been about the time of the full moon – “unbridled license prevailed throughout the camp...” This “was taken advantage of by all, as it was considered one of the rites of the ceremony” (Dorsey 1903: 138). Whether or not such intercourse was symbolically incestuous is not stated in the ethnography.

On the next to last (eighth) day comes the final dance “to the setting Sun”; the drinking of an emetic; and the drinking of the red-coloured sacred “medicine” or “holy water”. “That sweet water”, says an informant of this drink (p. 177), “is the blood that was shed by the woman.” The period of fasting is now at an end, fires are lit and there is an elaborate feast.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lévi-Strauss (1978: 222-3) convincingly argues that this ceremony uses the symbolism of the human female menstrual cycle to help regulate the wider rhythms of the cosmos. Traditions, he writes, presupposed harmony – harmony between the menstrual cycle, the moon and the various other cycles bearing on human experience (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1981: 274: “North American Indians tended to overestimate rather than underestimate the connection between menstruation and the moon’s phases”). Alternation between day and night, waxing moon and waning, summer and winter – these and other alternations were conceptualised as mutually reinforcing and interlocked. For this reason – Lévi-Strauss argues – female menstruation had to be very carefully controlled by men, for otherwise the entire universe could be thrown into chaos. And this, he continues, throws light on the entire pan-American system of mythology which *Mythologiques* is designed to interpret. As he puts it, referring to the father-in-law’s “training” of the human wife in the myth just examined,

“the veil lifts to reveal a vast mythological system common to both South and North America, and in which the subjection of women is the basis of the social order. We can now understand the reason for

this. The human wife's parents-in-law are not content just to present her with domestic utensils and to teach her the correct way to use them. The old man also proceeds to carry out a veritable shaping of his daughter-in-law. In her pristine innocence, she did not have monthly periods and gave birth suddenly and without warning. The transition from nature to culture demands that the feminine organs should become periodic, since the social as well as the cosmic order would be endangered by a state of anarchy in which regular alternation of day and night, the phases of the moon, feminine menstruation, the fixed period for pregnancy and the course of the seasons did not mutually support each other" (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 221-2).

This interpretation comes, at points, close to that being suggested here, but rests on very different premises. Lévi-Strauss takes it that the Arapaho myth is about "the transition from nature to culture". It is not concerned to validate the establishment of marriage in its modern, non-periodic form (as has been argued here), but is a myth about the origin of culture as such. In this view, womankind has to be rendered periodic through training and subjugation under male power. As he continues:

"So it is as periodic creatures that women are in danger of disrupting the orderly working of the universe. Their social insubordination, often referred to in the myths, is an anticipation in the form of the 'reign of women' of the infinitely more serious danger of their physiological insubordination. Therefore, women have to be subjected to règles. And the rules instilled into them by their upbringing, like those imposed on them, even at the cost of their subjection, by a social order willed and evolved by men, are the pledge and symbol of other 'rules', the physiological nature of which bears witness to the correspondence between social and cosmic rhythms" (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 222).

Lévi-Strauss's view is the inverse of that being suggested here. Lévi-Strauss takes chaos as the initial situation, and suggests (or at least allows his Amerindian myth-makers to suggest) that harmony and order are or were created under male ritual power. Here, on the contrary, it is suggested that male ritual "order" embodies no special creativity. At best, it represents only an imprint made from a pre-existent template. It becomes established only through the replacement of its female counterpart, its condition being the collapse of synchrony and harmony between women's menstrual rhythms and the cyclicity of the moon. In place of periodic "honeymoon" (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 157; 283), male ritual power establishes marriage as a non-periodic bond. Far from producing periodicity in womankind, it acts as the agency of its suppression as a creative cultural force. Yet tradition holds that without women's "noisy" and

“rebellious” periodic rupturing of marital bonds, all order, harmony, balance and renewal In the universe will be in danger of becoming lost. The world, fixed in permanent marriage, might then become fixed, correspondingly, in only one phase – in permanent day or night, summer or winter. To avoid this disaster, male ritual therefore seeks to make amends, preserving the forms of menstrual synchrony and alternation even as the menstrual potency of real women is being devalued and denied.



***Chapter 15: Between earth and sky***

In belief-systems throughout the world, the moon's capacity for metamorphosis is perceived as its essential defining attribute. Lévi-Strauss (1978: 109) writes that in both North and South America, for example, the moon, which is often hermaphrodite when it does not actually change its sex, provides the theme of a mythology of ambiguity". Or as Eliade (1958: 154-8) summarises his cross-cultural findings on a global scale:

"The sun is always the same, always itself, never in any sense 'becoming'. The moon, on the other hand, is a body which waxes, wanes and disappears, a body whose existence is subject to the universal law of becoming, of birth and death.... But this 'death' is followed by rebirth: the 'new moon'...

This perpetual return to its beginnings, and this ever-recurring cycle make the moon the heavenly body above all others concerned with the rhythms of life. It is not surprising, then, that it governs all those spheres of nature that fall under the law of recurring cycles....

from the earliest times.... the same symbolism has linked together the moon, the sea waters, rain, the fertility of women and of animals, plant life, man's destiny after death and the ceremonies of initiation...."

To Eliade's findings, we may add one vital extra ingredient. Rebirth may be conceived not only as emergence into new life but – in many instances – as entry into the life or identity of an opponent or counterpart. The Self is metamorphosed into the Other and the Other back into the Self, just as full moon is metamorphosed into dark and dark back into full:

**The Moon (Mweri-Matunda, Creator of Living Things.**

Matunda is....said to be either bisexual or one of a pair of twins, and is sometimes said to have married his sister because there was no one else. In his aspect of the White Matunda, he controls the cycle of....fertility, including the dry season rituals, all starting at the new Moon (? white) and reaching a climax of rejoicing at the full Moon (white-red). When the crescent Moon rises, the senior woman of the homestead goes out to address it, asking it to cure all children's diseases, to tell all men to enter their wives' houses, and all women to conceive. Following the climax of rejoicing, the

Moon, now female, starts to wane and the rituals cease. She becomes gradually inauspicious until she finally falls into Labour (or menstruation), becomes a thin crescent (red and dangerous) and falls into the dark hole in the west, and for three days remains in the dark (black) before she rises again, transformed into her brother-husband, the new Moon” (Jellicoe 1985: 42-3).

This description – despite its immediate reference to the Nyaturu in Tanzania – quite accurately mirrors the underlying logic of the Amerindian myths of *Mythologiques*. Although in concrete terms it describes an aspect of the fertility-rituals of an African livestock-owning tribe, it affords us a glimpse of something universal. It is simply the case that the moon is not capable of being looked upon, traditionally, in any very substantially different way.

The reader will note, moreover, the precision of the correspondence between Jellicoe’s (1985) description here and the template central to this thesis. At full-moon, husbands and wives reach the climax of sexual rejoicing; dark moon, by contrast, is the time of menstruation (or pregnancy) – an inauspicious” or “dangerous” phase of pollution linked with the idea that a woman (in this case, the female moon) is turning into a man (her own brother). Heterosexual, exogamous, adventurous rejoicing, then, alternates with inverted, “incestuous” intimacy, the former reaching its climax when the moon is full and high in the sky, the latter accompanying the moon’s three-day period of descent to earth and burial in a dark hole. Lévi-Strauss in a cross-cultural Amerindian context puts matters only slightly differently when he writes:

“The nocturnal luminary oscillates perpetually between these two possibilities of social inertia or avid curiosity for the exotic; considered from the point of view of sexual relationships, the only choice they leave open is between incest and licentiousness.”

#### One myth only

In *The Origin of Table Manners*, Lévi-Strauss set out “to prove”, in his own words, “...that the myths featuring the wives of the sun and moon were transformations of the bird-nester ones, and that all together they constituted a single myth” (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 581). In fact, he shows that the two protagonists in the bird-nester myths – the two men who quarrel for a relationship with the same woman, one incestuously, the other in legitimate

marriage – are recognisable as the characters Sun and Moon, whose features are defined through their dispute over which kind of “marriage” is best. In other myths, these two kinds of marriage are counterposed as “close” in opposition to “distant”, “cold” as against “hot” etc.

As noted in Chapter 8 (pp. 176-77), Lévi-Strauss at the very end of his four- volume analysis writes that the “quintessential mythic formula” is provided by a Coos bird-nester version. It so happens that in this version (although Levi- Strauss himself makes little of the fact) the sky-traveller meets, first, a Sun-wife who is so hot that he can approach her only with “a penis made of ice”, and second, two nocturnal sisters who synchronise female menstruation (“Whenever we get anywhere”, as one of them puts it, “the women have their monthly periods” – Lévi-Strauss 1981: 565). In this myth (as may be recalled), the young man is induced by his evil father to climb a conifer upon the top of which have been placed the old man’s “blood-stained faeces.” While his son is preoccupied with the attractions of such pollution in the world above, the father down below assumes the appearance of a young man and takes possession of the unfortunate bird-nester’s wives.

In Chapter 14 (pp. 389-90, 400), moreover, we noted Lévi-Strauss’s belief that the “most plausible initial state for the whole series of transformations” – that is, the myth we might most appropriately select as the common ancestral form – is the widespread legend of the origin of the spots on the moon. Versions of this myth, as earlier noted, are told from the extreme north to the extreme south of the New World; in most versions, Moon’s intercourse is with his own sister; In many, his stains stem from her menstrual flow.

Although in these and countless other myths, Moon is felt to be intrinsically incestuous, nevertheless there is a consistent implication that, as Lévi-Strauss (1978: 331) puts it, “marriage between Moon and humans allows the humans to come off best.” However much the myths profess to celebrate marriage and condemn incest, their base-line attitude towards incest seems ambiguous, to say the least. There is the implication that every woman secretly longs to marry her brother, whilst every man desires his sister; and at the deepest level, beneath all ideological assertions to the contrary, the myths seem to collude with such desires. The “sister-wife” is known, familiar, good – as



opposed to the wife from an enemy or strange clan who can never be fully trusted. To return to the opening lines of the Hare myth mentioned in the previous chapter:

*“The demiurge....had two wives, one close, his own sister who was as sensible as he was, and the other very remote: an evil mouse who very nearly caused his death” (Lévi-Strauss 1978; 147).”*

A further important point is that the two “protagonists” in the myths, whose “quarrel” forms the basis of most of the stories, are – as we have seen – ways of coding the two phases or aspects of Self and Other. They are the two opposite aspects of Woman, or of Man. Frequently, the myths are careful to point this out. We may recall that Kapei the Moon’s two wives in the Guiana myth mentioned in Chapter 14 (p. 401) are “both called Kaiunog”. In *The Wives of the Sun and Moon*, the “ugly” wife is subtly defined, not as a whole person, but as womankind in her “liquid”, “wet”, “toad-like” phase or state. The very abstraction of such counterpositions in these stories, in other words, indicates the complementarity of the aspects being defined, and the fact that each twin or partner is on some level the other’s “other side”.

Interestingly, these considerations apply outside the realms of mythic narrative. As objects of apparently-identical shape and size, the sun and moon themselves, when referred to in everyday life, are often felt in Amerindian cultures to be only the two polar-opposite aspects of the same basic reality – the sun being, as among the Cubeo, “merely the moon giving light and heat during the day.” “It is a fact”, writes Lévi-Strauss (1978: 142-3)

*“that, in several languages of North and South America, the same word is used for both the sun and the moon, and accompanied, if need be, by a suitable qualification: e.g. ‘day’ star, or ‘night’ star” (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 142-3).*

This usage is not universal. Nevertheless, it seems that the two “stars” in the Americas cannot be conceptualised outside the framework of the myths, which recurrently use the two bodies to code the two basic ways of being “married” – conjoined with kin, and conjoined with non-kin. That is, the use of the one word for both “Sun” and “Moon”, where this occurs, seems to express the same logic as that which uses the same word – translated by us as “wife” – for both Moon’s spouse and his sister,

Now, if characters such as “Sun” and “Moon” (or similar protagonists) are at the deepest level alternative, alternating roles or aspects of the same Self or Other, the myths should show how the same person periodically changes into his or her “opponent”. This is systematically done, the story-teller often delighting in the element of “deception” involved. We have seen this already in our fairy tales; the Wolf pretends to be Red Riding Hood’s granny; Jack pretends to be a different person each time he visits the giant’s kitchen in the sky; the ugly sisters – trying to step into their rival’s shoes – pretend to be Cinderella....

### **The naked man**

We may now turn to the basic theme of this chapter – the theme of “skin-changing” or role-exchanging (involving modes of lunar rebirth) as the key to an understanding of *Mythologiques* as a whole. Repeated, periodic assumption of the Other’s role – linked with earth/sky alternation and alternation between exogamy and incest – is a persistent theme in Lévi-Strauss’s North American bird-nester myths. Here (as in so many European fairy-tales), an element not only of “inauspiciousness” and “danger” but of evil or cunning deception is very often read into the incestuous metamorphosis. We may not find in these myths a wolf who changes into the clothes of a grandmother, or (to put matters another way) a grandmother who suddenly grows the eyes, ears and teeth of a wolf – but the effects are very much the same. The following three descriptions of “skin-change” come from the Klamath, the Fraser valley Shuswap and the Vasco respectively:

*“K mukamch took all Aishish’s clothes away, dressed himself in them and took on his son’s physical appearance” (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 31; see below for the story of Aishish).*

*“After causing the rock to rise higher and higher, so that the hero is trapped on a craggy ledge and unable to climb either up or down, Coyote dons the clothes, stretches his skin so as to appear young, and takes his son’s place” (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 384).*

*“Coyote... killed the frog, stripped her of her skin and put it on himself....” (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 186)."*

And so forth.

Not infrequently, the ethnography throws up – in addition to the incest motif – a clear statement that the “skin-change” occurs during feminine seclusion or menstruation, or is in any event associated with the magical properties of the womb. Three examples from Lévi-Strauss will suffice to illustrate this here.

1

A Tucuna (western Amazonian) myth tells of a girl “who was being kept in seclusion for her puberty festival” (that is, her first-menstruation rite). Whilst inside her dark hut, this girl mistakenly responded to “the spirit of old age”, whereupon the old spirit entered her hut suddenly

*“and exchanged his skin for hers. The spirit at once was transformed into a youth again, and his victim became a decrepit old woman....”*

2

A Mataco (Gran Chaco) tale concerns “the girl mad about honey”, who resolves to marry the expert honey-gatherer, Woodpecker:

“The marriage took place. But Tawkwax (the Trickster) was jealous, because he, too, desired the girl.

One day, during her menstrual period, she remained behind in the village, and Tawkwax caught her unawares while she was bathing. She fled, leaving her clothes behind. Tawkwax dressed up in them and took on the appearance of a woman, whom Woodpecker believed to be his wife. He therefore asked her to delouse him as usual; but Tawkwax was so clumsy that Woodpecker’s suspicions were aroused. He asked an ant to climb between Tawkwax’s legs: ‘if you see a vulva’, he instructed, ‘that’s all right, but if you see a penis, sting him!’” (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 109).

Tawkwax is so startled by the sting that he lifts up his skirt, revealing his masculine identity. He is given a sound thrashing.

3

The myths we are now discussing are about two rivals, one of whom gets into the skin of the other. A myth told by the Amazonian Mundurucu presents this motif with wonderful clarity, attributing the role-change to the female Moon’s womb:

*There were once two men: a deformed and sexually impotent creature called Karuetaruyben, and a fine upstanding and virile fellow named Uakurampe. Karuetaruyben’s wife spurned him and was unfaithful. One day, the unfortunate husband was alone fishing at the water’s edge. Sun and his wife, Moon, approached the unhappy man. Sun turned*

*Karuetaruyben back into a baby so as to insert him into Moon's womb, from which he emerged reborn – young, beautiful and potent. Overjoyed, he went home, rejected his unfaithful wife and found himself another woman.*

*Uakurampe, however – who was the unfaithful wife's brother – could not rest until he knew how Karuetaruyben had been so transformed. Eventually, he discovered the secret. Acting on this information he succeeded in meeting Sun and Moon, whereupon events repeated themselves. Instead of entering Moon's womb like a baby, however, he made the mistake of copulating with her. Angered by this, Sun caused Uakurampe to be reborn ugly and hunchbacked. Uakurampe went home and was rejected by his wife (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 205-06).*

At the end of this myth, then, a precise exchange of sexual roles has taken place through the transformative agency of the moon's womb.

