Chapter Three

The Dream Theory on the Dreaming c. 1880 — 1898

"...these our actors,
As I fortold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind: *We are such stuff*
As dreams are made of, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep."

Shakespeare

With reference to the Australian Aborigines, it has been said that '[i]n 1859 Darwin turned back beyond the Garden of Eden and placed an ignoble Adam in a Hobbesian state of nature' (Mulvaney, 1958, p. 295). Besides being a misleadingly broad generalization, this statement is simply inaccurate. Unfortunately, it represents a popular misconception. Therefore, I will briefly offer a more accurate intellectual background to evolutionary social theory as an introduction to this chapter.

To begin with, it was in the 1820s that Hutton and the Vulcanists had undermined the infallibility of the Biblical date of the creation. In the following decade Lyell published the *Principles of Geology* which discredited the scriptural account of the Flood in scientific circles. Thus, seven years before Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, Herbert Spencer could say:

> Ask any one of our leading geologists or philologists whether he believes in the Mosaic account of the creation, and he will take the question as next to an insult. Either he rejects the narrative entirely, or understands it in some vague non-natural sense (1852, p. 38).

What made the theory of evolution heretical was not its rejection of Biblical authority, but its subjection of man and nature to a world governed by laws autonomous of divine providence (cf. Gillispie, 1959). If God figured at all in the evolutionary scheme, He was no more than a first cause — a *Deus Otiosus*. For Darwin there was

> ... grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the creator into a few forms or into one; and that ... from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved (1859, p. 374; cf. Mandelbaum, 1958).

For Darwin there was 'grandeur'; for many there arose the feeling of anxiety at the idea that man was at the mercy of impersonal natural laws and removed from the hands of divine intervention.

Secondly, it should be emphasized that the idea of social evolution was neither invented nor primarily inspired by Darwin. Maine, M'Lennan, Spencer and Tylor had all begun their researches prior to 1859, and it is extremely unlikely that their later works were written primarily in response to Darwin's theories. 'Social Darwinism' is quite a misnomer. It would be a particularly inappropriate label for Spencer, who (as he never tired of reminding his readers) gave a comprehensive pre-Darwinian account of biological evolution in his *The Development Hypothesis* (1852) (H. Spencer, 1862, preface).

Furthermore, to place the idea of social evolution in proper perspective, we must remember that social progress was by no means a new idea. In 1868 the president of the Anthropological Society criticized C.S. Wakes' evolutionary ideas for being outdated.

> So far as he understood them, Mr. Wakes' views as published in his book were common about a century ago, and the present paper seemed to revive the metaphysical disquisitions of that period (quoted in Burrow, 1966, p. 132).

This was quite true. The idea of social progress can be found in the writings of Bacon, Fontenelle, Saint-Pierre, Condorcet, Hume, Adam Smith, Saint-Simon and Comte — to mention only the better-known names (see Bury, 1920 and Pollard, 1968). Such ideas were not unfelt in Australia. In 1841 Grey referred to a common mode of argument which supposed that

> barbarous man let loose upon the earth ... urged on by his necessities, and aided by his senses ... successively discovered the natural productions necessary for his subsistence, and the arts which ministered to his wants, until step by step he mounted to the pinnacle of civilization (1841, vol. 2, p. 220).

With these points in mind, it can be asserted that evolutionary social theory triumphed not because it was in harmony with geological and biological theories, but because it could, using a well precedented approach, handle the ever growing bulk of ethnographical evidence with a minimum of intellectual adjustment (cf. Burrow, 1966, p. 136). Because of its initial success it rose to the status of Kuhn's 'paradigm', and as Kuhn says,

> Paradigms gain their status because they are more successful than their competitors in solving a few problems that the groups of practitioners has come to recognise as acute (1962, p. 23).

How this paradigm provided solutions in 'primitive Australia [which] had played the part of godmother to evolution' (Goldenweiser, 1933, p. 132f) is a question to which I will now turn.

