

## Chapter Six

# The Transition to the Modern Era c. 1910 onwards

“A people without history  
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern  
Of timeless moments.”

T.S. Eliot

The preceding chapters have given an account of the succession of various theories of Aboriginal religion down to the time of the decline of anthropology's first 'paradigm' at the end of the first decade of this century. Two years later, in 1912, Durkheim published his monumental *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, and in 1915 Freud's *Totem and Taboo* appeared. Unlike their predecessors, these two works are not only still read, but remain a source of inspiration for modern anthropologists. Geerts rightly recognizes that modern anthropology

... draws what concepts it does use from a very narrowly defined intellectual tradition. There is Durkheim, Weber, Freud or Malinowski, and in any particular work the approach of one or two of these transcendent figures is followed, with but a few marginal corrections (1966, p. 1).

R.M. Berndt has made a similar observation of the study of Aboriginal religion, saying that 'In spite of all the work which has been carried out and written up since the publication of Durkheim's classic study, his heritage has dogged anthropological studies on this topic' (1974, fasc. 1, p. 1).

The one thing common to all the pre-Durkheimian theories I have discussed is their redundancy. My principal task has been the writing of an intellectual obituary, and in doing so I hope I have not only helped revive the memory of scholars who are becoming

increasingly obscure, but that I have also shed some light upon the ancestry of our own thinking on Aboriginal religion.

In this final chapter I will briefly describe how the modern study of Aboriginal religion developed following the decline of evolutionary social theory. It is of course impossible to give a comprehensive account of the massive volume of studies which have appeared since 1910, and it should be realized that what is offered here is merely an outline that places the preceding chapters in a broader historical context. My approach is teleological, in that I am only concerned with those theories which link those chapters with present-day thinking on aboriginal religion. Psychoanalytic studies have thus been excluded as being generally peripheral to mainstream anthropology (for a review see Hiatt, 1975, pp. 7-10ff.; R.M. & C.H. Berndt, 1946). The themes to be considered here are diffusionism and 'Culture-Circle' schools, functionalism, structural-functionalism and finally, structuralism and phenomenology.

## 1. Diffusion and 'Culture-Circles'

The result of the crisis in evolutionary anthropology was not the immediate growth of a rival paradigm but the return to pre-paradigm science. If there was a 'revolution in anthropology' (to use I.C. Jarvie's words) it was a revolution 'amounting almost to a disintegration of anthropology itself' (Burrow, 1966, p. 263). Evolutionary ideas were still current after 1910, but they no longer went uncontested by anthropologists. Rather, they were opposed by the idea of cultural diffusion.

Diffusionism was of course the methodological premise of many of the old Prichardian monogenists. In the post-evolutionary period, its first notable exponent was F. Ratzel. Ratzel said:

The religious conceptions of the Australians give the impression of decadence and corruption. There is a sound about them not only as of an earlier time but as from foreign regions, confused indeed and indistinct, but with a ring of Melanesian and Polynesian tradition (1885-88, vol. 1, p. 383).

— clearly a very different approach from the 'independent invention' of the evolutionists, in which nothing 'decayed' and where the 'corruption' of the Aborigines was an original intellectual sin. One pleasant result of the diffusionist approach was that the ethnological evidence was usually arranged geographically, thus doing away with the scissors-and-paste conglomeration of the evolutionists. Nonetheless Ratzel was willing to accept the view that religion was rooted in 'man's craving for causality' (*ibid.*, p. 41), and in this respect he was not unlike his evolutionary contemporaries. Their

essential difference was over the question: 'Have we in religion isolated developments or a network with closer meshes here, looser there?' (ibid., p. 57).

Ratzel's pupil, Leo Frobenius, developed his teacher's ideas by recognizing that not only single cultural elements but entire cultural complexes had spread throughout the world. He thus formed the idea of distinct 'culture-circles' (*Kulturkreise*).

The theories of Ratzel and Frobenius were in turn taken up by B. Ankerman and F. Gräbner, the latter applying the concept of 'culture-circles' to Oceania, where he discerned six distinct cultures — the Tasmanian, Old Australian, Totemic, Moiety, Melanesian Bow and Polynesian.

This school was subsequently joined by W. Foy and, more importantly for our purposes, W. Schmidt, who made an extensive study of Aboriginal 'High Gods' in his massive work *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee* (vol. 1, 1912, pp. 334-483ff.).

It should be emphasized that the 'culture-circle' school did not oppose the notion of evolution as such, but what they saw as 'evolutionism' — a *prima facie* acceptance of an unilinear evolutionary paradigm. The truth was, indeed, that they were proposing their own evolutionary scheme (cf. Lowie, 1937, p. 190). What they maintained to be superior in their approach was the formulation of a pattern of cultural development without any *a priori* theory of unilinear progress. In Schmidt's words:

To answer these questions, we need no previously adopted theory of development, whether that of progress upward or that of degeneration downwards. We simply let the facts speak for themselves (1931, p. 235).

The pitfalls facing this approach were, however, similar to those which had faced 'evolutionism'. The essential question was still one of origins. Schmidt said of primitive religion:

These religions are our principal base for attacking the problem of the origin of religion, for they are comparatively nearest to that origin and therefore preserve still more of its peculiarities (ibid., p. 255).

In the Australian context, the central issue was once again the relative antiquity of the so-called Aboriginal 'Supreme Beings'. Schmidt passionately defended these 'High Gods', and in the process magnified them to such an extent that even Lang (who had initially inspired Schmidt in this respect) could not fully accept the extravagant claims being made. Schmidt had not only argued that

Comparing the primitive cultures with the later ones we may lay down the general principle that in none of the latter is the Supreme Being to be found in so clear, so definite, vivid or direct a form as among the peoples belonging to the former (ibid., p. 257).

He has also claimed

... the Supreme Being of primitive culture is really the god of monotheism, and ... the religion which includes him is genuinely monotheistic (ibid., p. 262).

When Lang saw such ideas being associated with his name he replied:

I do not think that I have ever ascribed to any savage tribe, or to the masses of any European people, a religion which is monotheistic (1910c, p. 518).

To Lang there was a wide gulf separating a High God and a Monotheistic God who, and who alone, claimed the attributes of deity.

The historical method also had its exponents outside Austria. It was to some extent adapted by A. van Gennep in the long introduction to his *Mythes et Legendes d'Australie* (1905). The remainder of this book consists of French translations of 106 myths recorded in the works of Smyth, Curr, Parker, Spencer and Gillen, Howitt and Roth (see Hiatt, 1975a). In England, it was advocated by W.H.D. Rivers and later by W.J. Perry and G. Elliot Smith. The extreme position of Elliot Smith and Perry sought the roots of all cultures in borrowings from ancient Egyptian civilization. The only significant influence these scholars had in Australia was in the works of A.P. Elkin, who worked for his Ph.D. under Elliot Smith. Elkin's doctoral dissertation, entitled *Ritual and Mythology in Australia: An Historical Study* (1927), made a geographical survey of Australian myths and associated ritual, social and economic factors. The ultimate objective of the survey was to discover the historical implications of these phenomena. Elkin argued that there was a North-Western and Eastern Aboriginal culture; the latter he believed to be historically connected with 21st Dynasty Egypt (1927, p. 302).

Eliade has recently criticized Elkin's *Aboriginal Men of High Degree* for adopting the 'Egyptian diffusionism' of Elliot Smith and Perry (1973, p. 27f., n. 45). Again, in *The Australian Aborigines* Elkin writes:

As far as I can see the matter, and I have discussed it with initiates, the sky-hero corresponds to the hero of religious secret societies, the mysteries of which go back to the old mystery cults of a few thousand years ago, and with which I am prepared to believe that this cult is historically connected by whatever incidents it was brought to the Australians (1938a, p. 253).

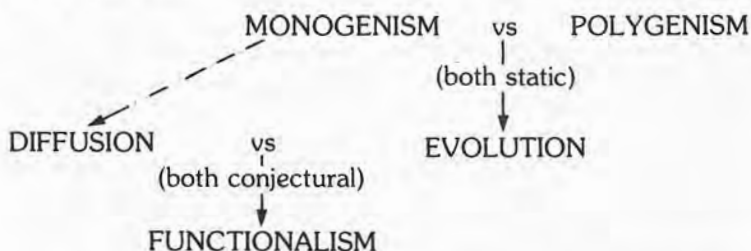
Eliade rightly questions exactly what Elkin means by 'mystery cults' (1973, p. 27, n. 45). In fact, Elkin had previously stated that 'the

privilege of being united with Osiris before death was gradually extended to others who desired it. And here we have the genesis of the Mystery Religions' (1933a, p. 6). It thus seems a fair conclusion that Elkin believed the Sky heroes of the Aborigines to be historically connected with Egyptian mythology. However it should be emphasized that Elkin did not make such claims central to his arguments (cf. R.M. & C.H. Berndt, 1965, p. 8), and they are mentioned here primarily as illustrative of diffusionism in Australia.