\* \* \* \* \*

Since this thesis is now beginning to demonstrate the global universality of the template, and since European fairy-tales have already featured in the analysis, it may be appropriate at this point to return briefly to the brothers Grimm. In one of the loveliest of Grimm's tales, an old hag – closely identified with a clinging-woman who attaches herself tenaciously to the hero's back – becomes young again in the light of the full moon. The heroine is "an old wench, strong and big, but as ugly as night"; the hero, a handsome young count. The young hero has already told himself that such an ancient hag "could not touch my heart, even if she were thirty years younger." This hideous witch gives the title to the story; she is *The Goose-Girl at the Well*. A fragment of the tale will have to suffice here:

*"She rose and went out, and where did she go? Over the meadows ever onward into the valley. At last she came to a well, with three old oak trees standing beside it; meanwhile the moon had risen large and round over the mountain, and it was so light that one could have found a needle. She removed a skin which covered her face, then bent down to the well, and began to wash herself. When she had finished, she dipped the skin also in the water, and then laid it on the meadow, so that it should bleach in the moonlight, and dry again. But how the maiden was changed! Such a change as this was never seen before! When the grey mask fell off, her golden hair broke forth like sun-beams, and spread about like a mantle over her whole form. Her eyes shone out as brightly as the stars in heaven, and her cheeks bloomed a soft red like apple-blossom...."*

The girl's beauty is inseparable from moon's light itself – a fact which is subtly emphasised in the next episode, in which the mysterious heroine's "dark"

appearance is resumed simultaneously with a temporary darkening of the moon. The handsome young count has been watching the above scene from a hiding- place high up in a nearby tree. Inadvertently, he causes a branch to crack, making a loud noise:

*“She sprang up like a roe which has been overtaken by the shot of the hunter. Just then the moon was obscured by a dark cloud, and in an instant the maiden had put on the old skin and vanished, like a light blown out by the wind” (Grimm and Grimm 1975: 730-31).*

\* \* \* \* \*

### **the story of Aishish**

The fourth volume of *Mythologiques* opens with a version of the “bird-nester” myth concerning a “naked man”. The man is “naked” not just in an ordinary sense but for a reason linked with the central motif of this thesis. He has had his skin changed: his “clothes” (in fact, as is made clear, the marks of his personal identity) have been taken off him by his own foster-father, Kmukamch. Kmukamch wishes to usurp the youth’s identity in order (as usual in “bird-nester” myths) to seduce one of his wives. It will be worth memorising the main details of what follows for future reference; an almost identical Australian version will be presented below.

The “father” tries to get rid of Aishish by claiming that the birds nesting on a tall stalk are eagles. He tells the youth to take off his clothes and climb up after the birds:

“Aishish, now naked, climbed up but found only little birds of a very common species. Meanwhile the stalk grew as he climbed and Aishish was unable to get down; he went back to the nest and waited. Kmukamch took all Aishish’s clothes away, dressed himself in them and took on his son’s physical appearance. Only the daughter-in-law whom he coveted did not suspect his duplicity...” (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 31).

Kmukamch cohabits with his son’s wife. Meanwhile (in conformity with the template), Aishish is deprived not only of marital enjoyment but also of food. The youth, marooned at the top of the tree “and with no food to eat, became nothing but skin and bones” (the parallels with Jack-and-the-Beanstalk will not be missed). He is eventually rescued by two butterfly-females, given drink and food, and carried back to earth. He puts on flesh, recovers his strength,

regains his stolen wives and kills his father, who later resurrects himself from the dead.

Lévi-Strauss notes that “if Kmukamch connotes the sun and his son Aishish the moon” (as much evidence independently suggests), then the protagonists in this myth may be viewed as counterparts of the two brothers, Sun and Moon, in *The Wives of the Sun and Moon* (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 48). In terms of the template – and here we go beyond Lévi-Strauss – they are not two “characters” but ways of conceptualising two opposite roles or aspects of mankind. The characters are not, then, literally father and son (Kmukamch, indeed, is described only as a foster-father), any more than Sun and Moon were literally brothers, or the “frog wife” and “human wife” sisters. What matters is that they are polar opposites; one way of coding this polarity is to depict their relationship as “like” that of an older and younger brother, or two brothers-in-law, or any other two relatives, given appropriate modifications to the story.

The story of Aishish can now be decoded. According to the template, the monthly menstrual sex-strike triggers a general phase-switch. This may not be an exchange of clothes, of identities, or of positions in relation to the earth and sky. But it is certainly an exchange of roles. The collective menstrual power draws “its own blood” away from marital relations during each dark moon as the blood flows; it releases men and women once again in a process which culminates at full moon. As the blood flows, the man who was “father” and “husband” to his children and wife becomes “son” and “brother” among his kinswomen. The woman who was “wife” to her husband now becomes “sister” to her own kin. Every man loses his wife or wives, just as every woman loses her husband or husbands, it is almost as if someone had “stolen” the sexual partner, replacing him or her with a substitute with whom sex would be incestuous and therefore “wrong” or “false”. And just as the sexual partner is “stolen”, so also the possibility of feasting is removed. The time of menstruation and the dark moon – as shown in Chapters 5 and 11 – inaugurates a phase of fasting, coded in the myths as the hunger and starvation afflicting travellers to the “sky” or “world beyond” (although the Moon – like a reversed animated image – paradoxically grows “fatter” from this moment on). With full moon, however, the original situation is restored. The menstrual spell breaks, the “stolen” sexual partners are restored and normal life, with its feasting

and other pleasures, is once more resumed. The “quarrel between antagonists” in all these myths is, then, of the same order as the quarrel” between night and day, full moon and dark, wet season and dry. In such alternations, first one aspect “kills” the other, then the “killed” aspect resurrects itself and “kills” its “opponent” – and so on. Winter reigns; summer is dead. But then summer regains the ascendancy and kills winter in turn, before the whole process repeats itself. At a deep level, the seemingly-fraught, often frantic and typically-bloody “conflicts” between “rivals” in these myths tell only of such patterns of alternation which are central to the experience of life in all its forms. Death, murder, incest, cannibalism, rape: these and similarly drastic deeds and events are memorable code-terms whose function is to help fix in the collective mind the features of a logic of cultural metamorphosis modelled on the peaceful changes of women and the moon.

### **The bird-nester in Australia**

Lévi-Strauss turns to the story of Aishish in the fourth and final volume of *Mythologiques*. His analysis of this and related myths forms the triumphant culminating demonstration of the extraordinary inner unity of American Indian mythology as a whole, from end to end of the two New World continents. For he shows how the Indians of the Klamath region of North America reconstitute point by point, and down to the minutest of details, the “bird-nester” myths of the Bororo and Ge Indians of Central Brazil and the eastern highlands of Bolivia. The precision of the correspondence runs deeper than can be conveyed here, and involves much more than examples of what may seem to be the occasional chance near-identity of one whole myth with another from a remote region. It is not just the similarities between myths which are striking; much more impressive is the degree to which the differences can be shown to be systematically related, as successive “twists” or “distortions” worked upon base-materials held in common. The demonstration is exhausting and arduous, but ultimately rewarding. Never before has an anthropologist conveyed so powerfully a sense of the deep mental and cultural unity of humankind.

Yet in his *Mythologiques*, Lévi-Strauss chose to limit himself almost entirely to the Americas. Perhaps the full impact of his discoveries and their significance was thereby diminished, at least in the eyes of many non-

specialists. But even among anthropological specialists in comparative mythology, it seems surprising how few have set out to build on Lévi-Strauss's edifice. *Mythologiques* showed that the myths of the Americas are reducible to "One Myth Only", to use Lévi-Strauss's words (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 561-624). Fifteen years have passed since the publication of this immense work, yet no-one seems to have felt it worthwhile to pursue the same investigation further with a view to demonstrating the inner unity of the mythology of the planet as a whole.

Some idea of the stunning concordance between myths in far-flung corners of the globe may be gleaned if we now examine a bird-nester myth from Aboriginal Australia. The reader should at this point recall the details of the Klamath Indian story of Aishish, in the following version from the Djuan tribe in Arnhem Land, Australia, the quarrel between kin over a woman, the contrast between youth and age, death and new life, the supposed discovery of eagles nesting in a tall tree, the magical growing of the tree as a means of eliminating a sexual rival, the marooning of the unfortunate bird-nester, the themes of deception and usurpation, the reduction of the bird-nester to skin and bones, the return to earthly life, the recovery of the stolen wife and the ultimate revenge – all these elements are present as in the Klamath myth. The chances against such a parallel arising by coincidence would surely be astronomical.

*There were once two brothers, the eldest of whom – Nabonkitkit – "had two women whom he kept hidden in the bush". One day, the younger brother – Kimurree – was out hunting when he found these two women. Not knowing his brother had claimed them, he returned home. "Brother", he said, "today I found two women in the bush. There is one for you and one for me."*

*Nabonkitkit disagreed. "No", he said, "you are too young to have a woman. I could not let you have one. It is better that I have the two of them."*

*Kimurree pretended to concede. Soon, however, he had thought of a ruse. "Brother" he said, "I have found an eagle's nest in a tree and there are two young eagles in the nest. Come and I'll show you." They arrived at a low tree. "Climb up", said Kimurree, "It is not very high."*

*But no sooner had the elder brother begun to climb than the tree began to grow. "What is the matter with this tree", he called down, "I am a long way from the ground already." "Why", called back Kimurree, "you are not half way up yet. It looks a long way down to you, but you are only a little way above me." Nabonkitkit went on*



*climbing. Some time later he heard his brother calling from a long way off that he still had not climbed very far. Nabonkitkit climbed and climbed until at last he reached the eagle's nest. When he looked down he saw his brother on the ground a long way away. Then he saw that, just below him, a huge smooth knot had grown all round the trunk of the tree. There was no way he could get down. He now realised that his brother had sung the tree and made it grow, also causing the huge knot to form around the trunk.*

*"Ai, Ai, my brother", the victim heard Kimurree calling, "you will never get down out of that tree. There you will die. You would not let me have one of your women. Now you can watch me take them both. I am going a long way from here now. Bo-bo, my brother" (Robinson 19.56: 159-61).*

Nabonkitkit was stranded in the sky "all through the rain-time, all through the time that the grass came tall and green over the plains." He stayed there "until the grass was brown and whitening." Then, in the time of the cold weather, a great wind bent and shook the tree "and tossed out the dry bones of Nabonkitkit into the grass far below." As the bones hit the grass, they sat up, "for Nabonkitkit was a great doctor." He began to crawl about, catching lizards, centipedes and little birds, gradually putting flesh and sinews back on to his body. He set off in pursuit of Kimurree, eventually found him with his two wives, killed all three of them and travelled on alone.

### **Trees, ropes and rainbows**

To further appreciate the unity of magical myths, the reader should now form a static mental picture of the above story. Imagine, for example, a stage-set, with all the episodes in the narrative represented simultaneously in a frozen moment of time. The most essential components would be (a) the earth, (b) the sky, (c) a tree stretching between these two, (d) one man in the sky, (e) another man on the ground, (f) two women in an uncertain position, somewhere between the two men and their different worlds.

With this stage-set in mind, we may now visualise the acting-out of the following myth from the Fitzmaurice River area in Western Australia:

*"Flying Fox had two wives, who were small rainbows. He was jealous, suspecting that both wives found a man called Rainbow more attractive than himself. One day, the two wives hurried off to join Rainbow, even though on the basis of their subsection-affiliation they called Rainbow 'son'. They enjoyed intercourse with Rainbow because, unlike Flying Fox, he had had his penis subincised.*

*Searching for them, Flying Fox at last saw his two wives high on the top of a hill. 'Why have you climbed up there?' he cried angrily. His wives saw that he could not climb up and lowered a rope for him. But when he had almost reached the top, they cut it, so that he fell down and was smashed to pieces.*

*But Flying Fox felt around and found his eyes, his nose, his fingers – all the parts of his body – and put himself together again. He was a native doctor and sung himself well again.*

*Then he took his stone-tipped spears and set off in pursuit of Rainbow and the two women. At last he came up to them. He could hear the girls chattering. As he approached, Rainbow tried to placate him: 'You're alive! Everything is right now!' He didn't see the spears. Flying Fox approached and speared him, so that he fell backwards into the water and became a Rainbow Snake. Flying Fox subincised himself, after which his two wives did not try to leave him again" (Berndt and Berndt 1964: 226).*

It will have been noted that this story requires few changes to the stage-set visualised for the previous myth. The basic difference is that a high hill and a cut rope replace the former tree and smooth knot as the link between earth and sky. We have (a) the earth, (b) the sky, (c) a rope stretching between these two, (d) one man in the sky, (e) another man on the ground, (f) two women who move between the two men and their respective realms. As in the previous story, one "marriage" is legitimate, the other illegitimate, and again as in the previous story, the injured party "dies" and is "reborn" in the course of losing and gaining his wives. The Fitzmaurice River myth links the permanent retention of wives with subincision of the penis. With its prominent motifs of subincision, death and rebirth, the story is clearly linked with male initiation ritual.

It is worth noting that the myth depicts an exchange of positions with respect to the earth and the sky; at the moment of Flying Fox's death, he is "low" while Rainbow is "high"; at the end of the story, Rainbow is "low" (in the water) while it must be supposed that Flying Fox "flies" and is therefore "high". This final separation of the "high" from the "low" features in other versions from neighbouring tribes:

***"The Rainbow Serpent (Marithiel tribe, Western Australia).***

*Lerwin, The Rainbow Serpent, had no wife. Amanggal, The Little Flying Fox, had two wives. Lerwin stole one of the women while Amanggal was looking for food. When he discovered his loss, Amanggal pursued Lerwin to a far country and slew him with a stone-tipped spear. Lerwin cried out in pain, jumped into deep water, and*

*was transformed into a serpent. Amanggal flew into the sky” (Stanner 1966: 86).*

Or again:

***“The Rainbow Serpent (Wagaman tribe, Western Australia).***

*Tjiniman (the Bat) had two wives. Djagwut (the Rainbow Serpent) stole both of them. Tjiniman pursued him and slew him with a stone-tipped spear while he slept, the spear striking him in the back. Djagwut cried out in pain, jumped into deep water, and was transformed into a serpent. Tjiniman flew into the sky” (Stanner 1966: 87).*

This last myth, in a longer and slightly-different version, has been analysed already – it is the story of Kunmanggur the Rainbow Snake (here called Djagwut) which was discussed in Chapter 11 (pp.342-46).

An array of Aboriginal myths in the same vein could be cited. The means of disjoining the sky-world from the earth may differ – a tree in one myth, a hill in another, wings, rope or a rainbow in yet others – but the movements are essentially the same. Indeed, we are now once again encountering the image of the Rainbow Snake in Aboriginal mythology – an image discussed in depth in Chapters 7-11. This image is in essence one of “skin-change” or metamorphosis pictured as a union of opposites – a “low” creature (a snake) which is also “high” (a rainbow). Recall our image of the “high” set in contrast with the “low”, a woman or women poised in transition between the two. In this chapter it has been suggested that these apparent “opponents” are at a deeper level two opposite phases or aspects of the same reality or being; they are mankind in his brother-role as a “giver” of wives, and mankind in his husband-role as “taker”. Maddock (1978a 8) comments on the earth-sky polarity so prominent in rainbow-serpent myths:

“A flying fox who goes up into the sky is the other self of a serpent who goes down into the water: a rainbow serpent is in essence a split representation, since it shows in the sky above but lives in the water below”.

Maddock does not say that the one “self” is man as wife-giver, the other, man as wife-taker, or that the alternation between “selves” may express human alternation between kinship and marital roles (see *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* – Lévi-Strauss 1969a). Yet this does seem to be indicated by the myths. The very fact that one protagonist is always “incestuous” provides

sufficient evidence: the “incestuous” man is someone who “should” be “giving away” a female relative but is in fact attempting to reclaim her or colluding with her desire to return home. One recording of the Fitzmaurice River myth explains that Rainbow is wife-giver to Flying Fox:

*“Little Flying Fox went kangaroo-hunting, taking with him two women who had been given to him by The Rainbow Serpent. But the two women went away and hid. Carrying a kangaroo, he caught up with them. They were on a high cliff and made a rope to lift him up. The rope broke and he fell down a long way, breaking his bones. The women went to bathe in the salt-water part of the river, and then ran away, with sexual intent, to the Rainbow Serpent. The Little Flying Fox mended his broken bones, bathed in the salt-water, and set out to recapture the women. The tide kept on sweeping him back as he tried to cross the river. He looked for a sharp piece of stone for a spear. He tried several stones, but they were not sharp enough. Finally, he found a sharp stone and put it on his spear-shaft. Then he chased and found the women. He said: ‘Ah! Here you two are! I have to pick up my spear.’ He sang the song that begins kawandi, kawandi; then he danced by himself; and, after that, went to sleep. Wakening, he found The Rainbow Serpent, and threw the spear so that it pierced his backbone” (Stanner 1966: 87-8).*

This myth is about the oscillation of two women between “wife-giver” and “wife-taker” (to use Lévi-Strauss’s terminology), this in turn being pictured as a movement between earth and sky, death and new life, falling asleep and waking up etc. It is interesting that, as the two women return to the Rainbow Serpent, they first pick up the tidal (that is, moon-linked) movements of “the salt water part of the river”, a force which sweeps them apart from Flying Fox.