1. The Psychic Unity of Mankind

I have already shown how Prichard and his followers asserted that the mentality of all man was of a comparable kind. This proposition was a fundamental principle of evolutionary social theory. 'Psychic unity', however, need not be equated with intellectual equality. For Morgan, Spencer and Lubbock the doctrine of the psychic unity of mankind was compatible with racist arguments, and they maintained that psychological variation was a function of physiological and neurological differences. Since evolutionists saw primitive religion as a direct consequence of a primitive mentality, it will be necessary to examine their attitudes towards the intellect of the Aborigines in some detail.

Spencer provides us with a detailed account of the savage mind. According to Spencer, primitive thought is concerned with simple sensations rather than complex conceptions. Thus the emotional life of natives is a direct response to sensations, and they are consequently liable to abrupt changes of mood. The Aborigines are used to illustrate this point. Haygarth complained that the Australian natives had defied every attempt to curb their nomadic existence, and even those Aborigines who had been befriended by Europeans would disappear in the middle of the night for no apparent reason (1848, p. 105; cf. Spencer, 1876, p. 58). Bonwick provides a further example:

> Our fair friends [he said], with all their trials including an occasional waddying from their enraged or jealous partners, were a merry, garrulous company. Like all savages, they quickly changed from smiles to tears. The names of two females of the George River tribe will illustrate this variety of emotion: *Plooranaloona*, sunshine; and *Taenghanootera*, crying bitterly (1870, p. 56; cf. Spencer, loc. cit.).

In short, Spencer believed that primitive man is impulsive, irresponsible, moody and concerned with nothing but his own immediate happiness. While they may display parental affection, this is due to the workings of instinct and is not an indication of self-less love. As proof of this, Spencer cites reports of Aborigines deserting their sick children, and even killing them for fish bait (ibid., p. 67).

To uphold his opinions, Spencer had to contend with numerous reports which had argued that the Aborigines were an alert and intelligent race. He quickly put such reports in their place.

> The Australians are said to be as intelligent as our own peasants. But the ability thus referred to as possessed by men of the lowest types, is one for which the simpler faculties suffice; and goes along with inability when any demand is made on the complex faculties (ibid., p. 82).

While savages have acute memories and skill in mimicry, they have an impoverished capacity for logical thought and will simultaneously entertain two blatantly contradictory notions. They are unreflective and only the most obvious causal relationships are grasped by them. And when the relationships of cause and effect are too subtle for their meagre intellect, they fill the void with the wildest conjectures. It is this mental fragility that led savages to believe that inanimate objects 'hide' themselves, or that solids can suddenly change their shape. We will see later that such misconceptions gave rise to the earliest religious beliefs, according to these early theorists.

For Spencer, as for Lubbock and Morgan, racial variation in mental faculties had a neurological foundation. At its worst, this stance led to a circular Lamarckianism where races are said to develop in response to an environment which man improves as he develops.

Tylor was more ambivalent than the above theorists in his patronage of biological explanations of intellectual variation. In *Anthropology* he suggests that in searching for a rationale for the lack of civilization amongst primitive peoples 'we should partly look for an explanation ... in differences in intellectual and moral powers' (1881, p. 74). In *Primitive Culture* he adopts another stance, however, and says 'it appears both possible and desirable to eliminate considerations of hereditary varieties or races of man' (1871, vol. 1, p. 7).

While Tylor may have toyed with hereditary explanations, the fact remains that such theories were simply unnecessary in

accounting for social evolution. Since all the early social evolutionists relied partially on environmental rationales of racial variations, they ran the risk of over-explanation if they simultaneously referred to biological factors. This was especially true of Spencer. According to Gossett:

> Herbert Spencer ... attached great importance to race theories in explaining the character of societies, but he was among the first to realize the value of collecting information to discover what differences exist between classes, social groups, and societies generally, a search which inevitably led him to a close study of environmental factors and which caused later racist thinkers to regard him as harmful, or at least dubious support for their side (1963, p. 416).