Diffusionary theory and the notion of 'culture-circles' never rose to the status of an anthropological paradigm. It was merely an antagonistic alternative to the now dethroned evolutionism. In order to become a paradigm, it would have to become an unquestioned theoretical premise. This never eventuated. Rather, just as evolution had settled the differences between monogenism and polygenism, so another school arose to supersede both evolution and diffusion. In 1922 Malinowski wrote:

[I]t seems to me that there is room for a new type of theory. The succession in time, and the influence of the previous stage upon the subsequent, is the main subject of evolutionary studies, such as are practised by the classical school of British Anthropology (Tylor, Frazer, Westermarck, Sydney Hartland, Crawley). The ethnological school (Ratzel, Foy, Grabner, W. Schmidt, Rivers and Elliot Smith) studies the influence of cultures by contact, infiltration and transmission ... The influence on one another of the various aspects of an institution, the study of the social and psychological mechanism on which the institution is based, are a type of theoretical studies which has been practised up till now in a tentative way only, but I venture to foretell will come into their own sooner or later (1922, p. 515f.; cf. Radcliffe-Brown, 1922, preface).

'Functionalism' (or 'structural-functionalism' in Radcliffe-Brown's case) appeared as the Hegelian synthesis of evolution and diffusion. We might diagrammatically depict the history of anthropological theory as follows:



A brief history of the functional study of Aboriginal religion and some of its permutations will follow in the remainder of this book.

## 2. Functionalism

Any discussion of the functional approach to Aboriginal religion must give priority of place to Emile Durkheim. His ideas however were not without precedent, and it is fitting to begin this discussion by mentioning some of his theoretical predecessors to whom we have referred in previous chapters. As he made clear in his *Montesquieu and Rousseau*, Durkheim acknowledged that both of these French philosophers paved the way for his sociological approach — a tradition which was continued by Saint-Simon and Comte. Reference must also be made to Robertson Smith's focus on the totemic community of worshippers whose sense of kinship was created by the shared sacramental meal. Durkheim used Smith's thesis as the core of his own theory of religion.

Durkheim was to a certain extent inspired by Herbert Spencer, although his philosophical and methodological premises were of a very different order. He completely opposed the individualistic premises of Spencer's theories. In this latter respect he was more in agreement with Wilhelm Wundt, who was one of Durkheim's personal acquaintances. Wundt's notion of the *Volksseele* (group soul) is clearly analogous to Durkheim's *conscience collective*. In his *Elements of Folk Psychology* Wundt wrote that he was concerned with

... those mental products which are created by a community of human life and are, therefore, inexplicable in terms merely of individual consciousness, since they presuppose the reciprocal action of many (1912, p. 3).

In the case of religion, furthermore, he preferred emotionalist rather than intellectualist arguments. He wrote that

... it is not intelligence nor reflection as to the origin or interconnection of phenomena that gives rise to mythological thinking, but emotions; ideas are mainly the material which the latter elaborates (*ibid.*, p. 92f.).

Wundt's anthropological works, notwithstanding the above, were still placed in an essentially evolutionary perspective, although it is interesting to note that he regarded the Aborigines as being not 'primitive' but 'totemic' (the second stage in his four-phase evolution to 'humanity'). While Aboriginal mythology was in many ways still primitive, argued Wundt, 'the Australian culture is anything but primitive; it represents, rather, a stage of development already somewhat advanced' (*ibid.*, p. 18).

There is one school of thought which at times came particularly close to Durkheim's thinking on religion. This, surprisingly, was that of the American pragmatists. I say 'surprisingly' for several reasons. First, because Durkheim's writings

proved to be singularly unpopular among American sociological audiences (cf. Hinkle, 1960). Secondly, because Durkheim in his *Pragmatism and Sociology* had been at pains to show the basic methodological differences between the two schools; and thirdly, because William James' definition of religion, focusing on 'the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude' stands antithetically to Durkheim's sociological definition (1902, p. 50). It is nonetheless true that other pragmatists were using arguments which are in places exceedingly close to Durkheim's. Since to the best of my knowledge this similarity has not been previously recognized I will discuss it in a little more detail. It is significant in adding a further dimension to Leach's suggestion that Malinowskian functionalism was epistemologically rooted in pragmatism (1957).

In his book *The Development of Religion* (1910) Irving King argued that primitive mentality is based upon 'appreciative' attitudes, that is, upon a sense of value. This difference in cognition is not the product of an inferior intellect (a concept that Dewey had previously refuted with specific regard to Aboriginal mentality in his *Interpretations of Savage Mind* (1902)), but is rather a consequence of primitive man's adjustment to his physical and social environment. Inversely, it is that which is social which is most valued. This however, is not directly perceived, and thus social factors which are valued are acknowledged as a vague power:

... the hypothesis is here offered [King said], that the Australian theory of control over the totem plant or animal through *Intichiuma* ceremonies is but an aspect of a vague, perhaps only half-conscious (because unformulated) theory that a potency of some sort is present in nature, analogous to *wakonda*, *manitou* or *mana* (1910, p. 150f.).

This force is in reality the undefined perception of social life. King argues that

... primitive man easily tends to interpret his feelings of value in terms of a mysterious, vaguely conceived 'force', but the values themselves are largely of social origin, and the social factor is continuously present, enhancing them and rendering them stable and permanent (ibid., p. 249).

Religion was thus to King the perception of a mysterious force which was of social origin. Another pragmatist, E.S. Ames, published a similar 'functional' (the term was used by Ames) (1910, p. 71) account of the genesis of religion in which he argued that any ceremony emotionally involving a specific social group is 'religious', and that religion is defined by this social quality (ibid., pp. 72 & 168). His views on the function of religion are clearly expressed in the following passage:

The expression of the social consciousness in the spirits of the group is due to the feeling of society for its tasks and ideals. When several persons work at a common task, they develop more or less a rhythm and harmonious adjustment to each other ... But this spirit of the company ... is usually objectified in some emblem, flag, crest or hero. Everyone knows how much greater is the sense of fellowship and reality when the symbol is set up or carried in procession. Psychologically, this is the same experience which in an unconscious and literal way registered the clan feeling in the totem, the ancestral hero, or the chosen divinity. The spirit of comradeship, of communal endeavour, fear, hope, reverence, and trust expresses itself through many forms and many degrees of objectification (ibid., p. 114).

These passages indicate that the American pragmatists had in fact anticipated many of the central arguments of Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Other examples could have been added, such as King's dictum that 'magic is relatively individualistic and secret in its methods and interest, and is thus opposed fundamentally to the methods and interests of religion, which are social and public' (1910, p. 195). These similarities should not, however, detract from the importance of Durkheim's brilliant study. The pragmatists had neither his clarity of argument nor the detail of his empirical evidence. Although van Gennep said that 'the impartial ethnographer is obliged to put question-marks beside every line' of Durkheim's book (1913, p. 206), it is nonetheless true that Durkheim had made an in-depth analysis of the religious conceptions of an Aboriginal community that has never been surpassed in its scope of vision. Elkin has remarked that the most striking feature of Durkheim's study was the way in which, by using the available ethnographic data (mainly Spencer and Gillen's *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*) he was able to "participate" in, and certainly to analyse correctly, the function of the ritual life and mythology of the Australian Aborigines' (1951, p. 132).

Durkheim had in fact begun his researches into Australian totemism back in the heyday of evolutionary anthropology, and in the pages of *Folk-Lore* and *L'Année Sociologique* he had regularly crossed swords with his English colleagues. Nor was he untouched by evolutionary theories. He had said, 'The study which we are undertaking is therefore a way of taking up again, *but under new conditions*, the old problem of the origin of religion'. These 'new conditions' were vitally important. He continued:

To be sure, if by origin we are to understand the very first beginning, the question has nothing scientific about it, and should be resolutely discarded ... What we want to do is to find a means of discerning the ever-present causes upon which the most essential forms of religious thought and practice depend (1912, p. 20).



An evolutionary framework was not necessary to such an approach. What was fundamental was the relationship of religion to other social phenomena.

Durkheim's famous arguments need only the briefest retelling here. He refers to society's mode of 'thinking' of itself as '*la Conscience Collective*' which is qualitatively different from individual thought, and which thus cannot be explained in terms of the latter. Being social it can only be understood in relation to other social facts.

It is, says Durkheim, a system of beliefs and practices pertaining to sacred things which unifies its adherents into a single moral community (*ibid.*, p. 62). This sense of the sacred is, however, the sense of society itself. The totemic symbol

is the outward and visible form of what we have called the totemic principle of god. But it is also the symbol of the determined society called the clan. It is its flag; it is the sign by which each clan distinguishes itself from the others, the visible mark of its personality, a mark borne by everything which is a part of the clan under any title whatsoever, men, beasts or things. So if it is at once the symbol of the god and of the society, is it not because the god and the society are only one? ... The god of the clan, the totemic principle, can therefore be nothing else than the clan itself, personified and represented to the imagination under the visible form of the animal or vegetable which serves as totem (*ibid.*, p. 236).

The sacred is the awareness of the otherworldliness into which one is transported on occasions of social effervescence. The totemic species acts as a 'flag', a concrete concept, which strengthens complex and vague feelings of 'society' by intensifying their sense of solidarity through symbolically imposed totemic rites.

Space does not permit further detailed discussion of the works of other French sociologists and ethnographers. We may however mention that Hubert and Mauss (1904), van Gennep (1909) and Levy-Bruhl (e.g. 1910) all made extensive use of Aboriginal material in their analysis of magic, ritual, 'mystical' thought and other religious phenomena.