It has here been argued that “incest” in these myths refers to women’s periodic return to their own kin during menstruation. Menstrual seclusion is a rupturing of the marriage-relation, and may be seen as a temporary “stealing back” of men’s wives by these women’s “blood” or “kin”. We saw in Chapter 11 (pp. 342- 46) a Murinbata (Western Australian) variant on the above Rainbow Serpent theme – the myth of Kunmanggur, who attempted to steal and extinguish the world’s fire. The myth, it will be recalled, describes two women as the Serpent’s daughters, while the Bat (Tjiniman) is his son. The Bat has incestuous designs on his sisters, whose menstrual blood he has just seen. The sight of the blood arouses him sexually and he insists on intercourse. It should now be added that (in an episode not previously discussed), the girls

then escape to the sky by climbing up a cliff, they let down a rope for Bat to climb, but cut it just as he approaches the top. Bat breaks his bones, restores himself and kills the Rainbow Snake as in the other versions (Stanner 1966: 84-9?).

Of all the published versions of this Aboriginal myth, perhaps the most delightful is the one collected by the bushranger Bill Barney from his informant Mirawong (Barney 1959: 39-45). It comes, like the others, from northwestern Australia. According to Mirawong, speaking in general terms about women, “we have two kind in we country... one that live longa water and ‘nother kind called Mungga-mungga that live in ant-hill longa dry country...” (Barney 1959: 39). Women, then, are either of the “wet” kind or the “dry”. The “wet” kind are “useless” as wives and positively dangerous; to be turned into proper wives they have to be “dried”. With this background-information in mind, we can turn to the myth:

*A long time ago, seven girls had been “cursed by magic”, since when they had lived with the ducks and crocodiles in a lagoon. One day, a young man called Manbuk approached the lagoon, saw the water-girls and managed to capture one.*

*At first, the woman was “proper useless one.” Manbuk remembered, however, that “the enemy of water is fire and the only way these water-girls can be rid of the curse is to hold them over a smoke that has been made from the fire of green bamboo stems”. This was done. (For the ritual practice of “cooking” women to rid them of blood-pollution, see Chapter 11).*

*“As the thick white smoke arose he held his girl captive in it and watched in amazement as a grey slime fell from her skin on to the ground....” As it did (Mirawong explains) “That young water-girl that was useless one now change meself into proper pretty one woman that can talk the same language as Manbuk and can understand his customs properly way”.*

*At this point, the water-girl was joined by her sister. Manbuk’s marriage was a happy one until the intervention of the two women’s father, Dunia – the Moon. As Dunia returned from fishing, he called out for his daughters to help him carry back his catch, his aim being to seduce the two women. The trick failed, but the girl’s mother was warned. She escaped with her daughters up a tall banyan tree overhanging the water. When old Dunia next came home from fishing and called for his daughters, he found his whole family up in the sky. The girls’ mother lowered a long vine to her old husband. “Take hold of this root-vine, old man”, she said, “take hold and we will pull you up into this new home.” He had almost reached the top, however, when his wife cut the rope, saying aloud, “They who look with lust upon their daughters must die.”*

*"I am falling... I am falling... I am falling" cried the old man. With a loud noise (for dark moon noises see previous chapter) he fell into the lagoon and turned into a crocodile. The mother and her daughters heard him cry aloud in the voice of Dunia "that he would never die but be reborn over and over again and ever grow fat at each full moon by devouring the soul-shades of those who disobey the tribal way of life." For three days after their father's death, the three women remained in the tree top. And then, "on the third evening, they beheld the first new moon in the sky over sun-down way, and as the orb grew bigger each night the outline of Old Dunia became plainer upon it."*

Dunia, the Moon, remains an ever-present threat, always "hungry for his girls". It is explained that it was to satisfy his desires that the seven women mentioned at the beginning of this myth had been "cursed by magic" and compelled to live among the crocodiles in their lagoon (Barney 1959: 39-45).

There is no need to cite further myths. Those mentioned here correspond closely to the "stage-set" envisaged, in which two women alternate between "incest" and "marriage", "earth" and "sky", with a tree, rope or other object serving both to conjoin and disjoin the two realms. Taken as a whole, the evidence seems persuasive that the alternation between worlds, in these Aboriginal myths as in others discussed in previous chapters, corresponds to the alternation between marriage and kinship, linked to the alternation between "fire" and "water", conjugal sex and menstrual blood, light and darkness, full moon and new. The movement of women to their own "father", their "son", their "brother" or to the "rainbow" corresponds to their periodic retreat from marriage, an event which precipitates a general exchange of kinship and sexual roles.



***chapter 16: Conclusion***

“Einstein once remarked that ‘the eternally incomprehensible fact about the universe is that it is comprehensible’.... The solitary comprehensible fact about human experience is that it is incomprehensible” (Needham 1972: 246).

Lévi-Strauss’ aim was to bring to the study of culture something of the inner simplicity and harmony of principle which natural scientists seek and find in the study of nature. Sharing in this aim, the preceding chapters have suggested a simplified abstract model as an aid to understanding the findings of social and symbolic anthropology.

In any science, new paradigms become adopted when the old ones prove unable to cope with persistently “anomalous” findings. At first, attempts are made to ignore or play down the anomalies. Theoretical discussion is deliberately focused elsewhere – upon problems felt to be in principle soluble using familiar techniques. For a while, this strategy is successful: dissidents are effectively marginalised. No matter how strongly they insist on the significance of the anomalies or the legitimacy of the problem-areas they represent, science continues to address only those problems known to be soluble in its terms. Indeed, suggested new theories – the bolder of which would restructure the scientific community’s entire conceptual web of language and thought – appear unnecessary, illogical or even mad. It is only after a period, as the number of obvious anomalies in the old paradigms increases, that the dissidents begin to make enough converts to ensure that their presence is felt. There then follows a more or less chaotic period in which little consensus is achieved – the old paradigms are discredited, yet among the multitude of proposed new ones, none is able to command a consensus as to how the field should be restructured (Kuhn 1970). In the case of anthropology, with the demise of structuralism and other widely-accepted paradigms and the absence of any agreement on alternatives, such a situation has prevailed for some time.



There has long been no theoretical framework which brings together anthropology's various sub-disciplines – the study of primate behaviour, of human evolution, of archaeology, of pre-capitalist economics, kinship, ritual, mythology and other domains. Nowadays, it is not even believed that there could ever be such a framework. Such paradigms as exist are those of the discipline's fragments; dividing up the field, they validate the permanence of its incommensurable terminologies, its boundaries and its inconsistencies. Each sub-discipline's "anomalous" findings are for the most part safely ignored – usually by being projected across the nearest disciplinary boundary as someone else's problem.

### **Anthropology and "anomaly"**

The "anomalies" of the science of culture have accumulated since the founding of social anthropology more than a century ago, occasionally finding their way into the centre of a new paradigm (as happened with the marriage-rules central to the kinship-analyses of Lévi-Strauss) but more often remaining outside the focus of any theoretical framework. When Nadel (1957: 177) wrote that the advance of any science "is punctuated as much by the disappearance of old problems as by the emergence of new ones", he was particularly thinking of social anthropology. "The old problems are abandoned", he wrote, not because they are solved but

"because all that can be said has been said; and if certain questions still remain unanswered they are yet shelved in spite of it, or perhaps because of it – because one realizes that they are unanswerable and should be replaced by other, more profitable, ones."

The problems abandoned have been precisely those which almost all late nineteenth century thinkers considered most urgent and significant:

"Think of the controversies, now silent, about the origin of totemism, the distinction of magic and science, the 'meaning' (or 'nature' or 'function') of taboo or sacrifice, and many other, similar topics. These were brave attempts, aiming at final explanations, even though they contained much that was speculative, much that was over simplified, and a great deal of purely verbal argumentation. Today, we have grown much more modest.... And many of the questions which inspired the earlier scholars are simply no longer asked. Perhaps we shall return to them one day" (Nadel 1957: 189).

Nearly a generation later, Robert Murphy (1972: 37) was to comment:

“We do not just fail to return to the basic questions – we have forgotten what they are.”

This thesis sets out from the observation that despite decades of attempted explanation, almost everything about traditional human cultures is in fact “anomalous”. Firstly, the findings of social anthropology are anomalous in a general way in relation to the biological paradigms – Darwinian, neo-Darwinian, sociobiological – which set the parameters for most discussions on human evolution and cultural origins. Secondly, they are anomalous in more specific contexts in relation to what is left of the prevailing paradigms of social anthropology as a discipline.

### **The ideology of “the family”**

The dogma of the cultural centrality of the “nuclear family” has burdened western social anthropology since the inter-war period. Malinowski (1956: 72, 28) in particular set the scene when he affirmed that “the tradition of individual marriage and the family has its roots in the deepest needs of human nature and of social order”, seeing it as his professional task to “....prove to the best of my ability that marriage and the family have been, are, and will remain the foundations of human society”. Whereas – he noted – W. H. R. Rivers “would lead us to believe that what I like to call the initial situation of kinship is not individual but communal” (1930: 99), his own view was the opposite. The family and marriage, he insisted, “from the beginning were individual” (1956: 76). Culture’s “initial situation” was dominated by

“....the group consisting of father and mother and their children, forming a joint household, co-operating economically, legally united by a contract and surrounded by religious sanctions which make the family into a moral unit” (1956: 80).

It has been this conception of an “initial situation” – the reverse of that suggested in this thesis – which has kept social anthropological kinship theory in a state of crisis for most of the twentieth century.

### **Kinship theory in crisis**

“I believe”, wrote Sir Edmund Leach (1961: 26) over a quarter of a century ago, “that we social anthropologists are like the mediaeval Ptolemaic astronomers; we spend our time trying to fit the facts of the objective world into the

framework of a set of concepts which have been developed a priori instead of from observation”. According to Leach, the most damaging of these arbitrarily imposed concepts has been the notion of “the elementary family” as “a universal institution”. Anthropologists have insisted that “the family” in the English language sense of this word is the logical, necessary and inevitable focal point around which all human kinship systems revolve and from the standpoint of which they must be viewed. Leach observed that the characteristic kinship systems of traditional cultures tend to become unintelligible when viewed from this standpoint (see section on “classificatory kinship”, pp. 479-483 below). As a result, he concluded, the mental constructs of modern kinship theory are beginning to look as bewildering and futile as the cycles and epicycles of those Ptolemaic astronomers who could conceptualise the universe only by assuming the centrality of our own Earth.

Some years later, in an evaluation of the contemporary state of kinship theory, Needham (1974: 39) expressed a similar verdict. “The current theoretical position”, he observed, “is obscure and confused, and there is little clear indication of what future developments we can expect or should encourage.” He concluded, in tones indicating a mood close to despair:

“In view of the constant professional attention extending over roughly a century, and a general improvement in ethnographic accounts, this is a remarkably unsatisfactory situation in what is supposed to be a basic discipline. Obviously, after so long a time, and so much field research, it is not just facts that we need. Something more fundamental seems to have gone wrong. What we have to look for, perhaps, is some radical flaw in analysis, some initial defect in the way we approach the phenomena.”

Matters have scarcely improved in the years since Leach and Needham wrote.

### **Menstrual avoidances – norm or anomaly?**

The hypothesis presented here has focused upon a set of puzzling features widespread in traditional cultures – in the first instance, menstrual observances and taboos; in the second, certain recurrent details of male initiation rites. Widely commented upon by early writers – who usually conceptualised such observances as perplexingly anomalous – neither of these patterns has been satisfactorily explained. In recent years, not being central to

any of the main anthropological paradigms, they have aroused rather little specialist interest or attention.

To explain menstrual taboos, this thesis has proposed a hypothesis which intentionally cuts across many of the disciplinary boundaries of anthropology. It has been shown how such taboos have a bearing on numerous aspects of male initiation ritual and how they link up with other prohibitions – for example, rules against eating one’s own kill. In seeking an explanation for these and other features, the thesis has outlined a formal model or “template” linking menstrual taboos with meat-sharing rules in a pattern hypothesised as the starting-point for human culture as a whole.

In essence, the hypothesis inverts previous assumptions relating “norm” to “anomaly” in human kinship and culture. Almost all previous paradigms have regarded “pair-bonding” or the “nuclear” or “elementary” family as normative in some basic sense for human culture as a whole, other forms of kinship being seen as deviations or extensions derived from this starting-point.

This thesis has proposed, on the contrary, that it makes better sense to start with a model in which “the family” is split down the middle. Culture starts – it has been argued – with gender-solidarity. Where primary commitments and loyalties are concerned, culture in the first instance places marital partners in opposite camps. Clan organisation, unilineal descent, exogamy, in-law avoidances, rules preventing couples from dancing together, sharing in sacred ceremonial or sharing public meals – these and related features of many traditional cultures (see below, pp. 484-5) are expressions of such a norm. From this point of view, menstrual avoidances appear “normal”. It is the norm for husband and wife to be set apart. Menstrual avoidances periodically help re-establish this norm. Where the contrary obtains – where nuclear family bonding is so strong that husband and wife remain together even during menstruation – this is a deviation from the norm.

### **Integrity of the model**

The most important formal feature of the model is its simplicity. In being developed in the course of guiding this thesis’s research, it was not assembled

piecemeal – adding one component to take account of one class of facts, another to make it fit others, and so on. Instead, in elaborating the implications of the model, “the facts” were at first intentionally kept in the background.

At all stages, the model’s own inner integrity came first. That is, the familiar and accepted findings of anthropology – which are here considered to be theory-dependent like the findings of any science – were as far as possible not taken into account until after each aspect of the model had been elaborated and confirmed internally as consistent with the whole. In this way, using each internal implication to generate expectations of the evidence as a guide to further research, the whole model as an independent construct was built up from its own logical starting-point. The result is a hypothesis which by its very originality, simplicity, internal integrity and range of implications is very much open to being tested in the light of the evidence and either refuted or confirmed.

Instead of setting out from numerous ideas, the model sets out from only one – the assumption that in becoming human, females can and do refuse sex to males who bring no meat. This periodic sexual withdrawal has the effect of splitting the nuclear family. The hypothesis shows how the incest-taboo, unilineal descent, menstrual avoidances and other basic potentialities of the human cultural configuration emerge logically as consequences and expressions of that starting-point alone.

### **Women and cultural origins**

At an early stage in the argument of this thesis, it was suggested that protohominid females – on the assumption that they did not actually go out and kill animals themselves – were presented with two logically-possible strategies for obtaining meat from males. One was to keep chasing after male hunters in an attempt to get a share in whatever meat was available before the hunters themselves had consumed it. The other was to stop where they were and compel the males to bring their kills home.

Previous discussions of early human hunting-behaviour have not focused upon the female as an initiator or conscious actor in this context, instead (for whatever

reasons), discussions have centred on the male and his survival strategy, his need to find a mate and produce offspring, his need to cooperate in the establishment of the incest-taboo, the hunting way of life, meat-sharing behaviour and/or whatever other aspects of culture were considered most basic.

It was argued, for example, that if the hominid male were to become an effective hunter, he would have had to co-operate in the hunt. Further, if he were to ensure that his genes were immortalised, he would have had to learn to bring meat to his mate and her offspring. This was the essence of the “Man the Hunter” hypothesis which became particularly popular in the nineteen sixties. “The family”, “cooperation”, “the sexual division of labour” and much else were assumed to have been satisfactorily “explained” on this basis – all without crediting the female with any innovative, creatively active role at all. Despite changes in detail and in emphasis, most more recent discussions of human cultural origins have been conducted within the parameters established by this hypothesis.

The argument had two major drawbacks. First, the results it produced were not interesting – they did not sufficiently engage with the findings of social anthropologists (in fields such as the study of kinship, ritual or symbolism) for the model to act as an anthropological research guide. Social anthropologists, consequently, have felt justified in continuing to ignore theories of social origins as they have done for more than half a century.

Second, even on its own level, the theory left crucial problems unsolved. Granted that the hominid male “had to” learn to bring meat back home to the hominid female, the question still remained: how did this come about? It is inadequate simply to state that because a pattern seemingly “ought” to have occurred, it therefore did. In other species, nature does not always oblige in this way. Schaller (1973b: 84-6), for example, was surprised to find that Serengeti lion-cubs had to compete for meat with powerful adults – a competition which they regularly lost:

“Adults tear a carcass apart and fiercely defend their portions, and it was depressing to see a starving cub totter to its mother, each rib sharply outlined beneath its unkempt hide, and receive a vicious cuff instead of a bite to eat”.