In chapter five we will see that the next generation of evolutionary anthropologists followed Tylor's lead and dispensed with hereditary explanations. To a certain extent however, it was of no great consequence to the resultant analysis of primitive society where the author sought hereditary or environmental causes for intellectual differences. In either case it was maintained that the human mind everywhere operated in response to the same basic principles. The savage mind might be unimprovably inferior, but it was nonetheless subjected to the same fundamental impulses. One favourite way of expressing this was to liken the brain of a savage to the brain of a child. Spencer wrote:

> How races differ in respect of the more or less involved structures of their minds, will best be understood on recalling that unlikeness between the juvenile mind and the adult mind among ourselves, which so well typifies the unlikeness between the minds of savage and civilized (1876, p. 146).

Wake applied this to evidence from Australia.

> The aborigines of Australia [he said], as compared with the races who have made further progress in mental culture, are yet in the condition of children (1872, p. 82).

Lubbock shows how this could be extended into a theory of recapitulation. He argued:

> The life of each individual is an epitome of the history of the race, and the gradual development of the child illustrates that of the species. Hence the importance of the similarities between savages and children. Savages, like children, have no steadiness of purpose (1870, p. 569).

Thus, if the minds of savages were quantitatively inferior, they were at least qualitatively the same. Despite Spencer's low estimate of primitive intelligence, he maintained, it was erroneous to assume their 'grotesque' beliefs had been produced by a different form of reason.

> Given the amount of knowledge which primitive men possess, [he said] and given the imperfect verbal symbols used by them in speech and thought, the conclusions they habitually reach will be those that are *relatively* the most rational (1870, p. 536).

At its best, this tendency led to a slightly more positive appraisal of the Aborigines. For example, Tylor quoted approvingly the view that, while the Tasmanians' intellectual character was low, it is

> ... not so inferior as often described. They appear stupid, when addressed on subjects which had no relation to their mode of life; but they were quick and cunning within their own sphere (1893, p. 150).

I must now briefly mention three corollaries to the psychic unity hypothesis. Firstly, if it is accepted that man's mind everywhere responds in the same manner, it is reasonable to suspect that geographically disparate societies would have the same *Elementargedanken* ('elementary ideas'), to use Bastian's phrase. This is the basis of the theory of 'independent invention' which partially usurped the old diffusionary methodology.[8] This notion of independent invention also helps explain a stylistic peculiarity of early social evolutionary writings. It allowed the authors to compare material from across the globe merely on the grounds that the underlying ideas were of a similar kind. This is why it is a cause of rejoicing to find two sentences in a row on the Aborigines in these works.

The second corollary to the psychic unity theory is temporal rather than spatial. It stated that living savages revealed the ways of our pre-historic ancestors. Tylor believed the Tasmanian Aborigines 'were representatives of stone age development' (1893, p. 147), and that

> ... the study of their culture ... affords valuable though imperfect guidance to formation of opinion as to the earliest distinctly recognisable period of human civilization (ibid., p. 149).

A third corollary follows directly on from the second. Since higher civilizations have passed through the lower evolutionary stages, it was conceivable that relics of past eras might linger on into contemporary society. This was the doctrine of 'survivals' (cf. Hodgen, 1936). Tylor saw the abolition of 'survivals' as anthropology's contribution to modern society. And 'survivals' were discovered by using the comparative method. Tylor's review of J.D. Wood's (ed.) *The Native Tribes of South Australia* aptly illustrates this point. Tylor laments that some readers might find accounts of Aboriginal tattooing, circumcision and sorcery tedious and irrelevant. But, he reprimands,

> All this ought to be interesting to us, as practices of black-magic closely

allied to those of the Australian savages are going on to this day in country hamlets in England (1879, p. 89).

Given these evolutionary assumptions, it is not surprising to find that the Aborigines were often cited as evidence of a low, if not the lowest, race of mankind. In his continuum from savagery to barbarism to civilization, Morgan places the Aborigines at a low level of savagery. He said:

> [T]he aborigines of this great island are near the bottom of the scale. When discovered they were not only savages, but in a low condition of savagery ... Australian humanity ... stands on as low a plane as it has been known to touch on the earth (1877, p. 385).

For Tylor, the Tasmanians

> ... stand before us as a branch of the Negroid race illustrating the condition of man near the lowest known level of culture (1899b, p. v.).