We must now move on to examine the legacy of Durkheim's approach in more recent Aboriginal anthropology. In his reaction against the intellectualistic interpretation of religion, Durkheim had maintained that 'it is an essential postulate of sociology that a human institution cannot rest upon an error and a lie, without which it could not exist (1912, p. 14). By this he meant that religion as a social phenomenon, must have and continuously perform social functions. This dictum, in its various permutations, became the basic premise of functional anthropology. The two names now intimately associated with functionalism are of course, Malinowski and

Radcliffe-Brown. Neither of them was a blind follower of Durkheim and they certainly differed from each other. To state the differences briefly: Malinowski studied the biological function of culture (that is, how culture satisfied basic biological human needs), while Radcliffe-Brown studied the social functions of the constituent units of the social structure (cf. Radcliffe-Brown, 1946). That difference led Radcliffe-Brown to abandon the label 'functionalist' in favour of 'structural-functionalist'. '[T]he Functional school [he said], does not really exist; it is a myth invented by Professor Malinowski' (1940, p. 188). Most of the studies of Aboriginal religion in the last half-century have drawn on the ideas of one or the other of these scholars.

Radcliffe-Brown is important in this context, not only as one of anthropology's most influential figures, but also for having played a crucial role in the history of Australian ethnography. In 1910 he replaced Baldwin Spencer as the leader of an expedition to Western Australia, and thus became the first professionally-trained anthropologist to undertake field-work in Australia. Some of the results of these investigations can be found in his *Three Tribes of Western Australia* (1913).

When the Australian Association for the Advancement of Science met with their British colleagues in 1914 plans were made to finance fieldwork and the teaching of anthropology in Australia. The conference was attended by many people of influence — Baldwin Spencer, Marett, Haddon, Rivers, Elliot Smith, Balfour, Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. World War I interrupted their plans, however, and it was not until the Second Pan-Pacific Congress of 1923 that these ambitions began to be fulfilled. The conference resolved:

In view of the great and peculiar interest of the Australian aboriginals, as representing one of the lowest types of culture available for study, of the rigid and inevitable diminution of their numbers, and the loss of their primitive beliefs and customs under the influence of higher culture, the Pan-Pacific Science Congress urges that steps should be taken, without delay, to organise the study of those tribes that are, as yet, comparatively uninfluenced by contact with civilization (*Proceedings of the Second Pan-Pacific Congress, 1923, vol. 1, p. 36*).

It was thus that in 1926 Radcliffe-Brown became Australia's first professor of anthropology. He also chaired the Research Committee on Anthropology of the Australian National Research Council. His recommendation in this capacity put approximately one dozen researchers into the field. To publish their findings he founded the journal *Oceania* in 1929.

In the light of these facts it is somewhat surprising that Malinowski's influence should have been so strong in Australia. Part of the reason for this was that some Australian ethnographers (Hart,

Piddington, Elkin, Kaberry and Stanner) had studied under Malinowski at the London School of Economics. Furthermore, Elkin, who succeeded Radcliffe-Brown and who had a personal dislike for his predecessor (see Elkin, 1956), was an eclectic thinker who maintained a broad definition of 'function' (1938, p. 167). Finally, some ethnographers found Radcliffe-Brown's arguments to be either vague or at least too subtle to be of use in the field. Ralph Piddington, who studied the Karadjeri in 1930-1931, said 'my conception of theory is operational. I regard it essentially as a charter for research' (1950 & 1957, vol. 2, p. v f.). He believed the concepts of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown to be ill-defined, and he disliked their failure to consider individual needs (ibid., p. 360). Phyllis Kaberry, who also worked in the Kimberleys in 1934-36, felt that Malinowski's theories were of more use to fieldworkers, despite Radcliffe-Brown's lucidity (1957, p. 75f.). As we shall see, Ronald and Catherine Berndt, who have worked throughout Australia since 1939, have also acknowledged their indebtedness to Malinowski.

Malinowski had written works on *The Economic aspects of the Intichiuma Ceremonies* (1912) and *The Family Among the Australian Aborigines* (1913) before he made his name as a fieldworker. He had planned a sequel to the latter work, which was to be Durkheimian in scope, examining the relationships between ritual, ceremony, metaphysical beliefs and social organization (1913, p. 303 n.1). Unfortunately, this was never written, and it was left to his successors to apply his methods to the study of Aboriginal religion.

Piddington has said that the function of religion is

... to provide psychological safeguards against failure, methods of controlling the incalculable, expressions of collective optimism, explanations of failure and disaster, and ways of securing and enforcing socially oriented co-operation (1950 & 1957, p. 366).

Such a broad Malinowskian definition underlies his study of Aboriginal religion. A more explicit exposition is to be found in Kaberry's *Aboriginal Woman: Sacred and Profane* (1939).

Kaberry stated that her book (dedicated to Malinowski) offered no new theory of culture, and that 'for the moment I am substantially in agreement with that formulated by Professor Malinowski and others of his school' (1939, p. xiii). She accepts the latter's view that religion is related to man's (and woman's — one of the chief arguments of her book was that Aboriginal women's religious life served the same functions as that of the men) fundamental biological needs. People are 'cursed' with foresight which, while having obvious adaptive advantages, brings anxiety with the awareness of our inability fully to control our destiny. Religion is born 'out of the real tragedies of human life, out of the

conflict between human plans and realities' (quoted in *ibid.*, p. 158 from Malinowski, 1930, p. 641). Kaberry thus saw Aboriginal religion as being less than entirely adaptive. It was sought where science and realism had failed.

Man dons the armour of religion [she said] because it offers him a protection against fate and misfortune, however much it may hamper his movements, limit his activities, and obscure his vision (*loc. cit.*).

All Aboriginal religion is depicted by Kaberry as a response to uncertainty. Totemism projects dependence on the natural environment into a mythical past (*ibid.*, p. 192). Rituals emerge from the struggle to provide food, the need to confront an uncertain environment, to ensure the individual can face adult responsibilities, and essentially, to inspire people with confidence and security (*ibid.*, p. 269). Her stance is summarized as follows:

Unless we relate these myths, dogmas, and rituals to the needs of the Aborigines, to their relationships with one another and their environment, we have missed their significance ... If we have grasped the underlying factors of daily life, the interests that constitute it, we are in a better position to realise how religion is a means of consolidating advantages already held, of reinforcing strength where control is less sure, of resolving conflicting claims. I have indicated the sanctions it provides for customs, laws, and these rites which either bear directly on the welfare of the community as a whole, or on the life-crises of the individual (*loc. cit.*).

It is in the study of Aboriginal mythology that Malinowski's legacy has been most strongly felt. His basic premise is expressed in the following passage:

Myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is ... a pragmatic charter of both primitive faith and moral wisdom (1926, p. 101).

This 'charter hypothesis' was adopted by Kaberry. To give but one example, in the *Lunga* myth of the origin of death moon tries to seduce snake, his mother-in-law, and he is consequently emasculated and turned into stone. Although this myth is told in a jocular fashion, Kaberry nonetheless insists that it is meant to warn the young of the repercussions of indulging in tabooed relationships (1939, p. 200).

In an appendix to his book *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*, entitled 'The Rationalisation of Yuari', Piddington gives a further example of myth as charter. His chief informant had married a girl from the same marriage section as himself (classificatory son's daughter), and, faced with an ethical conflict, he proceeded to produce a series of rationalizations for his misconduct.

Yuari argued that the tabooed relationship had no *bugari* (dreaming) sanctions. Indeed he interpreted instances of mythological moiety endogamy as precedents for his behaviour. This, says Piddington, reveals not only 'the importance of myth as a charter for traditional behaviour' but also how variant behaviour can only be accepted if it can find mythological sanction (1950 & 1957, p. 786).

The primary exponents of the charter theory in an Australian context have been R.M. and C.H. Berndt. The Berndts have maintained the primacy of myth over ritual and thus argue that myths are 'the essence of a religion' (R.M. & C.H. Berndt, 1964, p. 265). They have said, furthermore, that

... myths in aboriginal Australia and New Guinea ... are myths in the classic anthropological sense — what Malinowski called 'charters', guides to actions (C.H. & R.M. Berndt, 1971, p. 83).

They are not, however, closed to other explanations. R.M. Berndt has suggested that historical and psychoanalytical interpretations could help in the understanding of the *Djanggawul* cult (1952, p. 307) and, more recently, they have shown themselves to have sympathies with Lévi-Strauss and the structuralist movement (see R.M. Berndt, 1970 & C.H. Berndt, 1970). The charter theory is, nonetheless, central to their arguments.

The Berndts maintain that morality and religion are inseparable in Aboriginal world-views (R.M. Berndt, 1970a, p. 219). The concept of Dreaming encompasses both mundane and supernatural worlds in one moral universe. The one reflects the other. They argue that Aboriginal myths are accurate images of Aboriginal social life. They do *not* make statements about the ontological nature of their universe (see Stanner's views below). Myths 'make statements' about (mundane) reality rather than (ultimate) Reality. They do *not* concern themselves with the origin of misfortune, but rather they provide a blueprint to show that both good and bad are unavoidable realities with unavoidable consequences. The mythic beings are bound by precisely the laws that bind living Aborigines: 'It is as if Desert life were encapsulated in the myth. What it contains is a guide for action' (*ibid.*, p. 243). Again:

Mythology inspires and contemporary ritual sustains a way of life sanctified by the Dreaming, where good and bad are accepted conditions of living. There is no 'fall from grace', no mythic beings possessed of an innate goodness to be emulated by Aboriginal man, beings ready to punish the transgressor and reward the person who adheres to ideal norms. Mythic beings were both good and bad, and badness was a necessary corollary of goodness (*ibid.*, p. 223).