Of seventy-nine lion-cubs born to two prides in Schaller's study. 67 per cent died, eleven having been killed by other lions, fifteen through starvation. "Altruism in human terms", comments Schaller (1973b: 86), "has little place in nature".

Admittedly, many carnivorous animals are co-operative, the hunters in many cases bringing back meat to the offspring and/or their guardians in their dens. African hunting dogs, for example, systematically return from a hunt to disgorge their meat to begging pups and to guards who remain behind, the meat often passing through several stomachs before being finally digested (Kuhme 1965). Wolves have been known to carry meat over nineteen kilometres to a den (Peters and Mech 1975: 294). But this kind of observation has been helpful only in emphasising once again what "had to" occur. It says nothing about how in our own particular species it did occur. It says nothing about precise genetic or social mechanisms, and therefore makes no specific predictions as to how we might expect early human culture to have been organised.

It can certainly be argued that a protohuman dominant hunter-male who wanted to produce surviving offspring would have needed to cooperate efficiently and bring meat to his mate. But how? Wolf and hunting-dog meat-carrying and food-regurgitating behaviour of the kind just noted is largely instinctive. By contrast, as noted earlier in this thesis (see above, pp. 128-9), non-human primate males seem to display none or very few of the self-denying instincts required (Harding 1975: 249, 253; Hladik 1975: 26; Kummer 1971: 59; Strum 1981: 276 Suzuki 1975: 262-6;). Are we to assume that the protohuman male, unlike his non-human primate relatives, suddenly began developing an instinct to avoid on-the-spot consumption and bring back meat to his mate at the home base? Is there such an instinct in the human male? And if not, what were the mechanisms through which this male's "need" to provide meat for his sexual partner became translated into normative cultural practice?

Dominant primate males – for example, chimpanzees and baboons – not only begin consuming their kills on the spot (see Chapter 5, pp. 128-9). They are also impeded in hunting efficiently precisely by the internal sexual structure of

dominance, which sets the animals in conflict with one another (reducing the possibilities of co-operation) and immobilises them by requiring each male's round-the-clock physical attachment to "its own" females (Chapter 5, pp. 133-6). This thesis has suggested a way out of this problem which would have carried society towards collective action, ritual, sexual morality and the cultural plane. The hypothesis is unexpected and may even seem improbable by virtue of its novelty. But it provides a solution to some real problems, and in doing so accounts for numerous features of human culture in addition to the basic fact that human hunters do indeed provide meat for their mates.

Our starting-point is that male reproductive strategy cannot be understood in isolation from what the female is doing. Let us suppose for the sake of argument that protohuman females during the hunting transition were still – like non-human primates – seeking out dominance as a sexually-desirable characteristic in males, following dominant individuals about and attempting to obtain from them left-over portions of meat. The point is that if this were the situation in which males found themselves, then the most adaptive male strategy would have been to attract females on this basis. Males would have moved relatively slowly so that "their" females and offspring could keep up with them. If and when they made a kill, they would have let their females obtain a share in the meat on condition that sexual access were allowed. Those females best able to display their immediate sexual availability would probably have got the most meat, while those inhibiting or delaying sexual advances would have got little or none. Is this how human culture evolved?

Despite the widespread acceptance of some such situation as human evolution's starting-point, few have been prepared to follow the logic to its conclusion in arguing that this is what ultimately happened. It simply does not fit the facts – facts such as that human sexual rewards do tend to be delayed, that for all humans such a thing as sexual "morality" does exist, or that human hunter-gatherers do have a "home-base" from which male hunters periodically depart and to which they return.



### **The establishment of the “home base”**

The anthropologically-informed primatologist DeVore (1965: 33) long ago emphasised the importance for human evolution of the institution of a “home base”:

“No monkey or ape has such a base; when a baboon troop leaves its sleeping place in the morning, all the troop members must move together. There is no assurance that the troop will return to the same sleeping place in the evening, and every individual, even though sick or injured, must keep up with the others or risk permanent separation from the troop. Because the whole troop moves together, it is not possible for baboons to hunt other animals effectively. Even more important, the absence of a home base makes it impossible for males to go in one direction in search of game while females and juveniles disperse to gather vegetable foods – a system of food-getting which seems universal among hunter-gatherers”.

In view of considerations of this kind, most specialists are in agreement that protohuman males must have begun adopting a very different reproductive and food-gaining strategy from other primates, going away from “their” females for periods of time and returning later with meat. References to “pair-bonding”, “fidelity” or “sexual morality” are sometimes introduced into the discussion to explain this. But what has not been sufficiently recognised is that if leaving the females periodically is what males did, this could only have been made possible by a definite strategy on the part of females as well.

Males could only bring meat home if the females mirrored this by practising a strategy of staying behind in a home base in the first place. But how could hominid females have stayed away when “their” males went off to hunt? Such behaviour is unknown among other primates. What would have induced the females to stay for long periods away from their dominant “protectors”? How could they have been sure that the males would return? And if the females were typically available as prizes to be competed for, how could the males have torn themselves away from the mating-opportunities and the competition? Finally, let us suppose that despite all this, some males did manage to form into a co operative band and then went off to hunt. How could these males have been sure that when they returned, “their” females would still have been “theirs”? How

could they have trusted rival males not to take advantage of the situation, dominating and claiming the unguarded females in their absence?

It is not that there are no answers to such questions. There are good ones. It is just that the answers involve abandoning the logic of primate dominance. To primatologists and sociobiologists, this may seem a disadvantage. To anthropologists, however, it might well be regarded as an advantage precisely to the extent that it takes us towards the cultural domain. It would seem difficult to justify adhering to a hypothesis which explains nothing about culture at all – when an alternative exists which would simultaneously and parsimoniously explain incest-avoidance, exogamy, pre-hunt sex-bans, menstrual taboos, in-law obligations, the own-kill rule, menstrual ritual, lunar mythology and much else besides.

#### **The link between “home base” and “sex strike”**

Few would deny that protohuman females at a critical stage in evolution did stay behind at a home-base. What has not previously been recognised, however, is that this must mean that the females in some sense “made the meat come to them”. Of the two female survival-strategies mentioned earlier – (1) running with sexual intent to males in possession of kills, or (2) refusing sex to males unless these brought their kills back to them – the second must have been chosen. The particular contribution of this thesis has been to spotlight this second option and to show how, from it and from it alone, the entirety of the human cultural configuration would in principle have emerged.

In previous discussions, there has been an apparent difficulty in realising that if the males were to have been released for hunting, “their” females must have been (a) prepared to stay behind and (b) sexually-unavailable in the meantime. That is, “staying behind” and being “set apart” sexually were in some sense aspects of a single package of female responses. The parameters of previous debate always rendered this point obscure; there was certainly nothing in “the facts” as previously constructed to lead us to suspect it. At an early stage in this thesis’ research, however, it became clear that it was a logical internal implication of the model. Guided by this implication, it was then found that “the facts” – for example, the almost universal traditional insistence that sex is

incompatible with hunting – appeared in a new light, connecting up to form a picture more coherent than any which had been generated before.

Once it has been recognised that “staying at home” and “going on strike” constitute twin aspects of a unitary female response, the core of the argument of this thesis has been accepted. The rest follows simply from an attempt to delineate (a) the theoretically-possible ways of effecting this sexual detachment and (b) its consequences.

### **The origins of collective solidarity**

Given that females by some means must have made themselves periodically unavailable, the question arises as to whether they did so individually or as an organised collectivity. Was each female’s act of sexual withdrawal a private affair, each female motivating the hunting-efforts of her own male partner and awaiting his individual return? Or was the alternation between feminine availability and non-availability an aspect of the general, collective structuring of social and sexual life?

The answer to this question is surely not in doubt. Unless each male hunter simply chose to go off into the bush individually, as the mood took him, collective female action must have been required. For early human hunters, without sophisticated weapons, co-operation in the hunt was essential. If this is accepted, then it follows that the hunting-band as a whole either departed for the hunting-grounds, or stayed. Similarly, in a group, the females attached to this band must either have been available sexually or unavailable. Any “sex-strike”, then, must have been more than an aggregate of individual acts.

But it is not necessary to derive the collective nature of the sex-strike purely from the collective nature of the hunt. This would make female solidarity appear as something derivative – dependent upon the prior existence of co-operative behaviour on the part of male hunters. In fact, matters are perhaps better seen the other way around. Although collective male hunting might have been objectively necessary, the primate evidence suggests that in practice it would have been continually threatened by the potentiality for inter-male sexual conflicts and insecurities. It is here argued that this would have remained the

case unless or until female action changed the situation, in other words, not until female sexuality was made periodically unavailable and therefore not to be fought over could the causes of male sexual rivalry be removed. Only then could the necessary trust and Solidarity between males prevail.

The monkey-like or ape-like female “yes”-strategy (presenting sexually to obtain a share in meat) logically implies inter-female competitive behaviour. By contrast, the new “no”-strategy (refusing sex until males bring meat) implies solidarity for internal reasons. It would have been useless for a female to use the “strike-weapon” against one or more males unless she could also ensure that other females respected this. In sum: far from female solidarity being merely a reflection of male hunting-solidarity, it can plausibly be argued that the female strategy discussed here required solidarity for internal reasons, and that it was only to the extent that females achieved this that male collective solidarity on the scale required for effective hunting could in turn have arisen.

### **Nature and culture**

The real mystery of human culture is to understand how its logic ever could have prevailed. The theoretical problem in the present context is considerable, for it needs to be understood how any female could have refused sex for relatively long periods of time – days on end – without being “undercut” by rival females prepared to offer themselves regardless, it may seem impossible to get round this problem, for it assumes the introduction into primate social life of a new factor – a level of solidarity between females sufficient to prevail over the power of male-female sexual bonding and what might appear to be inescapable reproductive imperatives. Primate females tend to compete with one another for sex-linked privileged access to such things as feeding-places and protected sleeping-sites, so any such solidarity would have had to withstand what must have been, at times, enormous pressures to break ranks under the inducement of dominant males with all the privileges these could offer. And of course the difficulty is that Darwinian selection-theory would indicate that those females best able to break ranks and make sexual alliances at the expense of their female rivals might have been those producing most offspring. On this basis, they would have been those, therefore, whose descendants might have been

expected to make up an increasing proportion of subsequent generations of females.

All this is what Darwinian and neo-Darwinian theory might lead us to expect. Individuals compete, natural selection occurs, and selection operates at the level not of the group or species but of the individual, favouring those individuals in each generation best able to compete and take advantage of whatever opportunities exist for passing on their genes.

Clearly, the model presented in this thesis conflicts with all this. Its point of departure is the establishment of a level of female solidarity sufficient to transcend what might appear to be certain fundamental laws of biology. One possible defence of the model would be to say that this is indeed the case – and that it is precisely such a model that we require. Culture ultimately transcends biology, just as biological principles (such as evolution through natural selection) transcend the ordinary laws of physics and chemistry. A model which failed to get beyond Darwinian natural selection would not be a model of cultural origins at all.

But although such an argument might seem tempting, it remains the case that biological evolution itself must have contained the capacity for whatever self-transcendence culture's emergence represented. The origins of culture may have gone beyond biological necessity, but the process cannot have occurred while biological imperatives were somehow held in suspense. In short: female solidarity – “sisterhood” – must have been genetically viable, even if in its consequences it carried society dramatically beyond genetic control.

### **Kin selection**

It is in the light of such considerations that we may turn to the theory of “inclusive fitness” or “kin selection”. It may help explain why even in genetic terms a protohominid female might have had as great an interest in defending her sister or brother as in producing or defending her own biological offspring.

The concept of “inclusive fitness” is the core scientific insight around which the various claims of “sociobiology” have formed as accretions. “inclusive” in

this context means that it makes genetic sense for an individual to include more than itself and its offspring when adopting strategies for passing on its genes. It makes sense for it to include also its biological kin.

Kin selection may be relevant to the hypothesis proposed here. Let us suppose that a particular gene conferred upon a female protohominid an unusual capacity for restraining her own sexuality, and that behaviourally this expressed itself in altruistic tendencies towards her Sisters. It might be that hormonally-governed oestrus behaviour (see next section below) was in her case weaker than normal, so that when she was ovulating she was still able to avoid sex. Oestrus-loss of such a kind would have made it easier for her to refrain from sexual competition with her sisters. In the event that her sisters were refusing the sexual advances of a male or group of males, it would have been easier for her to defend these sisters, instead of undercutting them by making sexual advances herself. Such a hypothesised tendency would be “altruistic” in that it would mean incurring a cost (in terms of opportunities for personal reproductive success) to herself, and a similar benefit to her sister or sisters. Are there any circumstances under which such a gene could be favourably selected and thus increase in frequency over the generations?

Normally, we would expect any gene that risked damaging its carrier’s personal reproductive success to be selected against. However, in the case of altruism towards a sister, each recipient of the benefit would already have a chance of carrying a copy of the same gene as a result of descent from the same ancestor. To the extent that such were the case, the “altruistic gene” would really be doing what all genes must do to survive – namely, helping its own replication.

The daughters (or sons) of a hominid mother carrying such a gene would have no more probability of carrying that gene than would the mother’s full siblings. From the gene’s point of view, therefore, it would be as useful for the mother to risk her future reproductive success in defending her sister as to risk it in defending her offspring. The gene’s future would be fostered by that route just as effectively. It is in fact on such a basis that sociobiologists account for the well-documented phenomenon of sibling-solidarity in group-living monkeys, both in peaceful activities such as grooming, and also in coming to the aid of

brothers and sisters under attack (Daly and Wilson 1984: P46, citing Kurland 1977; Massey 1977; Meikle and Vessey 1981).

The relevance of this to the sex strike model will be appreciated. It is not suggested that kin selection explains the origins of culture. In itself, the concept explains nothing except the genetic possibility of sibling solidarity. It does not explain why this possibility becomes realised to a greater or lesser extent in different species or under different conditions. Nor would it explain why in one and only one evolutionary instance – our own – sibling solidarity became (as is here suggested) strong enough to facilitate the emergence of culture. On the other hand, kin selection can certainly account for a degree of biological sibling solidarity as a genetically viable aspect of reproductive strategy. If for various reasons such solidarity among protohumans could have developed to the point at which related females supported one another in asserting themselves sexually as “on strike”, the threshold of culture might have been reached before being crossed.

### **Loss of oestrus**

In what follows, it will be shown that this suggestion provides an elegant means of solving an old problem – that of oestrus loss in the human female.

In non-human primates, the female experiences a hormonally-governed, strong impulse to copulate during ovulation – when she is in oestrus or “heat”. The moment of ovulation is publicly announced, each female displaying signals to indicate her enhanced receptivity to males. In some species these signals are purely behavioural, but in others they also take the form of visible swelling of the genital region, changes in colouring of the sexual skin, scent-emissions and so on. Chimpanzees ovulate for only one day out of the thirty-six days of their cycle, but prominently inflate their genitalia for about ten days beforehand. The female’s sexual fervour intensifies as her genitals begin to swell. By the time she is in peak oestrus, she is impelled to copulate many times a day, consorting very briefly with one male after another. It would be hard to imagine such an aroused female restraining herself sexually out of solidarity with her sisters. Throughout the rest of her cycle, by contrast, she seems less exciting to males and experiences a much reduced interest in sex. In many primate

species, throughout most of the infertile portion of the cycle the female is physiologically and physically unable to mate at all.

Accentuated oestrus-displays are related in an obvious way to inter-female sexual competition for fertile mating opportunities. Such displays, which are universal in one form or another among non-human primate species, may be regarded as uncontrollable, involuntary “yes”-signals sent out by females at the moment when they are most likely to conceive. No mature male in the vicinity can resist the temptations of a female in such a state.

By way of contrast, the human female does not compete with her sisters in this way. She is in principle sexually receptive, regardless of fertility, throughout the whole of her cycle. Her interest in sex, despite possible slight peaks at ovulation and/or menstruation, never becomes as overwhelming as it is for primates in oestrus and remains essentially unchanged. Conversely, she is equally able to refuse sex at any time: at no point during her cycle is she the slave of her hormonal state.

In human females, correspondingly, the “yes”-signal has been lost. Instead of being externally marked as a public display, ovulation has evolved in the reverse direction, to the point at which the moment of maximum fertility has become effectively concealed. In neither appearance nor behaviour is it possible to determine a human female’s fertile period. Far from males in her presence being made publicly aware of her ovulation, the human female’s special condition is kept so close a secret that unless she is unusually aware of her own physiology she will not even know the moment herself.

The anomalous nature of this development must be stressed:

“All mammals advertise their ovulation somehow, with the exception of one species – our own. We conceal it.