And for Wake the Aborigines

> ... represent the childhood of humanity itself, revealing to us the condition of mankind, if not in primeval times, yet when the original potentialities of man's being had been but slightly developed (1872, p. 83).

2. 'Religion' and Evolutionary Social Theory

In the next section I will examine in detail the significance of this race which represented the 'childhood of humanity' to theories of the evolution of religion. It is first necessary, however, to draw attention to changes which made it possible to talk of 'Aboriginal religion'.

In the first chapter I argued that the deists transformed 'religion' into a rational belief in a Supreme Being. Then, in chapter two we saw that it was because of this implicit definition that most investigations of Aboriginal culture, reached the conclusion that they were men without a religion. We also saw that early anthropologists shared this definition, but were divided as to whether or not the Aborigines conceived of a Supreme Deity. It seems that those who denied Aboriginal religiosity, however, were gaining dominance. To offer but one more example, F.W. Farrar published an article in the *Anthropological Review* (1864) which quotes the following evidence with approval:

> Mr. Schmidt says, '*They have no idea of a Divine Being*' and Mr. Parkes, 'That they have no words for justice or for sin' and Dr. Laing [sic], 'They have no idea of a Superior Divinity, *no object of worship, no idols, nor*

temples, no sacrifices, nothing whatever in the shape of religion to distinguish them from the beasts' (1864, p. ccxvii).

Farrar would not deny that they had a vague 'fear of the unknown', but such a predisposition, which is shared by animals, could hardly be called 'religion' (ibid., p. ccxxi f.). The necessary criteria of a 'religion' are indicated by the title of Farrar's paper — 'On the Universality of Belief in God, and in a Future State'.

Within less than a decade of Farrar's article, it was to be recognized that the Aborigines did indeed have a 'religion'. It should be made quite clear that this change had nothing to do with Aboriginal deities. Lubbock would not accept their authenticity. He had read Ridley's statement that 'In every part of Australia where I have conversed with the aborigines, they have a traditional belief in one Supreme Creator (1873, 268; cf. Lubbock, 1870, p. 209f.), but dismisses it since the deity in question (*Baiame*) lacked the three attributes required of a God — eternity, omnipotence and goodness. Tylor similarly disclaimed the authenticity of the Australian gods, and leaves us with the warning that 'The ethnographer must be ever on the look-out for traces of ... foreign influence in the definition of the Supreme Deity acknowledged by any uncultured race' (1871, vol. 2, p. 419). We shall see in chapter five that Lubbock and Tylor never wavered from their stance on this issue.

What then was responsible for the rise of Aboriginal 'religion'? The answer is twofold. Firstly, it was due to the evolutionary perspective which sought the origin of 'higher' religious conceptions in 'lower' beliefs; and secondly, it required that the definition of religion be modified to include these germinal buds of religion. In the following pages I will examine in detail these two factors which led to the emergence of Aboriginal 'religion'.

The first point — that lower beliefs were seen as the germ of higher religions — was a direct consequence of the evolutionary tendency to search for gradual and natural progressions from simple to complex forms. Evans-Pritchard has said of the evolutionists:

> They sought, and found, in primitive religions a weapon which could, they thought, be used with deadly effect against Christianity. If primitive religion could be explained away as an intellectual aberration, as a mirage induced by emotional stress, it was implied that the higher religions could be discredited and disposed of in the same way (1965, p. 15).

To some extent this was true, but the converse also applied. If there was an intrinsic connection between higher and lower beliefs, then primitive supernatural conceptions must be *essentially* the same as our own.[9] Thus Lubbock said:

> I have felt doubtful whether this chapter should not be entitled 'the superstitions' rather than 'the religion' of savages; but have preferred the

latter ... because many of the superstitious ideas pass into nobler conceptions (1870, p. 202).

From here it was but a small step to the inclusion of these lower beliefs as 'religious'.