The charter views I have discussed have been criticized by Hiatt, who says they fail adequately to account for both bad behaviour that is not punished and the punishment of the innocent (1975, p. 6f.). The myth related by Kaberry (above) ends with the

introduction of death into the world, and thus moral and immoral alike are punished. Piddington's account of the rationalisations of Yuari are also ambiguous, in that the same myths can be used both to sanction and to condemn the same behaviour.

R.M. Berndt has since defended his views, maintaining that they had merely said that both good and bad are part of the *status quo*, and that the inevitable results will follow the respective behaviour (1979, p. 25).

What they are saying is that there are things which can and do happen in the ordinary process of social living. They may be good or they may be bad, and they happen to mythic beings; it is therefore likely they will happen to human beings. They are part of an inevitable and irreversible frame of existence — when bad actions affect, harmfully, other persons, some form of punishment is bound to result. The good is conceived as co-existing with the bad (*ibid.*, p. 26).

Whether such a reply will satisfy critics remains to be seen.

### 3. Social Structure and Social Logistics

Radcliffe-Brown is virtually the only person with first-hand knowledge of Aboriginal society who has been highly influential in the theoretical analysis of Aboriginal religion (the only other candidate being Stanner). I would suggest, however, that the significance of this fact could be easily exaggerated. I would contend that his theoretical insight was not the result of a profound acquaintance with Aboriginal life. First, his fieldwork was done through English-speaking informants in areas where a significant amount of traditional life had already been abandoned (see Radcliffe-Brown, 1913, pp. 160 & 165f.). Secondly, it has been said (I believe correctly) that he 'was not at heart a field worker, at least not to the degree of living amongst a "primitive" people, observing them daily and hourly, and to some degree participating in their life' (Elkin, 1956, p. 246). Thirdly, it seems that at least some of his reports were in fact not based upon his own observations but were rather borrowed without acknowledgement from his students and 'unprofessional' colleagues (see Needham 1974, 1975, 1975a, Scheffler 1975, Egan 1975, Moyer 1975 & White 1981). Finally, even his knowledge of secondary sources was limited, and the almost unbelievable suggestion has been made that he was unfamiliar with the concept of the 'Dreaming' (Elkin, 1956, p. 248f.). These points are not made with the intention of belittling Radcliffe-Brown's contributions. What I do wish to stress, however, is that his innovations did not arise from extensive empirical knowledge of the Aborigines. Unlike Malinowski he was at least partially entrenched in the tradition of 'armchair anthropology', and it was from the

armchair that I believe his theoretical inspirations arose. To these theories I now turn.

Although Radcliffe-Brown had studied under Rivers and Haddon he soon came to reject the methods of 'conjectural history'. He argued, for instance, that speculations on the origin of totemism had no place in a 'science of culture' (1929, p. 122). As early as 1913 Durkheim had written saying that Radcliffe-Brown's *Three Tribes of Western Australia* revealed that they were in agreement concerning the general principles of the science (in Peristiany, 1960, p. 318). Radcliffe-Brown nonetheless rejected Durkheim's analysis of Aboriginal totems as a clan's 'flag', on two accounts. First, he believed that clan solidarity was only part of the social function their religion served. He maintained that it also operated at a wider level, and that

While each group is specifically connected with certain parts of the natural order ... and with certain of the Beings of the World-Dawn, the society as a whole is related through the totemic religion to the whole order of nature and the World-Dawn as a whole (1945, p. 168).

Secondly, Radcliffe-Brown rejected Durkheim's view that totemic species were arbitrarily chosen as 'flags'. There was, he argued, an intrinsic relationship between certain species and social groups. In 1914 he wrote that he favoured a broad definition of totemism because he believed that

... it will only be by a careful examination and comparison of all the different forms of this special relation between society and the animal and plants that it uses for food, that we shall reach an adequate explanation of the phenomena in question (1914b, p. 629).

From his study of Andaman Islander religion he was aware of the existence of ritually acknowledged species that had no specific relationship with any one segment of society. Since Durkheim's hypothesis did not account for this occurrence, Radcliffe-Brown felt impelled to begin by searching for a basic principle to explain why societies have ritual attitudes towards natural phenomena. Totemism would, in turn, be explained as a specific form of this general principle. In this context Radcliffe-Brown anticipated Lévi-Strauss in stating: 'It may well be asked if "totemism" as a technical term has not outlived its usefulness' (1929, p. 117).

In *The Andaman Islanders* Radcliffe-Brown accepts Durkheim's dictum that society is the ultimate source of the sense of the sacred, but he goes on to argue that

The moral force of the society is experienced by the individual not only directly but also as acting upon him indirectly through every object that has social value (1922, p. 326).

For example, food is a principle source of euphoria and disphoria. An abundance of food leads to communal contentment and therefore an increase in social force. In this way food can indirectly affect the individual's experience of society, and natural phenomena are consequently intrinsically related to the moral force of society. It is because nature is important to social life that species are believed to be sacred and to contain power.

This argument underlies the paper 'The Sociological Theory of Totemism' (1929) in which Radcliffe-Brown once more states that where a society is primarily dependent upon hunting and gathering, be they totemic or not, the animals and plants upon which social life ultimately depends become the objects of ritual attitudes (1929, p. 126). What is the particular set of circumstances producing the totemic complex? Radcliffe-Brown describes it as follows:

Now totemism, I would suggest, arises from or is a special development of this general ritual relation between man and natural species. Let us assume for the moment that such a general ritual relation of man to nature is universal in hunting societies, as I believe it can be shown to be. When the society becomes differentiated into segmentary groups such as clans, a process of ritual specialization takes place by which each segment acquires a special and particular relation to some one or more of the *sacra* of the community, i.e. to some one or more natural species. The totem of the clan or group is still sacred in some sense to the whole community, but is now specially sacred, and in some special way, to the segment of which it is the totem (*ibid.*, p. 126f.).<sup>30</sup>

Lévi-Strauss has caricatured this as saying that totems are revered because they are 'good to eat'. It is, so to speak, the Alimentary Form of the Religious Life. This however, is only the first layer of the argument.

It is well known that in 1951 Radcliffe-Brown wrote another major paper on totemism, entitled 'The Comparative Method in Social Anthropology'. Lévi-Strauss has argued that this article is fundamentally opposed to its predecessor (1962, p. 162). While I agree that the second paper has many implications for structuralist anthropology, I would also maintain that these implications were already evident in a less developed form in Radcliffe-Brown's earlier statements on the function of religion. In brief, I would argue that he never simply maintained that species were sacred because they were 'good to eat', and that even in *The Andaman Islanders* (completed in 1913, published in 1922) he was already arguing 'that natural species are chosen not because they are "good to eat" but because they are "good to think"' (*loc. cit.*).

In *The Andaman Islanders* Radcliffe-Brown had developed the hypothesis that because most natural phenomena had vital social manifestations, primitive man had come to accept a world-



view in which the entire universe was socialized. In his 1929 paper on totemism he repeated this view: 'For primitive man the universe as a whole is a moral or social order governed not by what we call natural law but rather by what we must call moral or ritual law' (1929, p. 130). The origin of this perspective was not abstract speculation:

This view of the world [he said] is the immediate and inevitable result of the experience of man in society. It is a philosophy not reached by painful intellectual effort, by the searching out of meanings and reasons and causes; it is impressed upon him in all the happenings of his life, is assumed in all his actions; it needs only to be formulated (1922, p. 385).

That Radcliffe-Brown believed that this 'good to think' aspect was more basic than 'good to eat' elements is supported by the fact that he was not oblivious to the instances where the Andaman Islanders revered natural objects and species of little material value to their society. Their interest

... in the case of many of the animals has little or no relation to practical life, for he does not make use of them for food or in any other way. There is here therefore something that contradicts the fundamental assumption of the philosophy that is expressed in the legends, there is a lack of mental unity (ibid., p. 390).

Primitive man resolves this contradiction by legends which give meaning to what is socially meaningless.

The fundamental interest of the Andaman Islander, as of all men in primitive societies, is his interest in persons and personal relations. By regarding the animals as persons and relating stories about them he is able to correlate his interest in them with the fundamental basis of his mental life (loc. cit.).

Here Radcliffe-Brown is arguing that certain species have ritual significance, not because they have social value *per se*, but because primitive man has transformed that which is socially insignificant into an object of social and therefore ritual value by socializing it. Thus Radcliffe-Brown was saying that although peoples like the Aborigines initially felt the social importance of nature through certain species that were 'good to eat', this in turn led to a world-view in which all nature was a social and moral order. Even species that had no social value were incorporated into such a scheme. Of these species, primitive man seems to have been saying 'it's good to think they're good to eat' — that is, that they are somehow related and therefore significant to social life.

This brings me to his last paper on totemism itself. It is based on an analysis of the myth of Eagle-hawk and Crow. John Mathew had previously explained this myth as a confused record of past history. Obviously Radcliffe-Brown had little time for such conjecture. His knowledge of similar myths throughout Australia led

him to ask why social groups were represented, not only by natural species, but by *particular* natural species such as eaglehawk and crow, white cockatoo and black cockatoo, bat and tree-creeper, kingfisher and bee-eater, and the like.