Why the female human does not announce behaviorally her time of egg release but rather ‘conceals’ her ovulation....Is a question that has confounded the most scholarly writers who spew realms of speculation about the human condition into the pages of scientific journals. Obviously, sexual heat has an important place in evolutionary history; it is vital to reproductive success and species future. Without it, most mammals would not reproduce. Why then should estrus have been abandoned by the female human?” (Shaw and Darling 1984: 78).



### **Suggested explanations**

One explanation has rested on an assumed female need to tempt males away from promiscuity and into permanent monogamous wedlock, oestrus-loss making daily sex with the same female necessary to ensure insemination at the right moment and to provide confidence in paternity (Morris 1967; Alexander and Noonan 1979; Strassman 1981). A version of this hypothesis (Stoddart 1986) concentrates particularly on the absence of any olfactory signals during human female ovulation. Stoddart suggests that extended hunting trips combined with “gregariousness” brought problems for the originally-monogamous protohuman couple – particularly since, in the early stages, the would-be faithful female was unwittingly giving off sexually-irresistible odours to all about her each time she ovulated:

“The development of gregariousness brought with it a major social problem the likes of which had not before been encountered by man’s ancestors. This was that if some males left the home camp on hunting trips which might last for several days at a stretch, as has been proposed by some workers, bonded females remaining at the home camp would not infrequently produce odorous ovulation advertising signals while their mates were absent and while other males were present as guards” (Stoddart 1986: 518).

As the nearby stay-at-home males were aroused by such odours, non-monogamous, unfaithful sex would unavoidably have occurred whilst the unfortunate hunters were far away. This (runs Stoddart’s argument) would have been disastrous, since it would have deprived the hunter-males of any genetic interest in investing parental care in their partners’ offspring. If the nuclear family were not to be threatened by infidelities of this kind, it was essential that olfactory oestrus-signals should have been suppressed. This duly occurred. Females by this means avoided inviting sexual intercourse with the “wrong” males during their partners’ absence on hunting trips. Each hunter-male could then be certain that he was the father of any offspring. It will be noted that Stoddart here is assuming a kind of “sex-strike” hypothesis, the assumption being that ovulatory odours were inhibited to enable females to refrain from sex during the absence of their male partners on extended hunting trips.

Responding to earlier versions of the oestrus-loss-supports-monogamy hypothesis, Benshoof and Thornhill (1979; see also Symons 1979) contest the

notion that concealed ovulation increases the male's confidence in his paternity. On the contrary, they say, the early human male's ignorance of the condition of his mate would have caused intense problems, as he attempted to guard her against covetous neighbours, never knowing whether he should join the hunting party and risk being cuckolded or stay at home on the off-chance that this would be her fertile week. No system, they say, could be more poorly designed to guarantee paternity than the system of concealed ovulation. If paternity-assurance were the deciding factor, humans would have evolved the pattern common to other monogamous primates: a short, well-defined oestrus with very little advertisement of the fact. Under this system, the female's monogamous partner knows perfectly well when she is in heat, whereas rival males are kept ignorant because they are kept at a distance and the signals are not sufficiently public. Then the female's mate need only guard her for the few vital days; after that, he can go hunting secure in the knowledge that however unfaithful she might be, he will be the father of any baby she has. Again, it will be noted that this is a kind of "sex-strike" hypothesis, at least in the sense that the female does not engage in relevant or genetically-threatening sex whilst her hunting-partner is away.

The authors argue that this is initially what happened: protohuman females were in a limited sense "monogamous" in that they had fertile sex only when their chosen partner was at home. Reducing their public sexual signalling to ward off unwanted males, they signalled just sufficiently to let the favoured partner know the correct moment to inseminate. To explain the "later" development of complete loss of oestrus-signalling, however, Benshoof and Thornhill follow a complex course, arguing that when couples began living in large social groups, the females found themselves surrounded by a wide choice of males. It then became in females' interests to deceive their supposedly-monogamous partners and get themselves inseminated by the genetically "best" males in the group, regardless of whether these gave help in provisioning or childcare. So human females had sex with their "faithful" partners for most of the cycle, but during ovulation sneaked off to get pregnant by the best obtainable mate (the exact opposite of the previous supposed system). Concealed ovulation made this possible, since the "faithful" partner had no way of knowing that his sexual intercourse was not fertile; assuming the offspring to be his, he provided the

support and childcare that the mother required. This has been termed the “cuckoldry” theory of oestrus-loss.

The difficulty with all this is not only that it appears complicated. There is also the serious problem that it assumes women’s conscious knowledge of the correct moment to “sneak off”. But in fact, women conceal ovulation from themselves, and not simply from their male partners. “Although some women think they can tell when they are ovulating”, as Shaw and Darling (1985: 84) put it, “the vast majority most decidedly cannot, and even with our current technological ability to measure basal body temperature and to sample and categorize cervical mucus, the time of ovulation is notoriously difficult to pinpoint”.

Starting out from this self-concealment, yet another hypothesis has it that given the chance, women would avoid the pain and danger of pregnancy and childbirth altogether: if they knew when they ovulated, they would simply avoid sex at that time – an assumption the exact opposite of that made in all the other scenarios. On this basis, our species would long ago have become extinct. In this view, concealed ovulation has evolved to safeguard the reproductive process by preventing women from practising such a disastrous form of birth-control (Burley 1979). Not surprisingly, this hypothesis, too, has come under attack: whilst it is acknowledged that culture and consciousness may sometimes run in opposition to genetic imperatives, few are willing to agree that human females given the chance would be such relentlessly reluctant mothers.

After remarking that we will “never know which of these hypotheses, if any, is closest to the truth – each has serious flaws – the feminist-inclined biologists Shaw and Darling (1984: 86) offer their own suggestion:

“Ovulation wasn’t deliberately concealed by evolution, but its signals became secondary, unimportant ones that, if they did anything at all, probably interfered with the pattern of life in ‘protohumans’, where rite and ritual, rather than the ebb and flow of one’s hormones, may have determined when to make love and when to be celibate” (p. 88).

Since this observation to an extent fits in with the predictions of our model, it is worth mentioning. The notion of “rite” as something which determines when and when not to be “celibate” is suggestive of the sex-strike concept as

developed here. However, it can hardly be regarded as an explanation of anything. A full explanation would need to integrate loss of oestrus with other peculiarities of the human menstrual cycle – and also explain where “rite and ritual” come from in the first place.

### **Menstruation**

The topic of menstruation brings us to a further complication – which presents a difficulty for all of the above-mentioned theories. It has to be acknowledged that hormonally-controlled sexual signals are not entirely missing from the human female, for at the opposite point in her cycle from primate oestrus, menstruation in the human case has been accentuated as an external display. This is one of the factors which any full theory of the human reproductive cycle would have to explain. A woman loses considerably more blood during menstruation than does any other primate, a development central to what Wilson (1975: 547) has described as “extraordinary” evolution on the part of the human female. This shedding of blood, although small, represents a significant loss – a loss which has to be made good by additional food intake. Although there is no biological imperative to avoid sex during this period, in traditional human cultural contexts, menstruation in fact signals “sex strike” or “no”. Explaining the accentuation of menstruation in humans has presented as great a challenge to biologists as accounting for the elimination of oestrus.

### **An unsolved problem**

With the transition to humanity, we have, then, a number of profound changes in female reproductive physiology. Whereas the male of the species remains relatively unchanged on this level, the female undergoes changes which are indeed revolutionary. To sum up, the crucial developments are (1) oestrus-loss, (2) accentuated menstruation, (3) continuous sexual receptivity. Taking these three features together, we can see that the human configuration is not just different from the primate pattern: it is the inverse image of it. Whereas the basic primate pattern is to deliver a periodic “yes”-signal against a background of continuous sexual “no”, the human one is to emit a periodic “no”-signal against a background of continuous availability or “yes”.

Previous hypotheses have not sought to explain such profound changes by linking them to an inversion of female sexual strategy. The usual assumption has been that throughout the hominisation process, primate dominance in some form must have continued to prevail. As noted, however, no plausible explanation for the physiological changes has emerged.

### **The shaping of the human female reproductive cycle**

The sex-strike model explains the changes very simply. it links the shift from competitive oestrus-signalling to ovulation-concealment with the transition from sexual competitiveness to an emphasis on inter-female solidarity. It links the shift in emphasis from periodic “yes”-signalling to periodic “no”-signalling with the transition from a primate “yes”-strategy to a “no”-strategy which is the precise inverse of this. It does not account for the various features one by one, a separate explanation for each feature, it generates them simultaneously as a total configuration on the basis of one explanation alone. And this one explanation by its own logic then proceeds to account for cultural features such as menstrual taboos, ritual and the specifics of human kinship organisation as well.

\* \* \* \* \*

In their mating systems, primates may be ranged along a continuum, with the more monogamous species (such as gibbons) located at one end, the more promiscuous (such as chimpanzees) at the other. To the extent that sexual relations are promiscuous – and even more strongly to the extent that there is polygamy of the kind where small numbers of males control large female harems – each female is in competition with others for mating-opportunities and for the privileges which rank within the mating hierarchy confers. The more obvious and alluring her signals and displays, the more likely she is to succeed in mating and to conceive, and the more likely she is to be protected and favoured by the dominant male or males. After her period of oestrus, each female withdraws to some extent, yielding her position to her rivals. From a Darwinian point of view, this is adaptive since there is no point in expending energy in competing for mating-opportunities if fertilisation will not ensue.

Most previous attempts to explain the unique reproductive physiology of the human female have confined themselves to a limited range of models of possible early human mating systems. In essence, these models have taken as their point of departure the apparent choices between “monogamy”, “polygyny” and “promiscuity” (with additional features such as “cuckoldry” sometimes thrown in). Since all of these patterns (in addition to intermediate forms) are to be found among the various living species of non-human primates, and since scientists are reluctant to envisage improbable or unprecedented possibilities, it has seemed logical to produce models in accordance with the limits set by such parameters. A different conclusion, however, could be derived from the finding that non human primate species span the entire range of theoretical possibilities – from lasting monogamy to extreme polygamy, from life-long sexual attachment to extreme casualness or promiscuity – without any species having evolved anything resembling the human female physiological pattern. We might conclude that primate mating systems produce primate reproductive physiologies, and that we cannot expect them to explain anything else.

It is here suggested that to explain the human pattern, we need a new model – not one taken from the study of monkeys or apes. In other words, given her radically different physiology, the evolving protohuman female in her sexual arrangements must have begun doing something quite remarkable and revolutionary in comparison with what primates had previously been doing.

So by way of contrast, leaving primate mating systems aside, let us picture a hypothesised protohuman population adopting or attempting to adopt the unprecedented strategy of the periodic sexual strike – an option which would transcend the choices between primate monogamy, promiscuity, polygamy or anything else which primates do. What might be the predicted effects of this new social and sexual logic on the protohuman female cycle? The sex-strike strategy by definition must involve a periodic on/off alternation in sexual availability on the part of each female. Consciously and deliberately, females from time to time determine that they are unavailable for sex. But for the evolving hominid female as for all female higher primates, the reproductive cycle is itself already a periodic on/off alternation in terms of reproductive receptivity, although on this level not conscious or deliberate. We have, then,

in the case of our postulated protohuman population, two kinds of on/off alternation – a new, “artificial” or “conscious” one, and an inherited, biological one. What is the relationship between these two?

### **Loss of oestrus: a product of female solidarity**

We may begin by asking at which point in the menstrual cycle would females have been best advised to be celibate? According to the initial premises of our sex-strike model, the overriding consideration in determining the moment and duration of any period of celibacy would have been economic. *Fertility would not have been a consideration*: if there was no meat, there had to be no sex, and the “sex-strike” had to last until the hunt had been successfully completed and meat brought home. The whole point of the sex-strike would have been undermined were it necessary to end it at a certain moment on hormonal grounds – regardless of whether the males had brought back meat or not.

Under such conditions, it would have become particularly important during each sex strike – no matter when this occurred nor how long it had to last – for each woman to display solidarity with her sisters by showing not the slightest sign of sexual flirtatiousness or desire. Each strike would have demanded a “united front” against all male potential sexual partners. Had one woman involuntarily displayed signs of inappropriately-timed sexual interest, she would have aroused the antagonism of her sisters. *It can be seen at once that such a situation would have demanded of each woman that her moment of ovulation be kept as secret and private as possible*. Within the heterogeneous population, then, the sex-strike would have sought out those females best able to adapt to its requirements. Those with strong oestrus-patterns would have tended to reject the new system or be rejected by it; those with weaker oestrus would more easily have thrived.

From this point of view, the evolving human female had to gain increasing control over herself. She could no longer afford to be chained down by her hormones. If the males in her life were uncooperative, they had to be coaxed, persuaded or otherwise dealt with – no matter what her cyclical state happened to be. If they were lazy or failed in the hunt, they had to be treated coldly.

Each female, linking up with others, had to control her own sexual inclinations and participate in controlling those of her sisters.

To the extent that hunting was a chancy business, this ruled out any fixed time for sexual activity. Females would have needed the power to say “no” at any time and for as long a period as necessary. By the same token, they would have needed the freedom to say “yes” at any time, too, since no-one could have predicted the moment of the hunt’s successful conclusion. Continuous receptivity and an equally continuous ability to say “no” are requirements with a basis in physiology; over a period, given the logic of the strike, the necessary physiology would have evolved.

#### **Biological and cultural periodicity: one rhythm or two?**

We have seen that for as long as the sex-strike was an opportunistic strategy adopted by groups of females in response to male success or otherwise in the hunt, the overriding requirement was freedom from hormonal control – the ability to say “yes” or “no” at any time, regardless of hormonal state. This demanded oestrus-loss and the evolution of continuous receptivity. However, the entire strategy would have been beset with reproductive problems unless or until there were at least a tendency towards harmonisation of the periodic sex-strike with the periodicity of the menstrual cycle. Where this was not achieved, females would have risked being on strike during their fertile periods and sexually available when they were infertile.

Let us assume, now, a population in which the “no”-strategy has been in operation for some time – tens of thousands of years, perhaps. Let us assume that big-game hunting has been developed to a fine art, that game is abundant and that each hunting-expedition can in general be counted on to produce results. If all this were the case, then the very success of the new strategy would make it possible for a new stability to emerge. Females would not have to organise sex-strikes on the spur of the moment, neither knowing for how long they would have to maintain each action nor even whether the hunt would be successful at all. Whilst retaining as a fall-back option the ability to say “No” at any time, in practice, as a normal rule, they would be able to settle down



into a regular, predictable pattern. The question arises: what would this pattern look like?

In the long run, a balance had to be struck between two great rhythms and two corresponding imperatives – cultural/economic on the one hand, natural/reproductive on the other. The impact of the first imperative – the principle that without meat there could be no sex – was immediate, operating on the level of conscious female will and decision. It was an economic rhythm and determinant, which on any particular occasion had to take precedence over all others. The second – sex must be permitted during the fertile period – was a biological, natural constraint, and acted as a determinant only in the longer term, at a level beyond that of conscious decision-making or will. On no particular occasion could it be allowed to impose itself as the overriding consideration (that would have implied a return to oestrus-behaviour), yet over a period its demands could not be escaped.

In terms of striking a balance, the most perfectly adaptive outcome would have been one in which the cultural on/off alternation of the hunt exactly matched the natural on/off alternation of the female reproductive cycle. Since the menstrual cycle cannot be arbitrarily stretched or telescoped from month to month so as to fit in with hunting contingencies, the only long-term solution was to establish some compatible regularity in the hunt itself. It is here suggested that such a solution was found. To the extent that technology, the abundance of game, a climate permitting the storage of meat and other factors made it possible for monthly extended hunting-expeditions to be predictably successful and to suffice, the necessary conditions for harmony in at least certain localities or for certain periods would have been met.

To the extent that an adaptive balance between the two great imperatives was struck, then, harmony would have been achieved – never perfectly, but always as a norm towards which reality could be made to approximate. In this context, just as the females would have been able to bring their periodic, hormonally-liberated “no” increasingly into phase with the menstrual flow, so they could have been quite liberated about saying “yes”, making this dependent not on fertility but on success in the hunt – and yet able to time their period of

sexual activity on most occasions so as to overlap with their fertile period. Women would then have got the best of both worlds. Of necessity they would have liberated themselves from hormonal control, retaining the fall-back option of being able to say “No” at any time – but they would have done this only to re-establish a normative attunement with their cycles now on another level, as an expression of collective will – setting up a rhythmic pattern in which the whole of culture now participated. In those localities where ecological, technological and other conditions best combined to permit such a synchronised outcome, the relevant populations would have been particularly successful, both in passing on their genetic characteristics and in transmitting and extending the hegemony of their cultural configuration, which would eventually have become the dominant culture of humanity – leaving its traces, therefore, in all subsequent cultural traditions. In the body of this thesis we have examined some central aspects of these traditions which at a deep level are shared by humankind.