Radcliffe-Brown's main example comes from Western Australia. Eaglehawk was Crow's mother's brother, and was thus a potential father-in-law. Because of this relationship, Eaglehawk had the right to make demands of Crow. He asked Crow to catch him a wallaby. Crow had a successful hunt, but ate the animal and returned empty-handed. Eaglehawk did not believe Crow's claim that he had failed to catch anything. He enquired about Crow's protruding belly, but the nephew replied that he had merely eaten acacia gum to ward off his pangs of hunger. Eaglehawk was not convinced, and tickled Crow until he vomited up the wallaby. He then punished Crow by rolling him in a fire until his eyes were reddened and his feathers went black. Crow emitted his now characteristic cry. Eaglehawk pronounced that Crow was never again to hunt, but would always be reduced to stealing game caught by others.

Radcliffe-Brown relates this myth to the ethnographic realities of Aboriginal life. Eaglehawks 'join in' the hunt with Aborigines, while the crows only arrive after the hunt. The two species are perceived to be alike in that they are both carnivorous, but the eaglehawk is the hunter, the crow a carrion-eater. Radcliffe-Brown sees the two species standing in a relationship of opposition, which is homologous to the social creation of opposites; of simultaneous separation and attachment experienced, for example, by a man towards his wife's moiety (1951, p. 110). This of course, has implications for Lévi-Strauss' theories of totemism, to which we shall presently turn. What I wish to stress, however, is that what underlies this duality in this instance is the social duality of opposition, not an innate duality in human thought. For Radcliffe-Brown all structures were empirical realities. What he was ultimately saying in his final paper on totemism was nothing more than his initial thesis that primitive man perceives the universe socially:

The resemblance and difference of animal species [he wrote] are translated into terms of friendship and conflict, solidarity and opposition. *In other words the world of animal life is represented in terms of social relations similar to those of human society* (ibid., p. 116, italics added).

Thus the understanding the Aborigines have of the relationship between Eaglehawk and Crow is based on their understanding of social relationships in general. This is a specific instance of the interpretation of the natural world as a social and moral universe. The following passage, written in 1929, well summarizes the constant foundation of all Radcliffe-Brown's studies of totemism:

Although there is always a danger in short formulas I think it does not misinterpret Australian totemism to describe it as a mechanism by which a system of social solidarities is established between man and nature ... [T]otemism is part of a larger whole, and that one important way in which we can characterise this whole is that it provides a representation of the universe as a moral or social order. Durkheim, if he did not actually formulate this view, at any rate came near to it. But his conception seems to have been that the process by which this takes place is by a projection of society into external nature. On the contrary, I hold that the process is one by which, in the fashioning of culture, external nature, so called, comes to be incorporated in the social order as an essential part of it (1929, p. 131).

Radcliffe-Brown's influence is evident in the works of several of the students who did fieldwork under his guidance. Stanner, whose approach will be examined later, has acknowledged his indebtedness to Radcliffe-Brown (1968). E.A. Worms has correctly commented that McConnel's analyses of the Wik-Mungkan ritual 'reveal the authoress as a faithful disciple of Radcliffe-Brown' (1958, p. 691). William Lloyd Warner was likewise influenced by Radcliffe-Brown, and in the remainder of this section I shall summarize his analysis of 'Murngin' (I retain Warner's incorrect term) religious life.

Warner began his anthropological career under Lowie and Kroeber. Although he did not refute their methodology or abandon his interest in cultural borrowings (see e.g. 1932), he nevertheless concentrated primarily on internal relationships in his own study of Aboriginal religion. Warner came to know of functionalism through Malinowski in 1926, and in the same year he began his fieldwork with the Murngin. The result was *A Black Civilization*, which was the first full-length monograph about an Aboriginal community written by a trained anthropologist. The book is dedicated to Radcliffe-Brown, whose influence is evident (1937, p. xii). Warner was an original thinker, and it is disappointing that he never applied his mature theories to the Aboriginal data (see 1959). Even in *A Black Civilization*, however, he had moved beyond the theories of his predecessors. His use of Murngin data to refute Durkheim's theory of magic reveals that he was not blindly adopting functionalist theory.<sup>31</sup>

To see precisely how Warner theorized about Murngin totemism it will be necessary to follow his analysis of the well-known *Wawalag* myth and the associated rituals — *Djunggawon*, *Kunapipi*, *Ngurlmag* and *Marndiella*.

Briefly, the myth relates how the *Wawalag* sisters journeyed towards the sea, naming objects and species as they went. One sister had a child, the other was pregnant, and both had entered into incestuous relationships with men of their own moiety. The younger sister then gave birth. Journeying onward they came to

Yurlunggur's (Rainbow Serpent) water hole into which the older sister allowed menstrual blood to flow. Yurlunggur was enraged and emerged to swallow the sisters, causing a flood with his rising. The waters receded when he returned. Warner's analysis of the four rituals revealed to him that their primary concern was with the symbolic swallowing of the women by the serpent. The rituals thus refer to and express mythical themes (1937, p. 367).

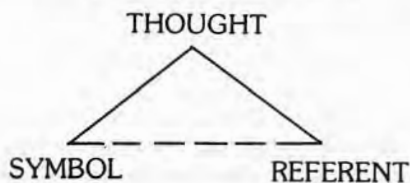
Warner then relates these religious phenomena to social organization on the one hand, and to natural phenomena on the other. In the latter context the python is associated with rain and seasonal floods. The Murngin are quite conscious of this and rain is believed to be either Yurlunggur or his saliva. The Wawalag sisters thus introduced the cycles of nature: growth and decay.

The myth's social content is revealed in the rites where women and uninitiated boys play the roles of the sisters, while the men act the part of the python. The snake is thus a symbol of men, the Wawalag sisters of women. According to Warner:

The men's age grade is a snake, a 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 (ibid., p. 377).

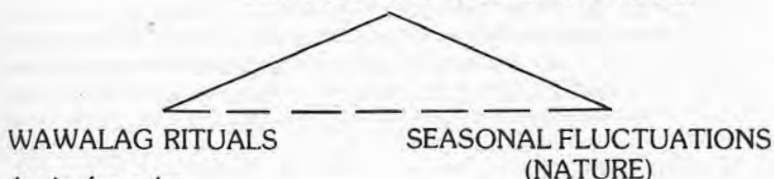
Warner was thus seeking homologies between natural, social and supernatural orders. The snake was the symbol of both the wet season and the men, while the Wawalag sisters symbolized the dry and the women. The myth, said Warner, was suggesting that the behaviour of the Wawalag sisters caused the coming of both alternating seasons and human uncleanliness. The ritual removal of this pollution would therefore assure the successful following of the seasons.

Warner organizes these various dimensions of myth and ritual, using an analogy from the symbolic studies of Ogden and Richards (1927) (also applied by Malinowski). Their thesis was that in the process of thinking there is a direct relationship between our thinking and what is thought of (referent), just as there is between our thought and a symbol. It is a fallacious supposition, however, to assume that words *have* meaning, that is, that there is an intrinsic relationship between a symbol and a referent.



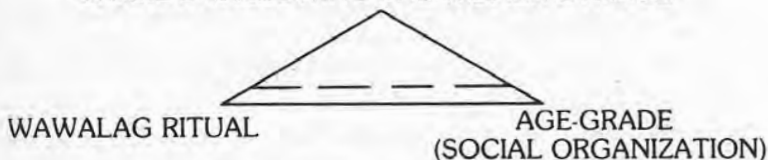
Warner likewise perceives a direct relationship between the snake swallowing women and seasonal fluctuations, and this symbol and the ritual. The fallacy occurs when the Murngin believe there is an intrinsic connection between ritual and the seasons.

### SNAKE-SWALLOWING-THE-WOMEN (SYMBOL)

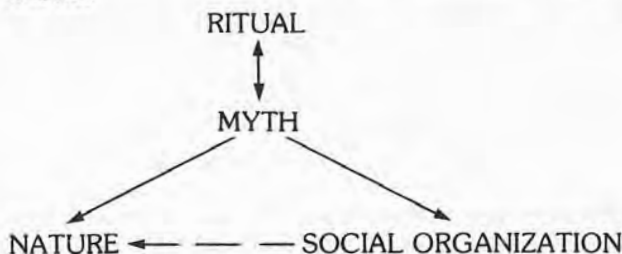


Again, from the social perspective, there exists a connection between symbol and the age grade, and likewise between symbol and ritual, but it is in some (not all) cases fallacious to believe there is a direct relationship between ritual and social organization.

### SNAKE-SWALLOWING-THE-WOMEN SYMBOL



The natural and social aspects can be diagrammatically amalgamated as follows:



According to Warner the system is logical (conceding the Murngin choice of symbols), provided that no attempt is made to connect the two referents — nature and society. In Warner's own words:

Murngin logic ... is verifiable and grounded in reality, provided one grants them their choice of symbols and realises that thus far there is no attempt to connect the two referents (*ibid.*, p. 400).

The fallacy arises when the Murngin assume that social behaviour affects nature. Murngin totemism is thus described as an empirically

illogical but socially logical symbolic system which relates simultaneously to the technological (man-nature) and social (man-man) orders. Warner summarizes his stance as follows:

In reality two aspects of society are being ritualized; the social relations of man to nature and man to man. It is man's adjustment to nature and his relations to it which are important to totemism rather than nature as an objective reality. The totemic design symbolises the ideas of the whole group in its ultra-relations, and the concept of the group and its relation to nature. The purpose of the ceremonies is to control man's relations with the changes of nature; and the effect is to subordinate for a time at least, smaller groups to larger integrations, to prevent open conflict, and to express the relations of the various internal groups ... to each other (*ibid.*, p. 399f.).

Totemism expresses in supernatural symbolism man's technological and moral world, and seeks ritually to realize that which the other two realms fail to achieve.

Thus [says Warner] that which is beyond man's technology or beyond his real powers of control becomes capable of manipulation because its symbols can be controlled and manipulated by the extraordinary powers of man's rituals (*ibid.*, p. 386).

The rituals are believed to keep nature and culture from 'being sick' where technology and the normal social moral controls are less than totally effective. They 'keep both men and nature well and strong and allow them to reproduce and the fertility of both to continue' (*ibid.*, p. 393).

In conclusion, Warner's approach to Murngin religious life reveals a move away from simple Durkheimian functionalism. Although he accepted that their totemic institutions did maintain social solidarity (*ibid.*, p. 381), his chief concern was with the symbolic significance of homologies between supernatural, moral and technological spheres.

In the process of his investigations Warner found it was necessary to analyse myths and rites in detail in order to relate them to specific aspects of nature and society. As we have seen this was a procedure also adopted by Radcliffe-Brown in his attempt to explain why specific species were of ritual importance to Aborigines. In this respect both Radcliffe-Brown and Warner paved the way for 'structuralist' studies of Aboriginal religion.

Lévi-Strauss said of 'The Comparative Method in Social Anthropology' that 'it is indeed a structural analysis which Radcliffe-Brown undertakes, consolidating institutions with representations on the one hand, and interpreting in conjunction all the variants of the same myth on the other' (1962, p. 158). Although Radcliffe-Brown would have objected to the implications of this statement, there is nonetheless some foundation to it. In postulating that the

Aborigines conceive of the universe as a moral social order he was placing world-views at the heart of his thesis. As he became increasingly concerned with the details of these world-views — as he moved from ‘why natural species?’ to ‘why particular species?’ — and as he related these to the social relations of Aboriginal life, he was moving increasingly closer to the activities of modern structuralists. He always retained his roots in Durkheimian functionalism, however, and in the last analysis it would be a misrepresentation to call Radcliffe-Brown a ‘structuralist’. He never shifted from his conviction that the structure he was dealing with was an empirical reality. He wrote to Lévi-Strauss:

I use the term ‘social structure’ in a sense so different from yours as to make discussion so difficult as to be unlikely to be profitable. While for you, social structure has nothing to do with reality but with models that are built up, I regard the social structure as a reality (quoted in Kuper, 1973, p. 70).

It is appropriate now to examine Lévi-Strauss’ theories.

## 4. STRUCTURALISM AND PHENOMENOLOGY

In this final section I shall comment briefly on the works of Lévi-Strauss, Stanner, Elkin and Eliade. Despite insurmountable mutual differences, they share one common premise, namely, that Aboriginal religion can be interpreted in terms of its meaning without reducing it to a social epiphenomenon. Lévi-Strauss believes his methodology is useful in that it does not impose meaning but rather allows the myth itself to ‘reveal its nature and to show the type to which it belongs’ (1964, p. 4). Stanner implicitly opposed the methodology of Radcliffe-Brown’s structural-functionalism when he said

I thought I should take Aboriginal religion as significant in its own right and make it the primary subject of study, rather than study it, as was done so often in the past, mainly to discover the extent to which it expressed or reflected facts and preoccupations of the social order (1963, p. vi).

While Elkin accepted Durkheim’s analysis of the function of religion he did not believe that religion had a social origin, that it was ‘just social froth and bubble’ (1932, p. 67). As the Berndts have suggested, Elkin’s understanding of Aboriginal religion was philosophical and even theological (R.M. & C.H. Berndt, 1979, p. 87). Eliade has been even more emphatic in his attack on those who would understand mythology reductionistically:

The neuropath [he wrote] loses the sense of reality that is of the order of the mind (let us say art or religion), and it seems to him to be a pure construction, a mask. The neuropath de-mystifies life, culture, the spiritual life (1973a, p. 144).

Each of these authors believes that Aboriginal religion can best be understood in terms of its 'meaning', and that it can be understood 'internally'. A more detailed examination of their respective approaches reveals, however, that this common assumption can lead to not only an assortment of theories, but to theories that are often mutually contradictory.

Lévi-Strauss' main contribution to the study of religion is in the field of mythology, and here I must confine my comments to his analysis of myth. He adapted the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's hypothesis that language had both synchronic and diachronic aspects. Saussure argued that the diachronic study of language only revealed its historical development and not the relationships of linguistic units at any given moment which must be studied synchronically. The rules of organization of a language he calls *langue*, while individual utterances are called *parole*, and while the latter may seem to lack structure, the former clearly reveals a pattern. Saussure also claims that, since the association of signified and signifier is arbitrary, it is relationships between signs rather than signs themselves that should be studied. This results not only in syntagmatic relations (horizontal) but also in associative (vertical) relations. Each word is related not only to those connected with it in a sentence, but with all the words that *could* have occurred.

In adapting Saussure's ideas Lévi-Strauss is, of course, not saying that myth is a language since myth is clearly dependent upon language. The basic structural units are consequently larger: what he calls mythemes or gross constituent units. This fact, says Lévi-Strauss, explains why myths, unlike poetry, have their value 'preserved even through the worst translation' (1958, p. 412). However, 'The true constituent units of a myth are not the isolated relations, but bundles of such relations' (*ibid.*, p. 413). His method of analysis entails the dissection of the myth into mythemes which, in turn, are collated into 'bundles' of parallel units.

The musical system is in this respect analogous to mythology. Melody is diachronic since it progresses through tune, whereas harmonies are synchronic and are co-sequential. Like music, a myth is unfolded in a temporal progression, but its nature lies in its synchronic structures. By grouping the basic units of a myth, certain harmonies emerge. These themes may themselves become the material of further analysis, and ultimately, 'There is no real end to mythical analysis ... Themes can be split up *ad infinitum*' (1964, p. 5).



When synchronic studies are made of a myth, the basic reality revealed is an opposition, almost a Hegelian dialectic. In myths an aspect of reality (thesis) is contradicted (antithesis) and resolved by being transformed into mythological language which allows mediation (synthesis). These contradictions relate to matrilineal cross-cousin marriages ('The Story of Asdival'), life and death ('Four Winnebago Myths') or variations in views on human origins (Oedipus). In each case, Lévi-Strauss is clear that 'the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model, capable of overcoming a contradiction' (1958, p. 426). When two categories in nature emerge and are so opposed as to be incapable of mediation, the mythological mind replaces them by 'two equivalent terms which admit of a third as a mediator' (ibid., p. 423). In some cases this is impossible, and thus myths 'seem to be entirely devoted to the task of exhausting all the possible solutions to the problem of bridging the gap between *two* and *one*' (ibid., p. 424).

Myth, then, is a particular type of thought. Kirk supposes that 'Lévi-Strauss has undoubtedly shown in *La Pensée Sauvage* that tribal societies employ a quite different style of logic from that developed in western societies' (1970, p. 82). It is hard to conceive that further misinterpretation could be possible. Lévi-Strauss' whole thesis is that 'the difference lies, not in the quality of the intellectual process, but in the nature of the things to which it is applied' (1958, p. 427). The distinctive feature of mythological thought is that instead of abstract concepts it employs signs, which are mid-way between percepts and concepts. Percepts have pre-existing references, but the mythmaker re-uses them as signs: the mythmaker is a logistical handyman in a perceptual junkyard. 'Mythical thought, that "bricoleur", builds up structures by fitting together events, or rather the remains of events' (1962, p. 22). This is re-stated in the opening words of *The Raw and the Cooked*: 'The aim of this book is to show how empirical categories ... can ... be used as conceptual tools with which to elaborate abstract ideas and combine them in the form of propositions' (1964, p. 1).

In the previous section we saw how Warner had sought homologies between myth, ritual and nature on the one hand and social life on the other. Lévi-Strauss gives this an almost imperceptible twist and states that

The mythical system [of the Murngin] and the modes of representation it employs serve to establish homologies between natural and social conditions (1962b, p. 93).

It is now not merely a statement that the homologies exist, but that the myth itself has established such homologies. This allows Lévi-Strauss to argue that one of the distinctive functions of totemism is the mediation of nature and culture (ibid., p. 91).

To illustrate this, Lévi-Strauss seizes on what was to Warner no more than a passing comment. Warner had written:

The snake is the fertilizing principle in nature according to Murngin symbolism: This explains why it is identified with the men's group rather than with the women: otherwise one would suppose that the male principle, being identified with the positive higher social values, would be associated by the Murngin with the dry season — the time of the year of high social value (1937, p. 377).

In this Lévi-Strauss detects a basic dilemma for the Murngin. The men who are superior (pure, sacred) are related to the bad season, while the profane and impure women are associated with the good season. Since inverting these pairs would be even more unacceptable, the original opposition is maintained but it is mediated by dividing the men into initiated and uninitiated classes 'according to the principle that the uninitiated stand in the same relation to the initiated in the society of men as women do to men within the society as a whole' (1962b, p. 94). The men thus partially incorporate the happy feminine aspect through periodically incorporating the uninitiated and socially female males into their group.

Space does not allow further examples of Lévi-Strauss' methodology in studying Aboriginal myths (e.g. *ibid.*, chap. 8), and I must turn now to an examination of the works of W.E.H. Stanner (and, in passing, Elkin). As Hiatt has indicated, Lévi-Strauss and Stanner developed their theories independently although concurrently, and they have each acknowledged that their respective theories do share certain methodological premises (1975, p. 12f.). The similarities are superficial, however, and in many respects their arguments are antithetical.