Finally, all of this provides an answer to what might otherwise have seemed a difficulty for the whole hypothesis in Darwinian terms – the objection, namely, that a female who broke ranks and mated during a sex-strike might gain a reproductive advantage over other females. In fact, gaining a genetic advantage under the conditions described above would be very difficult. Firstly, there is the question of kin selection. A female who damaged her sisters’ genetic future would simultaneously be damaging the future of her own genetic endowment. But even apart from this, there are other, more immediate, considerations. A female who broke from her sisters and mated would be doing so during her period of infertility, in which case genetically no gains could be made. The only way she could gain would be by getting out of phase – ovulating when her Sisters were menstruating. But achieving this would take a few months and would then commit her to staying out of synchrony for some time. She would then be menstruating time after time at precisely the moment when her sisters were celebrating the return of the hunters and enjoying sexual relations with them. Apart from the social problems this might cause, it is difficult to see how she could gain any reproductive advantage. At each ovulation, she would have to be mating secretly and at a time when no-one else was doing so. Would she be able to find a male willing to risk bad hunting luck by enjoying sex at the wrong time?

The pressures to fall in with the sex-strike would be strong, and unless she found a way of avoiding these pressures with regular consistency she would be at a serious disadvantage. Her cheating, in other words, would not pay unless she could be at least as consistent in breaking the strike as her sisters were in adhering to it. But this, too, would seem impossible. Menstrual bleeding is a difficult condition to hide – particularly from other women. The very fact of her cycle's irregularity would arouse suspicions. The system would produce, then, (a) an obvious means of detecting or suspecting potential cheaters, and (b) consequent strong pressures to conform in achieving synchrony. There would be very little scope for breaking the rules.

In evaluating the selection-pressures shaping evolution of the human female reproductive cycle, we have examined a cultural/economic determinant in the form of the “logic of the strike”, and a natural/reproductive one stipulating that fertile sex must nevertheless occur. The combined effects of these two kinds of determinants, each acting on its own level in its own way, may now be summarised. Every female risked being occasionally out-of-phase. But pronounced menstruation at the “wrong” moment, however embarrassing, was not nearly so serious a risk as untimely oestrus-signalling. To have allowed even one female's oestrus-signalling to have ended a collective sex strike at the “wrong” moment would have been potentially disastrous. To reduce the risk of this to nil, such signalling had to be eliminated altogether. By contrast, the opposite “mistake” – bleeding during what for others was the fertile period – may have been inconvenient for the individual concerned, arousing social unease and proving reproductively maladaptive in the long term, but it would not have undermined the entire cultural enterprise in so direct a way. It would have been tolerable on occasion, provided it did not settle down into becoming the normative, regular pattern. While oestrus-signalling simply had to go, then, it was affordable for menstrual signalling to be strong and even to become accentuated despite some risk of its being occasionally out of phase.

In terms of female biological evolution – to conclude – the sex-strike hypothesis would lead us to expect selective pressures towards (a) a capacity for menstrual synchrony (b) continuous sexual availability, (c) enhanced cortical control over sexuality (d) the complete elimination of oestrus behaviour and

oestrus-signalling and (e) accentuated menstrual bleeding in the human female. These are precisely the features which we do find.

With its emphasis on “No” or “negativity”, the model would also predict that the main impact of any hormonal surges in determining female behaviour would peak around the “negative” pole of the cycle – indicating refusal, irritability, or “rebellion” rather than accentuated marital availability or desire for sexual “surrender”. “Premenstrual tension” confirms this prediction nicely. We may think of it as a physiological trace – still operative amongst women today – of earliest Womankind’s struggle to assert the power of her sex strike. It is interesting to speculate what might be the creative forms taken by such “irritability” or “unpredictability” in cultures which endorsed women’s periodicity rather than demanding its denial or suppression (for an extended discussion on this theme see Shuttle and Redgrove 1978).

A final physiological feature is worth mentioning. For various reasons it would be convenient – if hunting expeditions were to be organised once a month – for this rhythm to coincide, normatively, with the periodicity of the moon. There would then be an obvious “clock”, visible to everyone, to act as an objective standard in relation to which the necessary synchrony could everywhere be gauged. Eliade (1978, 1: 23), commenting on Marshack’s (1972b) work in deciphering Upper Palaeolithic notation-systems, writes

“Whatever may be thought of Marshack’s general theory concerning the development of civilization, the fact remains that the lunar cycle was analyzed, memorized, and used for practical purposes some 15,000 years before the discovery of agriculture. This makes more comprehensible the considerable role of the moon in archaic mythologies, and especially the fact that lunar symbolism was integrated into a single system comprising such different realities as woman, the waters, vegetation, the serpent, fertility, death, ‘rebirth’, etc.”

The possible techno-economic value of moonlight during extended overnight hunting-expeditions was discussed in chapter 5 and need not detain us here. Suffice it to recall that a further prediction of the model would be that the human female menstrual cycle, unlike that of chimpanzees, baboons and most other primates, should have an average periodicity of 29.5 days – exactly matching that of the moon. This, too, is the case.

### **The transition to culture**

The most difficult step would have been to initiate the new logic. There is no denying that there would have been problems in sustaining cultural solidarity long enough for the new selection pressures to begin operating in its favour. How such problems could have been overcome is not easy to understand. But this is a philosophical and methodological problem for all theories of cultural origins – a problem shared equally by hypotheses which attempt to explain the origins of life. The existence of culture – as of cellular self-replication through DNA – at a certain point emerges in the evolutionary record as something utterly new. An immense number of preconditions appear to be required for this emergence, and the problem is that many of these preconditions seem to presuppose the new principle in the first place. Too many plausible-seeming hypotheses consequently turn out to be circular – they assume at the outset precisely the conditions which a scientific theory would need to explain. This problem may never be entirely surmountable – any theory will always have to rest on the introduction of something entirely without precedent at some point – but if this new element can be made to seem less complex and improbable than it did, the theory is a good one.

The present hypothesis assumes female solidarity. It assumes neither language, nor the incest-taboo, nor a sudden flash of insight, nor an extraordinary mutation producing “conscious thought”. Naturally, the hypothesis assumes that as a result of previous, non-cultural evolution, two-legged ape-like creatures – relatively advanced hominids – exist, and that these are at least as intelligent and as skilful in using tools as chimpanzees are. A certain level of manual dexterity, tool-using and tool-making skills, vocal and gesticulatory communicative abilities and cerebral agility would have been required before “culture” in the sense used here could even have begun to take off. But it is methodologically permissible for such developments and others to be assumed, since they do not themselves presuppose culture. Apart from conditions of such a kind, the hypothesis presented here merely presupposes (1) the ability of one female to form a bloc or alliance for meat-gaining purposes with another, and (2) the ability of female coalitions to exert a measure of sexual self-control. In primate societies, blocs or alliances are quite common – two males, for example, may often co-operate in blocking the dominance of a third. The

significance of coalitions in “chimpanzee politics” has been vividly underscored in the work of the Dutch primatologist de Waal (1983). Sibling solidarity has frequently been noticed and has been genetically explained. And it is quite normal in primate societies for females to control their sexuality – through “presenting”-behaviour, for example – in pursuit of economic gains, status and so forth. The assumption of sexual solidarity of the kind envisaged, then, is not excessively far-fetched.

### **Cultural selection – the logic of the strike**

In principle, it would only have needed two females – perhaps sisters, perhaps mother-and-daughter – to have set in train the movement towards culture as an unstoppable force. If these two always backed each other up, always acted in concert, began to synchronise their menstrual cycles (which would have tended to occur spontaneously) and were able to motivate two or more males to hunt for them by making sex dependent on it, then they might have been so much more successful in securing meat than other females in the population for their strategy to act as an attractive model, and for any genetic characteristics facilitating such solidarity to spread through the population.

To begin with, the resulting group might have been a small unit. But unlike other “family” units in the population, this one would have been capable of recruiting new members to its ranks almost indefinitely. There are limits to the viable size or territorial range of any horde or family-type grouping, but with a strike – the bigger the better. Strike action cuts across parochial boundaries spontaneously and of necessity. The striking group would have had a powerful motive to extend its influence and recruit, since with each sex-strike – as with any strike, including within contemporary culture – there could have been no tolerance of neutrality. If the surrounding females could not be brought into the strike, then they were a threat to it. Every female encountered or liable to be encountered by any male was on one side or the other, and the more females brought into the fold, the more powerful the strike on each occasion, and the greater the attractions of joining the movement next time.

A further consequence of this logic could have been decisive. The females adopting the new strategy would have been linked not to one or more dominant

individual males but to an immeasurably more elective force, both for hunting and defence. In addition to whatever links they had with offspring or biological kin, they would have been attached sexually to a male group whose capacity for joint action would have far exceeded that of unorganised males still prioritising their individualistic struggles for status, sex and food. The organised hunter-males, like the females, could not have been indifferent as to the behaviour of the surrounding male population. Any male who could not be recruited into the new-strategy hunting-band would have constituted a potential danger. The dominant individual male, the loner, the rapist – would have been perceived as a sexual threat. Any of such males as were unable to co-operate with the new strategy would have been treated in principle like any other animal predator – chased away, wounded or possibly killed. In any event, where conflicts occurred, no violent male would have been able to match the coercive power of the well-organised, experienced and motivated hunting-band. The traditional male sexual strategy of immortalising one's genes through assertions of dominance would no longer have worked. And if this were the case, then the cultural configuration – once established – would have spread through the protohuman population rapidly, sweeping all before its path and precipitating the extinction of all competing hominid groups unable to adopt the new way of life.

### **The universe of rules**

As noted already, the females in any hypothesised protohuman population would be divided into (a) those who were more liable to “break ranks” and mate regardless of their sisters’ attempts at a “sex-strike” and (b) those more liable to form coalitions with other females, following the “sex-strike strategy, placing pressure on other females to follow suit and submitting to similar pressures themselves. Of these two female types, there seems little question as to which would most plausibly have led social life in the direction of culture. We need hardly ask which would most have needed new communicative and signalling skills or which would have been most receptive, potentially, to the notion of a “rule” or “taboo”. Assuming that some accident made it temporarily possible to control fire for use in providing warmth or for cooking collectively-hunted meat, it seems hardly necessary to ask which females would have been most likely to succeed in keeping it alight. And assuming that the

complex of activities implied above – speaking, rule-making, fire-tending, hunting etc. – represented a viable mode of production, and that individually or competitively-obtainable food-resources were scarce, we need hardly speculate as to which category of females would have succeeded in producing the most surviving offspring.

The sex-strike would have provided the most fundamental and obvious feature of human culture, and the one which underlies all the capabilities for joint action which have been suggested above – the fact that it is based on rule. Here, the crucial point is not whether conventionalised patterns of behaviour exist. Such patterns, which can perhaps misleadingly be called “rules” by external scientific observers, are discernible throughout the animal world. Baboons and chimpanzees behave in predictable ways, according to conventionalised patterns determined both genetically and in complex interplay with the social and external environment. But this has nothing to do with “rules” as defined here.

A cultural rule exists when there is genuinely collective agreement to secure adherence to it. Where the rule is concerned, indifference, tolerance and neutrality are of necessity abandoned. Every individual who has entered the agreement has to submit to its terms. A violation outrages the community as a whole.

Such a situation does not prevail among non-human primates. To touch on a central issue – that of incest in sexual relations – let us imagine a dominant male gorilla with three females. Two of these are his daughters. The question is not whether or not he has sexual relations with all three females. That would be a matter of behaviour – not of rule. The question is this: in the event of this male’s having or attempting such relations, what would be the reaction of the other gorillas in the vicinity? Would they express some gorilla version of collective moral outrage? Would they come to the defence of the daughters? Would the females feel that an abuse of one was a threat to all? Or would they simply show indifference, leaving individuals to get on with things as best they could in their own way, each basically preoccupied with its own affairs?



As Lowie (1919: 113) made clear long ago, it should be immediately obvious – and all recent primate research indeed confirms this – that there would be no community outrage whatsoever in the face of the incest, nor even the merest hint of it. Primate “society” in this sense does not exist. Admittedly, individual primates in a local community may take sides, involve themselves in others affairs, express anger and attempt to involve allies in their emotions or schemes – but despite all this there is no over-arching collective body which makes it its business to interfere with its members’ private affairs. Although coalitions (as among chimpanzees) may come into being, they are formed around dominant or threatened individuals seeking immediate advantage for themselves, and allegiances and coalition-boundaries shift as perceptions of self-interest change. The result is that individuals are left to follow the possibilities opened up by social interaction; they do what they can get away with doing (de Waal 1983). There is certainly no collectivity which endures beyond and despite the flux of alliances and coalitions between individuals. No social group can be relied upon either to arbitrate impartially or to assert the validity or otherwise of universally-acknowledged categories of behaviour. There exists, consequently, no collectively-imposed system of constraints, no supra-individual force to impose sanctions – no “rule”, no “law”. We can put this another way by saying that in chimpanzee society, coalitions indeed form – but every coalition is always sectional, opportunistic and unstable, none being capable of embodying “society” as a whole.

Human culture – in its traditional forms particularly – is above all the “rule of law” in this sense: that the behaviour-patterns culture prescribes emanate from a source beyond instinct and beyond private enforcement by coalitions or individuals. In a human cultural system with its harmonising collective rituals and its formal structures of kinship we find something which transcends the parochial, petty level of interaction to which primates are confined. Beyond all private coalitions or alliances is a wider one – a set of shared understandings uniting the community as a whole. Whilst it is true that practical experience may often fall short of ideals, and that “developed” societies are indeed characteristically conflict-ridden, the fact remains that shared perceptions and understandings are what language, ritual and culture in its traditional forms are essentially about. No hunter-gatherer community, in any event, can be

understood without reference to this level of its being, which tends to be the most “meaningful” for its members themselves. And the essential point being made here is that it is inconceivable that primate “dominance” could have led to such a level. It could never have led to shared symbol and rite, because – with its roots in the dominance of private interest – it could never have led to a wide enough or representative enough coalition, it could never have sustained the wholly-necessary element of collective responsibility and collective intolerance which characterises human cultural rule-making at its best – intolerance of rape, of murder, of incestuous abuse, of anti-social greed.

Dominance is from this perspective the antithesis of culture. It is the pseudo law, the pseudo-order of alliances in the service of private interest and force – the patterned, structured outcome of self-seeking interaction based on inducement, threat and fear. Despite all the subtleties of social interaction which primatologists understandably celebrate, and despite whatever glimpses there may be of generous and sharing behaviour, the popular conception of “Jungle law” retains its essential validity in this respect. Such a situation leads each individual to look to itself, to attempt to bend others to its private interests (interpretable ultimately as those of its genes) and to display ultimate indifference to the fate of the wider community of which it is a part. There is no way that this could have led to culture – except along the road of revolutionary, point-by-point negation and overthrow of its logic.

On the other hand, if we are looking for a source of collective, impersonal intolerance leading to the “universe of rules”, we can have no better model than that of the strike. Like chimpanzee alliances, the strike is a coalition. But it is a coalition with a difference. The strike by its very nature undermines the dominance of private interest. It has its own logic, sweeping along individuals caught up in its current. It cannot be indifferent. It must impose “the law” – its own law of solidarity – with implacable intolerance, its survival depending on it. It has to extend, intrude, embrace and include ever more widely to avoid being thrown into reverse. And yet the concept of the strike avoids the anti-Darwinian mysticism or veiled theologism which has accompanied previous attempts to assert in humanity a spiritual, moral or psychological uniqueness demarcating us from the animal realm. The concept does not lead us to assume

anything genetically or socially unrealistic in terms of altruism or morality. The individual seeks her/his material interests – which may well include those of reproduction and genetic self-perpetuation – through those of the collectivity which is involved in the strike. At this point, kin selection indeed transcends itself, for in principle the striking individual must be motivated to defend and identify equally with all “kin” – who must now be defined as all those involved in the strike – instead of discriminating in favour of those genetically most ‘close’. The model leads us to the concept of culture because it provides a realistic framework within which biological interests can finally transcend themselves – a point of intersection at which genetic, personal and collective interests can be seen to coincide.

### **Sexual morality**

If the model of the strike in general provides us with an ultimate logical source of concepts such as “law” or “rule”, the model of the sex-strike in particular provides us with the source of sexual morality. It was noted above that the test in deciding whether or not this exists has nothing to do with individual behaviour. What matters is the attitude of others towards such behaviour. The female “no”-strategy immediately gives us the essence of sexual morality in this respect.

Baboons and chimpanzees show not the slightest trace of sexual morality. A female chimpanzee may be coy or withdrawn, but she does not display sexual embarrassment or shame. Whether she actually engages in intercourse or not may depend on many factors. But in deciding whether there exist moral rules or not, the question is not whether any male may come up and start to copulate – sometimes he will be allowed to, sometimes he will not. Neither is “coyness” relevant – in all animal species, courting-behaviour takes place, and one or other participant may often play at being hard to catch. In determining the presence or absence of sexual morality, we have to ask a different question. Let us suppose that a primate female made it clear that whenever she was receptive physiologically, males in general were welcome publicly to examine her intimate regions, to compete for intimate contact or copulate with her at will, regardless of what other females felt or were doing. What would be the attitude of all the other females? Would they feel undermined by her? Would they try to

exert pressure on her not to be so “loose”? Or would they be unable to socialise her differently since they would be following the same logic themselves?

We have only to ask the question to reach the answer. Just as chimpanzees in their communication-systems cannot agree upon or impose sets of “artificial” or “arbitrary” grammatical rules (as humans in their varying speech-systems do), so there are no social conditions under which the female members of a chimpanzee community can act as a united collectivity in judging or shaping one another’s sexual behaviour. The necessary element of unanimity is never there. If sufficient unanimity could be achieved, the result would be a chimpanzee version of a core component of the human cultural configuration – the entirely-“artificial” institution known as sexual morality.

The sex-strike hypothesis gives us such conditions. From the moment when two or more protohuman females went “on strike”, supporting one another in the maintenance of such action, the context of their own sexuality had become utterly transformed. No longer could each such female do with her body as she liked. She had to take account of her sisters, whose own pressures were derived from the requirements of the strike. All around her, then, was a set of “artificial” constraints. From that moment on, all sexual behaviour became divided into two categories – “right” behaviour and behaviour which was morally “wrong”. Even a private act of love-making, far away in some secluded spot, would now become viewed as an outrage to the female community as a whole if it occurred during what was supposed to be a general sexual strike.

Such morality was all-intrusive. By going on strike, the females were extending their claims ever outwards, stretching their influence into all corners of life, exerting a collective stake in the value which their sexuality now represented for them. Such collective sexual self-control – which is the antithesis of primate oestrus-behaviour – was the source of their pride, their status as women, their economic and social power. Each female could no longer do with her body as she pleased, or allow her instincts to carry her where they would. As a sexual being, she was now socialised – an asset to her gender-group as a whole. Her body was no longer just that of a physical individual. It was the

incarnation of something collective, something universal – or, to use the terminology of later religions, something “divine”. It was part of the most precious, irreplaceable, inviolable treasure of all the body of Womankind, which was to be guarded ferociously against all male attempts at seduction or privatisation.

But the model not only generates female sexual morality. It also gives us male morality as the mirror-image and counterpart of all this. For once two or more males were acting as co-operative hunters, respecting the inviolability of their sexual partners’ periodic strike, they too, by the internal logic of the situation, would have felt threatened sexually by any defiance of the rules. Any male displaying tendencies towards sexual strike-breaking, dominance or rape would have constituted a threat. Allowed his way, such a male – particularly if armed with hunting-weapons – might have raided the community of women and seized one or more females for his own private use. If he succeeded in this, other males might have followed suit. Along this road, culture would quickly have collapsed. But we cannot expect the group of co-operative hunter males to have exercised vigilance against this possibility purely out of concern for the future of culture. They had a more direct, very tangible motive. Without vigilant self-defence against the spectre of the dominant male, they might have lost their women. Before the whole community became extinct through cultural collapse, the members of the hunting-band would have become sexually expropriated – reduced, perhaps, to something like the status of baboon-like “bachelor males” excluded from female contact by a few dominant “overlords”. Such, in any event, might have been the fear. It was this very material factor of collective fear – of jealous collective motivation to defend their sexual interests – which gave force to the men’s moral vigilance.

The hunters’ new sexual security was founded on an inversion of previous patterns of female sexual preference. What females found sexually-appealing in male behaviour now was neither aggressiveness nor dominance, but adherence to rule and success in co-operative hunting. This pattern, although logical under the new circumstances, was not “natural”. It was a reversal of the usual primate pattern, and could be sustained by each individual woman only to the extent that she felt herself to be in a wider system which worked and which

reciprocated her trust, it could easily be undermined: indeed, given a local restoration of power to a few dominant males and the breaking of women's resistance, individual females might quickly abandon the quest for solidarity and revert to the pattern in which they found dominance attractive once more. The male gender-group, then, had as great a collective interest as the females in upholding the new order at all points – in recruiting members to its ranks, exercising vigilance, defending Womankind's periodic inviolability and placing constraints upon the sexuality of all its members. Ever since they had followed such a logic in falling in with the women's revolution, the hunters had won for themselves collective sexual security – without struggles for dominance, without “haves” and “have nots”, without fear of complete sexual expropriation. It was a treasure they could not afford to lose.

### **Incest and exogamy**

The model not only gives us sexual morality in a general sense. It also accounts for the incest taboo.

Females – according to the model – are inhibiting the sexual advances of non-hunter males. Within any group of females, there will always be some immature males still attached to their mothers. The females are inhibiting the sexual advances of all males who do not separate themselves and go off to hunt. Their own male offspring come into this category. Therefore, the females are inhibiting the sexual advances of such males. In other words, women's imposition of the “incest rule” – which is merely the sex-strike as experienced from the standpoint of male offspring – is the inescapable result of a refusal or inability to threaten the strike or otherwise complicate matters by making an “exception” of stay-at-home sons.

No other hypothesis can account for the emergence of the incest taboo and its contemporaneity with the hunting-transition so simply and neatly. Within the terms of the model, we are not asked to believe that female protohumans at a certain stage began complicating life by adding an “incest taboo” to the already-existing configuration of artificial constraints. Still less need we follow Lévi-Strauss (1969a) in postulating the sudden appearance of sexual generosity and altruism on the part of woman-exchanging groups of males. We

need suppose only that females remained consistently faithful to the logic of a meat-gaining strategy which was already established in their own material and economic interests. Within the terms of our model, inhibiting the sexual advances of stay-at-home, non-hunting males – of all such males, regardless of status or affiliation – was precisely what the women's sex-strike was all about. There could be no sex except with males who brought meat. By remaining faithful to this principle even with regard to their own immature male offspring, the females involved were simplifying life, not complicating it. The inhibition of young males' "incestuous" advances was the result.

In a general and preliminary sense, then, the incest rule – central and intractable problem for twentieth-century theories of human origins from Freud (1965) onwards – has been explained. But the model does not stop there but proceeds to define matters more closely, specifying related core-components of the cultural configuration by its own internal logic. It explains, for example, why the incest-rule continues from childhood into adulthood, so that even when they mature and become hunters, sons still cannot relate sexually to their mothers. And it explains exogamy, which is the specific context within which incest-avoidances in traditional cultures are normatively enforced.

Let us review the picture which the model outlines. The females are on sex-strike. They are insisting that the adult hunter-males separate themselves off and go out to hunt. These males will not go unless they are secure in the knowledge that the strike applies to all those of their gender without favour or discrimination – and in particular that the females will remain during their absence in control of the situation back at home. They need to know that no young males left behind, for example, will be allowed to gain the upper hand in securing sexual relations with any female. As part of their sex-strike, then, the females must inhibit their sons and show that yielding sexually to them would be unthinkable.

To the extent that sexual freedom in relations with their mothers/sisters is impossible, the males in each group become conditioned against perceiving 'their own' women as potential sexual partners. They therefore look elsewhere for partners as they mature. They cannot join the hunting-band of their fathers, for

that would involve difficulties with their own conditioning. It would mean sharing in their fathers' solidarity and therefore thinking the unthinkable – seeing their mothers/sisters as women to whom gifts of meat are brought, the implications of this being explicitly sexual. So they must either join another hunting band, or – if none exists – form one of their own. There must be, then, at least two hunting bands whose identities and solidarities are counterposed. Men can join one or the other, but not both. The cleavage between “fathers” and “sons” exists already; it has only to be perpetuated for the necessary dual organisation – the requisite division of the male community into two counterposed camps, each with its own internal solidarity – to emerge.

The recently-matured hunters seek sexual relations outside the community of their own women. But which other women exist within the system for them to turn to? The answer is simple. Their fathers must have been nurtured in a female group of mothers and sisters with whom sexual freedom was (for these “fathers”) “unthinkable”. In seeking sexual relations, the sons must turn, therefore (since there are no other women in the system) to this female group. Assuming that they seek partners of their own generation, the sons will in fact relate to the daughters of this group – “fathers’ sisters’ daughters”, who would also be “mothers’ brothers’ daughters”. In other words, the model has generated the standard anthropological form of a matrilineal exogamous moiety system, in which marriage is with classificatory cross-cousins.

### **Classificatory kinship**

The model not only generates exogamy and the incest taboo; it specifically generates “classificatory” kinship – the kind of kinship-logic characteristic of most hunter-gatherer and other traditional cultures (Morgan 1871; Fortes 1959: 156). Classificatory kinship expresses the principle of sibling-equivalence (Radcliffe-Brown 1931: 13). It is the kind of kinship which we would expect to emerge if sibling-solidarity were carried to its logical conclusion, overriding the primacy of pair-bonding.

The essence of classificatory kinship is that siblings occupy similar positions in the total social structure. Their “social personalities”, as Radcliffe-Brown



(1931: 97) put it, writing in this case of Aboriginal Australia, “are almost precisely the same” where terminology is concerned.

“...A man is always classed with his brother and a woman with her sister. If I apply a given term of relationship to man I apply the same term to his brother. Thus I call my father’s brother by the same term that I apply to my father, and similarly, I call my mother’s sister ‘mother’. The consequential relationships are followed out. The children of any man I call ‘father’ or of any woman I call ‘mother’ are my ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’. The children of any man I call ‘brother’, if I am a male, call me ‘father’, and I call them ‘son’ and ‘daughter’” (Radcliffe-Brown 1931: 13).

By the same token, if a woman has a relationship, any of her sisters may in theory join her in exercising the rights or fulfilling the obligations which that relationship entails. As far as this level of formal structuring is concerned (other levels being ignored for the sake of argument), she may stand in for her sister (just as any of her sisters may stand in for her) in any kinship capacity, whether it be as mother to her (the sister’s) child, as mother-in-law to her sister’s daughter’s husband – or even, theoretically, as wife to a sister’s husband. Moreover, since sisters are each other’s “equivalents”, it follows that theoretically, no mother should discriminate in favour of her own biological children as opposed to those of her sister. All of their joint children are addressed as “daughter” or “son” indiscriminately, and all are in theory collectively “sisters” and “brothers” to each other – which is an example of what anthropologists mean when they say that people who use a classificatory system, such as the Australian Aborigines, “do not recognize physiological but only social relationships....” (Radcliffe-Brown 1931: 104). As this logic is followed over the generations, the class of people who can be considered theoretically one’s “sisters” (or “brothers”) may expand indefinitely.

It was Lewis Morgan’s (1871) discovery and cross-cultural analysis of this seemingly-”anomalous” mode of kinship-reckoning which established social anthropology as a scientific discipline (Lévi-Strauss 1977: 1, 300). The basic principle of classificatory kinship – the formal equivalence of siblings – initially seemed merely “confusing” to investigators. As a certain Reverend Bingham wrote to Morgan, describing an example from Hawaii (Morgan 1871: 461):

“The terms for father, mother, brother, and sister, and for other relationships, are used so loosely we can never know, without further inquiry, whether the real father, or the father’s brother is meant,

the real mother of the mother's sister.... A man comes to me and says *e mote tamau*, my father Is dead. Perhaps I have just seen his father alive and well, and I say, 'No, not dead?' He replies, 'I mean my father's brother'

To many of the early thinkers, it all seemed very confusing. What possible reason could there be for not using a European-type, "descriptive" system of terminology – a system which allows one to describe with precision which relative is being referred to?

In fact, the problems encountered by early and more recent anthropologists in attempting to fathom the logic of classificatory kinship were ideological. As Robin Fox (1967: 184) has perceptively explained:

"It is because anthropologists have consistently looked at the problem from the ego-focus that they have been baffled by it. They have placed ego at the centre of his kinship network and tried to work the system out in terms of his personal relationships".

They have been puzzled because classificatory kinship simply does not work like this. The ego or "I" is not its point of departure. Neither is the marital couple. Although such kinship does not eliminate intimacy or individuality, it operates on another level – a level at which group-to-group relationships have primacy over personal interests or bonds. On this level, there is a profoundly meaningful sense in which it really does not matter who the individual is. What matters is everyone's participation in the solidarity and collective identity of a class of people in similar positions, each category or class defining itself through its relationships with other classes. This, it will be remembered, is the fundamental feature of our sex strike model, in which the women as a whole say "yes" or "no" in relating collectively to their sexual partners taken as a whole.

In societies with strong sibling-solidarity the logic of treating siblings as terminological equivalents becomes immediately apparent. If a woman has a child, her sister can "stand in" for her as that child's mother. Indeed, the mother's sister is already the "mother", for the expression "my daughter" means indifferently either "my daughter" or "my sister's daughter" ("my sister" and "I" being "the same"). A good example are the Hopi Pueblo Indians:

"Sex solidarity is strong.... The position of the mother's sister is practically identical with that of the mother. She normally lives in the same household and aids in the training of her sister's daughter

for adult life They co-operate in all the tasks of the household, grinding corn together, plastering the house, cooking and the like.... Their children are reared together and cared for as their own" (Eggan 1950: 33, 36, 35).

It is as if groups of sisters had such solidarity that they refused to distinguish between "mine" and "thine" where maternal relationships were concerned, each saying, in effect, "my sister's child is my child". Such solidarity and positive reluctance to discriminate on biological grounds inevitably generates terminological usages of a "classificatory" kind.

A further expression of the same basic principle is the levirate (or sororate) – inheritance by a person of his or her deceased sibling's spouse. Many Europeans are familiar with this primarily from the Bible:

"If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead [man] shall not marry without unto a stranger: her husband's brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of an husband's brother unto her" (Deuteronomy 25: 5).

Both levirate and sororate seem to have been universal throughout Aboriginal Australia (Radcliffe-Brown 1931: 96). In the rest of the world the levirate is or was so common that "it is easier to count cases where the custom is positively known to be lacking than to enumerate instances of its occurrence" (Lowie 1961: 32).

In the levirate/sororate, a person steps into the marital role of his or her deceased sibling with little or no ceremony and as a matter of course. In a sense, the living sibling was "married" to the spouse already, since siblings are kin-equivalents and marital contracts are arrangements not between two private individuals but between the kin on either side. Among the North American Navaho, for example, where the levirate and sororate once existed, the payment of bride-price "made each partner the potential sexual property of the rest of the clan...." (Aberle 1962: 121, 126).

### **Group-marriage**

Carrying this logic to its conclusion, we arrive at something startlingly different from the monogamous exclusivity and "fidelity" so prominent in most

theories of human origins. We arrive at “group-marriage” – the situation in which siblings, real and/or classificatory, are validated in the enjoyment of one another’s spouses even during their lifetimes. In much of Western Arnhem Land, Australia, for example:

“....a wife may have access to a number of tribal ‘husbands’, and ‘brother-cousins’ of her actual husband; while a husband enjoys the same privilege with his tribal ‘wives’, the classificatory sisters of his wife and wives and their female ‘cousins’. Should the husband or wife object, or take steps to terminate such a union, this would be contrary to public opinion, and the protesting party is soon made to understand that he or she is part of an institution which legally sanctions such relationships” (Berndt and Berndt 1951: 47).

In this part of Australia, “...extra-marital relations are the norm, expected and enjoyed as additions to married life” (p. 58).

The term for “classificatory spouse” (that is, roughly, “spouse’s sibling”) is *mamam*. It is in the course of ceremonies (which alternate between phases of celibacy and phases of sexual freedom) that women and men at the stipulated moments take these expressions literally, enjoying sexual relations with their additional spouses. For example, during a *Jamalak* ceremony (performed frequently throughout the year), sexual and erotic play are encouraged from the very beginning “to create an atmosphere of good will”, The Berndts (p. 142) comment:

“This is carried out quite blatantly before either husband or wife, indeed one party ‘pushes’ the other to take part... When the camp is large, with an influx of ‘stranger’ groups, the choice is wide, and is mostly made by a husband for his wife. But women are allowed to take the initiative with or without their husbands’ consent; public opinion would soon squash any demonstration of jealousy.... Young girls disport themselves with evident enjoyment, while the men to whom they give their attention usually behave shyly...”

In all this, a woman is saying, in effect, “my Sister’s husband is my husband”, while a man says the same about his brother’s wives.

### **Sibling solidarity and the model**

In concrete social situations – at least in the contemporary ethnographic record – the “equivalence of siblings” is rarely carried through to its logical conclusion, which would be to give every Woman tens or even hundreds of “sisters” formally equivalent to herself, and a comparable number of “husbands”.