Stanner's hypothesis is that Aboriginal rites and myths express what might be called in a qualified sense a 'philosophy' of life. A.P. Elkin was probably the first anthropologist to seriously apply this assumption to Aboriginal beliefs and it is thus appropriate to begin by examining his ideas. He argued that the Aborigines reasoned logically, but from different premises than our own — a position he mistakenly attributes to Lévy-Bruhl (1951, p. 132f.). He says

I could and did disagree with their major premise, but not with the inferences drawn from it ... Thus, granted a basic theory or doctrine of pre-existence of the souls or life-cells, or existence-potentials of all creatures and phenomena, beliefs and actions regarding human conception, the increase of natural species and phenomena, and the return of the soul after burial ritual to spirit-homes are quite logical inferences (1969, p. 87).

Elkin thus proposed that Aboriginal thought was logical and that it was coming to terms with the same problems that confront

western man. It is only the initial premises that differ substantially. The fundamental Aboriginal premises are firstly, that the world is populated by spirits which are incarnate in the form of humans and animals and natural phenomena, but are never tied to or fully equated with these forms. This is a doctrine of *animism*. Secondly, in *totemism*, the essential oneness of all existence is affirmed, while thirdly, the *Dreaming* recognizes the temporal dependence of the present upon the past (1938, p. 221 and 1967, p. 40f.). Of all these concepts, that of the *Dreaming* is the broadest and the ground of all else. The *Dreaming* as a universal is filled with every ritual, every particular dreaming, symbol and situation, and yet each fragment is filled with the same essential whole. Elkin relates this to the Indian identification of Atman and Brahman, and adds:

I am not trying to equate Aboriginal thinkers (and there are such) to Indian and Western philosophers, but I am suggesting that they have caught a glimpse of, and attempted to grapple with, similar fundamental philosophical problems (1969, p. 89).

Elkin's philosophical analysis of Aboriginal religious beliefs usually proceeded by identifying parallels with both eastern and western philosophies — including those of Thales, Heraclitus, Leibnitz, Kant and Bergson. It was this somewhat suspect approach that Stanner objected to. It was not that Stanner denied the legitimacy of comparisons *per se* (he himself uses a sacramental plan as a model for Aboriginal rites), but that he believed our use of analogies should be suspended 'until whatever analogies we draw with western philosophical thought are deepened and refined' (1976, p. 35).

Stanner's approach, while accepting Elkin's suggestion that myths and rites express a basic world view, is far more sophisticated in its use of ethnographic data, and is more thorough and sensitive in its interpretation of these data. His methods are applied to specific myths and rites, and the discerned meanings are not broad generalizations regarding Aboriginal beliefs as a whole.

Stanner's analysis of Murinbata ritual and myth (the details of which are summarized in Hiatt, 1975, pp. 10-14ff.) revealed, he argues, a common underlying structure which he interprets as signifying a basic ontology:

Murinbata religion [he wrote] might well be described as the celebration of a dependent life which is conceived as having taken a wrongful turn at the beginning, a turn such as the good of life is now inseparably connected with suffering (1963, p. 39).

Stanner arrives at this conclusion using a methodology which, at first glance, resembles that of Lévi-Strauss. Both authors interpreted Aboriginal myths and rites by dissecting and identifying

their basic units. Here however, the similarities end. First, Lévi-Strauss believes myth to be a product of the binary logic of the human psyche. In contrast, Stanner believes that Aboriginal thought is analogical and aesthetic.

Aboriginal thought is profoundly analogical [writes Stanner], and for this reason they are much given to a rude simile and metaphor ... Intellectual conceptions are raised by symbolization on these analogies. This of course is the essential symbol-function. But the development of the conceptions has taken an aesthetic rather than an intellectual course ... [T]he absence of a class of thinkers has allowed the laws of aesthetic development to take their course guided perhaps only by the intuitive fitting of a symbolical form to a mystery, which in the first place is perceived through an analogy (ibid., p. 14).

Secondly, since Stanner has advocated the primacy of rite over myth (ibid., p. 29), he could not accept any 'science of mythology' (as Lévi-Strauss' *magnum opus* is sub-titled) without a corresponding 'science of ritual'. In a passage which could very appropriately be used against Lévi-Strauss, Stanner wrote:

To be sure, the myth is a special kind of language, but I reject as inappropriate an analysis as a special kind of language. My concern is with the use of language or speech-form as *myth in a situation of rite* (ibid., p. 46f.).

The structures that Stanner sought to uncover were not merely structures *within* a myth but rather the corresponding structures of *both myth and rite*.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the respective analyses of Stanner and Lévi-Strauss are fundamentally opposed in that the former's are diachronic whereas the latter's are synchronic. Stanner is basically concerned with the sequential progression of events within myths and rituals. If there are any 'harmonies' to be found they are not *within* a myth but *between* myths and rituals (or one myth and another or one ritual and another). To have ordered a myth into 'bundles of' mythemes at the onset, as Lévi-Strauss has done, would be to destroy this diachronic structure.

Whereas Lévi-Strauss believes that myths logically mediate contradictory situations, and Stanner claims that Murinbata religion reveals a basic philosophy of life, a third approach propounded by Mircea Eliade has suggested that myths are paradigmatic models. Eliade is not saying that myths *have* a meaning, but rather that they are sacred 'archetypes' which *imprint* meaning. While Stanner has rejected a sacred/profane dichotomy in an Aboriginal context, Eliade makes it central to his thesis. Sacred archetypes (e.g. myths) are explanatory models which are used periodically to transform this profane world through the ritual process. Thus the repetition of the

wanderings of totemic ancestors in *Intichiuma* ceremonies ensures the world will continue because the rituals recreate the world as it was in mythical times. The profane world is destroyed and remade in a sacred mould. Initiation is a microcosmic variant of the same process. In Eliade's words:

[M]ost of the initiatory rituals and behaviours are informed with the symbolism of death and resurrections (or death and rebirth). As a matter of fact, the novice dies to the profane world of childhood and irresponsible innocence, the world of ignorance, and prepares himself for rebirth as a spiritual being (1973, p. 88).

By the periodic destruction of the profane world the onslaught of time is suspended. The sacred cosmic paradigms are static and timeless and their ritual repetition halts the process of history. The following passage penned, in fact, by Stanner (and thus revealing some similarity in the two scholars' work), can aptly be used to illustrate Eliade's position:

The process ... appears as one in which 'history' was both accepted and yet defeated by being made captive to symbolic forms. Diffusion brought exciting new motifs and styles of religious activity. But to be accepted the new apparently had to be compounded with the old. The unfamiliar had to be put in symbolic continuity with the familiar. In the upshot neither the past was disowned nor change made impossible. But to combine change with a rational conservation of the sacred forms and values already existing led to an involution of development, not to an evolution (1963, p. 143f.).

It would however, be an easy matter to overstate the similarities between Eliade's methodology and that of the structuralists. The essential difference is in their interpretation of symbols. Eliade was a member of the Eranos group, and was closely associated with Jung, whose *Psychology of Transference* was one of his favourite works (see 1973a). Although Eliade denies that his use of the word 'archetype' is associated with Jung's structures of the collective unconsciousness (1949a, p. IX), it is nonetheless true that he regards symbols as very static entities. As Leach has observed, 'in Eliade's Jungian schema it is the symbol *per se* that matters' (1966a, p. 31). Leach defends the structuralist position, saying:

... the trouble with Eliade is that although he stresses his concern with the history of symbols, as distinct from the structure of symbols, he does not really distinguish one from the other (*ibid.*, p. 30).

Whereas Eliade seeks to understand a symbol through its history (as revealed through comparative methodology) the structuralist proceeds by looking at the symbol in its mythic context and in its relationship with other symbols.

Eliade is not an anthropologist, but a historian of religion, and his studies are typically both thematic and comparative. His book

*Australian Religions: An Introduction* (1973) clearly reveals this background. If this book (originally a series of articles) is taken as an 'introduction' to Aboriginal religion it is decidedly unbalanced. What the book contains, in fact, is a series of Aboriginal illustrations of subjects with which Eliade has dealt more thoroughly elsewhere. There are thus chapters on mythical geography (chapter two, compare *The Sacred and the Profane*); initiation rites (chapter three, compare *Rites and Symbols of Intitiation*); and Men of High Degree (chapter four, compare *Shamanism*). His opening chapter is a revival (to my mind an unfortunate one) of the High God debate. Thus:

[T]he transformation of a Sky Being into a *deus otiosus* seems to have reached its farthest limits among the western Aranda. The next step could only be his falling into total and definitive oblivion (1973, p. 33).

Despite its modern terminology, this statement shares many of the views that Lang was advocating three-quarters of a century earlier. The importance of High Gods was apparently 'secretly' expounded in Eliade's *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, of which he said in his journal:

I wonder if the secret message of the book has been understood, the 'theology' implied in the history of religions as I decipher and interpret it. And yet the meaning emerges rather clearly: myths and religions, in all their variety, are the result of the vacuum left in the world by the retreat of God, his transformation into *deus otiosus*, and his disappearance from the religious science ... But has it been understood that 'true' religion begins only after God has withdrawn from the world? That his transcendence merges and coincides with his eclipse? (1973a, p. 74).

While a great deal of Eliade's thesis is theoretically stimulating, and while some students of Aboriginal religion have felt some of his propositions worth salvaging (e.g. Hiatt, 1975b), his revival of outmoded arguments (which he supports too often with equally old ethnographic data) will, I suspect, prevent him having a major anthropological impact. In his scathing (Ricketts, 1973 would say libellous) review of Eliade's works, Leach has unreservedly expressed his frustration with these deficiencies in Eliade's books. He wrote:

Every methodological error of which Sir James Frazer and his contemporaries have ever been accused is here exhibited in its purest form (1966a, p. 28).

## 5. Summary

This chapter has brought this history of the interpretation of Aboriginal religion approximately up to the present. There are, of

course, many other contemporary scholars whose works could have been included here, but a rather drastic pruning is necessary to give the most recent anthropological branches some semblance of order.

This is a historical work, and in these closing lines I have no intention of waxing critical or providing simplistic answers to the problems raised by historical considerations. It is appropriate, however, to summarize briefly the main points of continuity and discontinuity disclosed in the preceding pages.

Our present continuity with early students of Aboriginal religion is thematic rather than methodological. Early anthropologists unleashed three controversies which are still with us today. First, there has been the unexpectedly prolonged debate regarding the supposed ignorance of physiological paternity in Aboriginal procreation beliefs. I have not paid an undue amount of attention to this issue since it has been thoroughly covered in M.F.A. Montagu's *Coming into being among the Australian Aborigines*. Needless to say, these data were central to all 'sex-linked' theories from mother-right and matriarchy to psychoanalysis. Since Montagu has completed his survey controversy has once again flared. A passing remark by E. Leach together with M. Spiro's rejoinder led to Leach's article 'Virgin Birth' and a multitude of responses by P. Kaberry, E.G. Schwimmer, P.J. Wilson, R. Needham, H.A. Powell, M. Spiro and K. Burridge. It is difficult not to support Piddington's view that the suggestion that the Aborigines are unaware of the relationship between sexual intercourse and childbirth 'has played in ethnological theory a part quite out of proportion to its significance (1950 & 1957, p. 787).

The second recurring theme concerns the so-called Aboriginal 'supreme beings'. In chapter one I argued that this became an important issue because of the Deist supposition that the highest form of religion is the rational belief in a Moral Supreme Being. Indeed, such a belief was initially a pre-requisite in definitions of religion, and we saw in chapter two that the monogenists sought evidence of an Aboriginal Deity in order to prove the Aborigines were religious and thus human. Although Tylor broadened this definition of religion, it remained a dictum of evolutionary anthropology that a primitive race could not have such developed notions. Conversely, opponents of religious evolution such as Lang and Schmidt, sought to prove the contrary. Functionalism, on the whole, ignored the issue. Because they were concerned with the living relationship between religion and other social institutions they paid little heed to dubious ethnographic data which had been made significant only in the context of comparison with non-Aboriginal religious systems. Since then, High-Gods have been patronized by only a few individuals. They were accepted by R. Pettazzoni in his

Dio (1922). Pettazzoni sent a copy of the first volume of this work to Mircea Eliade when he was only a youth of seventeen, thus making a permanent impression on Eliade, who has turned out to be the most recent defender of Aboriginal Deities (chapter six).

The third major theme has focused on the nature of 'totemism'. This issue has tended to expand as interest in High-Gods waned. It has been said that totemism 'was invented, developed and made more and more obscure by those Victorians from about 1869-70, when M'Lennan wrote his celebrated articles ... and it was only with Lévi-Strauss' book ... that we can say the "problem" of totemism has been laid to rest once and for all. If we talk about 'totemism' any more, it will be in ignorance of Lévi-Strauss or in spite of him' (Poole, 1969, p. 9). Since few people are ignorant of Lévi-Strauss' *Totemism*, it would seem that most specialists on the Australian Aborigines are talking 'in spite of him', and it would also seem that the problem M'Lennan began remains relevant — indeed, Lévi-Strauss appears to have increased the vitality of the subject. While most scholars at least partially support Lévi-Strauss' criticism of the looseness with which the word 'totemism' has been used, they also seem reluctant to abandon it entirely. At present, the consensus of opinion seems to support Hiatt's view that 'Lévi-Strauss is mistaken and that there is no cause for alarm' (1969, p. 83).

Our discontinuity with our anthropological predecessors is primarily methodological. Throughout the preceding chapters I have argued that Thomas Kuhn's model of scientific 'progress' provides us with an appropriate model in that it emphasizes the 'revolutionary' nature of anthropological theoretical change. This point might best be illustrated with a summary of the preceding chapters, highlighting the paradigmatic nature of the anthropological understanding of Aboriginal religion.

What in Kuhnian terms would be the pre-scientific part of this history was discussed in the first two chapters. In chapter one it was shown how the initial responses to the Aborigines and their religion were conditioned by developments which occurred before Australia was discovered. I then examined the impact of the eighteenth-century attitudes towards reason and nature. This was perhaps the most significant factor influencing early anthropological attitudes towards Aboriginal religion. The conception of the Enlightenment that religion was something rational that was either 'true' or 'false' was adopted by anthropologists until it was challenged by scholars like Marett (chapter five). Associated with this exaltation of reason were two views of 'natural man'. The primitivists saw him as having a mind in which self-evident truth was uncluttered by the fetters of civilization. The anti-primitivists on the other hand believed that civilization was needed to bring man's latent rationality to maturity.



Both views, however, assumed there was a state in which man lived without culture.

In the second chapter we saw how philanthropists such as missionaries and Aborigine Protectors came to acquire a relatively detailed knowledge of Aboriginal culture. These insights led them to abandon the eighteenth-century concept of 'natural man', be he noble or ignoble. Like all men the Aborigines were slaves to their customs and in particular to their 'superstitions'. This interest in savage custom, partially inspired by the Aborigines Protection Society, resulted in the rise of anthropology as a science. It was shown that the Ethnological Society of London was, in fact, an offshoot of the Aborigines Protection Society.

The early years of anthropology were, however, rife with disputes, particularly over the question of the unity of the human species. It is here that Kuhn's theories help us understand the situation. The prescientific collection of ethnographic facts threatened total chaos unless some basic 'paradigm' could be found by which this data could be analysed and ordered. None of the initial candidates proved to be satisfactory and the first decades of anthropology were preoccupied with debates over potential paradigms. It was only with the rise of evolutionary social theory that anthropology received its first real paradigm, thus allowing day-to-day 'normal science' to occur (in this case filling in the details of man's ascent from savagery to civilization). This was the subject matter of the third and part of the fifth chapters, where detailed accounts of evolutionary studies of Aboriginal religion were given.

Chapter four examined some qualitative changes in fieldwork in Australia which undermined the evolutionary paradigm itself and which led to what Kuhn would call a 'crisis' within a paradigm (chapter five).

Chapter six briefly detailed the process of recovery from this crisis. Initially the controversies between evolutionary social theory and its diffusionary opponent deprived anthropology of a unified paradigm. The conflict was transcended rather than resolved by the rise of functional anthropology. As their analysis of Aboriginal religion reveals, the first generation of anthropologists undertaking fieldwork in Australia did so under the theoretical shadows of Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski. More recently, Lévi-Strauss has subtly transformed structural-functionalism into what is nonetheless a very different methodology. At present, however, it is too early to determine what will ultimately become the relationship between structuralism and the older functional school in the study of Aboriginal religion.

There is, however, another side to Kuhn's thesis which is relevant to our understanding of the ways in which Aboriginal

religion has been perceived. At the times when the revolutionaries were quiet it was patent that 'paradigms' such as 'evolution' or 'function' were accepted as *a priori* premises beyond the range of empirical falsification. It was Radcliffe-Brown, the father of professional anthropology in Australia, who once described his science as 'the purely inductive study of the phenomena of culture, aiming at the discovery of general laws, and adapting to its subject matter the ordinary logical methods of the natural sciences (1923, p. 138). On another occasion, addressing the theme 'Some Aspects of the Aboriginal Problem of Australia' he is said to have remarked that

... the work of the anthropologist is entirely objective. He treats the human nature as a chemist does his substance, and thence draws conclusions. If he admits human sympathies and interests he impairs the validity of his work. He then becomes a human being (Warner, Buxton & Radcliffe-Brown, 1928, p. 68).

The one thing a history of anthropological attitudes towards Aboriginal religion reveals is that its progress has been marked by neither the induction nor the objectivity that Radcliffe-Brown advocated. The 'scientific paradigms' adopted by anthropologists studying Aborigines have not been adopted inductively but have by and large been borrowed from scholars not specializing in Aboriginal studies. Theory has not been the *result* of our investigations, so much as it has been the *means* of investigation.

Such a comment is not meant as criticism but is rather offered as summary statement of the historical relationship between anthropological theory and the realities of Aboriginal religious life. The potential dangers of this relationship are evident nonetheless. R.M. Berndt has written:

The search for meaning is central to systematic anthropological research; but methodological devices used in that process often remove it from the empirical situation. Consequently, the end product that tells us what particular religious phenomena mean to particular believers or practitioners can differ considerably from our explanation offered in more general terms. The process of interpretation can have its dangers. It can hide or, at best, overshadow what people have to say about their religion. To put this in another way, the understanding of Aboriginal religion has been greatly affected by theories ABOUT religion (1979, p. 17).

Whether this problem has its foundation in the very nature of our undertakings or whether it is a product of what Stanner might call an 'immemorial misdirection' in our pursuits, is a question I leave for another occasion.