In practice, this equalising logic tends to be weakened or distorted in its implications by other factors, such as day-to-day foraging necessities, marital bonding, emotional compatibility, distance or closeness of relationship and residence. In practice, for example, women do tend to favour their own biological offspring over and above those of their sisters, although this may be publicly played down or denied. And in practice, in most secular contexts, individual men take and assert their special rights in individual women as their wives.

Strictly speaking, however – that is, to the extent that ‘classificatory’ principles prevail – the logic implies that in each generation, the parties which enter into relationships are neither individuals nor marital couples. They are groups of sisters and of brothers:

“The unit of structure everywhere seems to be the group of full siblings – brothers and sisters” (Radcliffe-Brown 1950; quoted by Fortes 1970: 76).

In quoting the above statement, as eminent a kinship specialist as Fortes (1970: 76) regarded it to be

“one of the few generalizations in kinship theory that, in my opinion, enshrines a discovery worthy to be placed side by side with Morgan’s discovery of classificatory kinship...”

Fortes added that, like Morgan’s discovery, this generalization “has been repeatedly validated and has opened up lines of inquiry not previously foreseen”.

Radcliffe-Brown (1952: 19-20) further noted that where “the classificatory system of kinship reaches a high degree of development”, husbands and wives are always grouped apart from each other. On a formal level – that is, where terminology, jural theory and publicly-professed ideals are concerned – husband and wife do not merge or combine their social identities. They do not share in using the same kinship terms towards others. They do not form a corporate unit in sharing relationships, property or even offspring (which, in some formal sense, will always ‘belong’ on one side of the family or the other).

To this picture of pronounced separation between spouses we may add that in a very large number of cultures, particularly in South America, Africa and Oceania,

spouses are not even allowed to eat together – “an arrangement”, as Lowie (1919: 122) put it, “almost inconceivable to us”. in Africa, it is a common Bantu custom that “the husband and wife do not eat together after marriage” (Richards 1932: 191). Among the Bemba:

“The first division of the community at mealtimes is along the lines of sex, Men and women eat separately. Even husband and wife never share a meal, except at night in the privacy of their own hut. It is considered shameful for the two sexes to eat together” (Richards 1969: 122).

Very often, the rationalisation is that meal-sharing is a sign of kinship – only kin should share food, so that for husband and wife to share meals would make them kin – that is, would tinge their relationship with incest. In various parts of the world, menstrual avoidances, menstrual huts, post-partum taboos, in-law taboos and “men’s house” institutions frequently help ensure that gender-distinctions are not blurred, incestuous confusion is guarded against – and spouses are effectively kept apart for much of the time. Uncomfortably for those who argue for the universal cultural primacy of the “nuclear family”, in other words, we find a widespread pattern according to which it is the disjunction of spouses, not their conjunction, which is the most strongly-emphasised ritual and structural norm.

According to Classificatory logic, in any event, husbands and wives are kept distinct and apart, not sharing in terminology, social identity or relationships. The members of sibling-units by contrast, are combined. They do share terminology, social identities and relationships. Where the formal structuring of social life is concerned, sibling solidarity, then, overrides pair-bonding. There can be no doubt that this idea is central not only to classificatory kinship but also to ritual structure in most traditional cultures. It can quickly be seen that the model of origins proposed here would produce an emphasis on group-to-group relationships and sibling-solidarity of just this kind. The periodic menstrual sex-strike would put wives with their blood-kin in one camp, husbands with their “blood” in another. We need only assume a subsequent weakening of this logic – detailing the causes and consequences of this for each culture or locality – for the ethnographic record as actually found to be explained.

## **Ritual**

Given the model, we require no special or additional explanation in order to account for ritual power in traditional cultures. The very same menstrual sex strike which forms the model's point of departure is *already* "ritual power" in its initial, simple form. Admittedly, going on strike in the circumstances defined by the model may not appear to be necessarily a "ceremony". It may not seem at first sight to be a "religious" act. But already it displays the defining characteristics of ritual action in human culture.

The process is linked, or at least normatively linked, with the moon. We may imagine the participants engaging in dancing, singing or other collective activities at full and new moon, emotional harmony assisting in the achievement of physiological harmony and hence menstrual synchrony. In going on lunar-scheduled menstrual sex strike, each woman brings her body into tune with an internal clock which may seem to derive from the sky itself, and which is in any event beyond arbitrary manipulation or conscious direction by individuals. The blood-flow has its own periodicity, independent of human will, and it is this seemingly-transcendental force which regularly binds the participants to each other, setting them apart in a distinct sphere.

The strike is coercive. Its necessary tendency is to negate the sexual-political dominance of men. To the extent that its logic prevails, women present a common front, lining up as one body. Each man respects the boundary they present; none will invade the feminine sphere. Yet the power of the strike transcends the need for violence. Its sanction is the threat of exclusion. The uncooperative male risks excommunication not only from female company but from the human community as such. This is a forceful sanction, with ultimate death very much implied. Yet the threat works autonomously. A man who has violated a woman becomes stained with her blood; his action therefore publicly marks him out. As he anticipates the consequences, fear works its own – perhaps lethal – effects. To its would-be violators, therefore, menstrual blood seems poisonous in a quite literal way.

This thesis has demonstrated the extent to which ritual or “magic” in traditional cultures echoes these themes. Ritual power has the following general characteristics:

1. It sustains its momentum primarily through participatory, rhythmic, synchronised activities such as dancing and singing;
2. It involves the synchronisation of the activities of humans with those of the celestial bodies;
3. It appeals to forms of authority which transcend the powers of human individuals;
4. It frequently demands the observance of sexual and dietary taboos, insisting on the inviolability of persons or things which are said to be “set apart”;
5. Where sanctions are concerned, these are primarily non-violent and operate directly through the emotions. People respect ritual power for fear of offending “the spirits” and thereby incurring illness or bad luck.

To the extent that women in traditional cultures are said to possess ritual power, men usually depict this negatively. Virtually throughout the world, the strongest and most negative form of feminine ritual power is the potency of menstrual blood, male contact with which is thought to produce illness or bad luck. There are often comparable avoidances of the blood or flesh of game animals. In cultures in which men claim a monopoly over ritual power, however, they frequently assert such power by bleeding. Under such circumstances, the blood is thought of as life-giving and positive. Synchronised male “childbirth” and “menstruation” are in fact recurrent features of secret male initiation rites, whose associated myths insist that men’s power belonged originally to women.

These features are consistent with the basic hypothesis of this thesis. It seems that humanity’s traditional expressions of ritual power are variations on a theme, the shared point of departure being women’s periodic menstrual sex strike.



### **Beliefs in divinity**

According to the model, culture begins with a population only of ordinary, earthly human beings – without gods, goddesses, spirits, souls, demons, goblins or ghosts of any kind. How, then, can we explain the fact that in all known traditional cultures, supernatural and religious constructs play an important role?

Religious conceptions of divinity rest on the notion of a gulf between humans and the supernatural world. “The gods” do find earthly embodiment in their shamanic or priestly representatives, but they are themselves of another order. At first sight, it may seem that our model would not predict this. It presents a picture in which no-one acknowledges any transcendental power. A person is what he or she is; people cannot be “representative” of a power transcending themselves or emanating from the skies.

Looked at more carefully, however, it can be seen that this is not quite true. It was noted above that the menstrual sex strike does transcend the power and the identity of physical individuals. Women in their sex-striking role do represent more than themselves. They may not be priestesses, but each is certainly the representative of an overriding social power. If the sex strike can extend indefinitely – if in principle it is as omnipresent as is menstrual synchrony or the moon’s light itself – then in embodying this power, each woman in her own person “stands for” something transcendental in its scope. She stands for her sisters, who may be potentially limitless in number. And if men respect this power, then although they acknowledge no divinity, there is present at least something of the formal structure of many of the world’s traditions of religious deference to “higher beings”.

Let us re-examine the characteristics of these women. What powers do they really possess? And in what respects do these powers resemble those which, in more developed, complex social systems, will become thought of as those of “the gods”?

These women cannot magically strike men dead – but they can certainly exclude them from sex. To the extent that this is the case, men can be rendered

impotent at a stroke. No prayers are offered to these women, but men do strive to please them and to be included when the time for love-making arrives. No-one offers them bloody animal sacrifices – but men do hunt and bring back for them animal blood and flesh. No-one regards these women as living in the sky or in the underworld – but, when menstruating, they are certainly in a world “set apart”. No-one conceptualises them as half-animal and half-human – as “totemic” mother-figures or as “mistresses of the game animals”. But their menstrual blood is certainly identified with the blood of the hunt, both kinds of blood being saturated with taboo or power. Failure to respect this blood leads to failure in the hunt. These women are not immortal – they do not die and then resurrect themselves, nor undergo reincarnation, nor flit between heaven and earth. But their strike is periodically renewed, as is their life-blood which flows from generation to generation in an endless stream. Moreover, in menstruation they do seem to accompany the moon to its own temporary death, moving into another realm from which they later return. Admittedly, these women are ordinary human beings. They are subjected to the ordinary laws of physics – such as those of gravity. They cannot levitate, nor fly magically through the night, nor be in two places at once, nor have eyes which pry into all corners simultaneously. Yet during each menstrual ritual these women’s potency is indeed that of their strike – which, like any strike, does make its presence felt everywhere at once, transcending space, as if possessed of a thousand ears and eyes.

There is much, then, that is “goddess-like” about the menstrual sex-strike. Admittedly, to use such language is to apply a later cultural category – that of developed religious ideology – to a situation in which it is not yet applicable. It can be conceded that to begin with, there are no shamans, no priestesses, no temples. The social world is not divided into mortals and immortals, nor are humans divided into lay people and those who are “set apart”. Unlike in developed religions, there are no specialists in the sacred life: all humans are involved in the solidarity of the sacred community during one phase of the lunar cycle, and then released from it in the next. All take turns in being “set apart” and reunited, in “the other world” and in this. If there are priests and priestesses, everyone is such – at least for a part of each month. If there are goddesses and gods, everyone can at the appropriate time participate in their

identity and power – which is no more than the ordinary cultural strength and solidarity of human beings themselves. Each of these points of contrast is significant, and each underlines why it would be confusing to speak of “religion” as present already within the specifications of the model, but it would be an oversimplification to state simply that the model has no room for religion – that humans acknowledge no transcendental power. What we can say is that men (and, in a different way, women) respect no power other than the moon-linked, blood-washed, periodically-asserted sanctity and inviolability of menstruating women linked in solidarity with one another and with their offspring. This – as this thesis has shown – gives us a springboard from which all the world’s religious and magical traditions can be derived.

### **Myths and fairy tales**

Magical myths and fairy tales the world over centre around a limited number of themes. Among the most common are the following:

1. Death and subsequent rebirth;
2. Marriage to animal brides or bridegrooms;
3. Metamorphosis or “skin-change”;
4. Dragon-slaying;
5. The stealing of ritual power from ancestral women;
6. The stealing of ritual power from monsters, giants or dragons.

This thesis has shown that male initiation rituals throughout much of the world bear a systematic relationship to female expressions of ritual power in the form of menstruation and childbirth. Through such rituals, men invert female menstrual power, retaining its formal properties whilst detaching it from women and using it as a weapon against them. The thesis has further shown the systematic relationship between these rituals and traditions of magical mythology.

It has been shown that in male initiation rites, men violate women’s menstrual space, take over their sex strike and “steal” from women the symbolic potencies associated with it. It has also been shown that dragon-slaying myths mirror the same theme. That is, the “dragons”, “giants” or “monsters” which mythological male culture-heroes slay and from whom they steal their power are code-terms

for the “many-headed” menstrual sex strike which men succeed in vanquishing. The myths exactly mirror the rituals. This explains why dragon-legends are so bound up with themes of birth and rebirth, marriage and threats to marriage, masculine sexual potency and the origins of male ritual power.

In other words, although women’s sex-strike can be viewed positively – taking the form of “goddess-power” (the relevant goddesses usually being associated with snakes) – it can also be viewed negatively. Under such circumstances, it takes the imagined form of many-headed dragons, all-swallowing snakes, giants, monsters, gorgons and so forth. The sex-strike’s dependence on menstrual bleeding then appears as the monster’s or dragon’s thirst for “blood”. Its incorporation of women and children into its own sphere of blood-solidarity becomes the dragon’s “swallowing” of its helpless victims. Entry into the sex-strike and subsequent emergence from it becomes coded as “death” which is followed by “rescue” or “rebirth”. Identification with the sex strike’s blood – which is also the blood of game animals – becomes coded as “marriage” to an animal. Emergence from the sex strike, followed by marital love-making, then becomes coded as the “animal bride’s” slaughter or loss of power – or, sometimes, as its sudden skin-change or metamorphosis (as the “spell is broken”, the loathsome “frog” or “beast” or “monster” to whom a young woman is wed turns into a handsome prince).

It makes sense for the sex strike to be conceptualised as a “dragon” for many reasons. First of all, a dragon is an immense snake – continuous, undulating, flowing like a stream, without differentiated parts, coiling, all-swallowing, death-dealing and, finally, skin-changing and therefore apparently immortal. But it is not merely a snake. A dragon is in fact a paradoxical creature. It is a “unity of opposites” – perhaps the oldest symbol connoting “dialectical” unity of such a kind. It lives in deep waters, but also flies high in the sky. It is the lowest of creatures (a snake); it is also the highest (having wings like an eagle’s or bat’s. It is animal in form; it is also human (in that it seeks union with a human bride) It is of uncertain gender (sometimes male, sometimes female, sometimes both at once), It demands periodic tribute in the form of animals or marriageable virgins. When angry, it sends floods or devours whole communities or blasts crops with its foul breath, It is cyclical, coiling round

and round, sometimes in a spiral. It may have many heads – seven, a hundred, a thousand etc. It guards an immense treasure – in the form of gold, silver, the moon, “the waters of life”, or marriageable maidens – which it withholds from men until it is slain. But it is almost impossible to kill – it has numerous “heads” or “lives”, or it keeps resurrecting itself, or it joins together its severed parts. It is linked (particularly in eastern traditions) with weather-change, and particularly with storms and thunder. It represents particularly the “dark” forces, as opposed to those of “light”. It is the enemy of romantic love, carrying off manageable maidens to an inaccessible realm, and must be vanquished before men’s marital rights can be made secure.

In all these respects, the dragon corresponds closely to the menstrual sex strike as specified in this thesis. Flowing continuity, cyclicity, alternation between opposite phases or states, periodic emergence from a watery abode – such are obvious characteristics of the menstrual stream. The snake’s ability to change its skins (supposedly instead of dying) would correspond to menstrual “skin-changing” as an indicator of womankind’s fertility and child-bearing “immortality”. The dragon’s many heads, its immense size or its snake-like form would correspond to the numerous participants in the strike, their separate identities merging into one extended – “snake-like” – identity. Its uncertain gender would correspond to the fact that women are not being “feminine” when they assert their menstrual power, in addition, during the sex strike, heterosexual gender-polarities are transcended by the unity of all blood-kin, whether male or female. The dragon’s association with darkness would correspond to the normative dark-moon moment for menstruation to occur. The link with elemental anger in the form of storms, thunder and floods would be logical inasmuch as menstruation is itself a “flood” and may seem “angry” in its marital negativity. The demand for tribute would correspond to the basic function of the sex strike – which is to secure tribute in the form of game animals from men. The periodic tendency to carry away or “swallow” women, or to withhold them from marriage, needs no special explanation.

This thesis has focused particularly on one particularly-illuminating dragon-legend – the story of Yurlunggur, flying rainbow-snake or “dragon” central to the Wawilak Sisters myth of north east Arnhem Land, Australia. It has been

shown how this dragon is personified ritually by synchronously “menstruating” men, and how these men model their menstrual bleeding on an image of female collective menstruation.

However, this myth and several variants have in turn been linked in the thesis to the numerous myths analysed by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his *Mythologiques*. The “dragon” which spans opposite worlds – being both “low” and “high” – has been linked to the motif of the “bird-nester” in Lévi-Strauss’s key myth. The bird-nester’s adventures have been shown to echo the adventures of all those who participate in male initiation rites, as they move from the world of marriage, cooking and feasting to the secluded world of blood-solidarity, rawness, fasting and “return to the womb”. Lévi-Strauss has shown how the myths of the Americas reduce, in the final analysis, to a single pan-American myth. This thesis has taken the argument a step further, showing that the magical myths and fairy tales of all humanity are indeed so many variations on a theme – this theme being the “lunar” motif of menstrual alternation, temporary death and subsequent-rebirth. It has been shown that if we dig deep enough into them, the world’s magical myths and traditions turn out to constitute one myth, one tradition, and that this is the blood-symbolised tradition of sexual solidarity – primordial prototype of revolutionary class solidarity – in which the human species was born.

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