Nonetheless, the step existed. Lubbock's writings are particularly illuminating here because he balked at this very step. Lubbock did not deny that Aboriginal beliefs contained the germ of religion. He said his intentions in his analysis of religion were

> to trace up the gradual evolution of religious beliefs, beginning with the Australians, who possess merely certain vague ideas as to the existence of evil spirits, and a general dread of witchcraft. This belief cannot be said to influence them by day, but it renders them very unwilling to quit the campfire by night, or to sleep near a grave; they have no idea of creation, nor do they use prayers ... They do not believe in the existence of a Deity, nor is morality in any way connected with their religion, *if such it can be called* (ibid., p. 321).

Ultimately he felt that 'religion' could not be extended to the Aborigines, if for no other reason than it was

> ... *a priori*, very difficult to suppose that a people so backward as to be unable to count their own fingers should be sufficiently advanced in their intellectual conceptions as to have any system of belief worthy of the name of a religion (ibid., p. 213).

Consequently Lubbock classifies the Aborigines as 'atheistic'.

Lubbock's case for labelling the Aborigines as 'atheists' is dubious, to say the least. It is well known that the stages he postulates after atheism are successively: fetishism, totemism, shamanism, idolatry and ethical monotheism. Now, while Lubbock consistently maintains that 'The Australians and Tasmanians have no idols' (ibid., p. 345) and 'the Australians, again, have no idea of creation' (ibid., p. 380), he himself provides evidence of what his contemporaries would have described as Australian totemism and fetishism.[10] Lubbock only avoids complete self-contradiction with the help of an awkward *ad hoc* distinction. He maintains that true 'fetishes' and 'totems' must be deified and worshipped, and thus the Aborigines are disqualified — although marginally, since their totems are 'almost in the very moment of deification' (ibid., p. 261). Thus, concludes Lubbock, in judging religious development 'The true test ... seems to be the estimate in which the Deity is held' (ibid., p. 205).

It goes without saying that Lubbock's approach made unnatural divisions between religious manifestations. From an evolutionary perspective, the obvious solution would be to define religion in terms of its essential origin rather than by the estimate in which the deity is held.

This brings me to the second development responsible for the emergence of Aboriginal 'religion'. While Lubbock had been aware that 'The question as to the general existence of religion among men is, indeed, to a great extent a matter of definition' (ibid., p. 208; cf. Distant, 1877, pp. 60-70ff.), it was Tylor who had the initiative to formulate, advocate and popularize a more comprehensive definition.

One of the most commonly cited pieces of evidence of Aboriginal irreligiosity came from J.D. Lang's *Queensland*. According to Lang, the Aborigines

> ... have no idea of a supreme divinity, the creator and governor of the world, the witness of their actions, and their future judge. They have no object of worship, even of a subordinate and inferior rank. They have no idols, no temples, no sacrifices. In short, they have nothing whatever of the character of religion, or of religious observance, to distinguish them from the beasts that perish (1861, p. 374).

Lubbock had uncritically accepted Lang's report (1870, p. 209f.). By contrast, Tylor stood Lang's evidence on its head. He teased from Lang's book evidence that the Aborigines attributed smallpox to the workings of an evil spirit named *Budyah*, that they acknowledged a being (but not, to Lang or Tylor, a Supreme Being)[11] named *Baiame*, and that they sacrificed girls to propitiate an evil spirit (Tylor, 1871, vol. 2, p. 2f.). In Tylor's hands this was abundant evidence of 'religion'. His rationale for thus classifying this material is found in his famous definition of religion. It is worth quoting at length.

> The first requisite of a systematic study of the religions of lower races, is to lay down a rudimentary definition of religion. By requiring in this definition the belief in a Supreme Deity or a judgement after death, the adoration of idols or the practice of sacrifice, or other partially diffused doctrines or rites, no doubt many tribes may be excluded from the category of religious. But such narrow definition has the fault of identifying religion with particular developments than with the deeper motive which underlies them. It seems best to fall back at once on this essential source and simply to claim, as a minimum definition of religion, the belief in Spiritual Beings (ibid., p. 8).

The importance of this definition can hardly be overemphasized.[12] It underlies all the material covered in the next few chapters (although I take up some important exceptions in chapter five), and indeed, it is showing signs of a revival at the present (Goody, 1961; Spiro, 1966). In the following section I will examine the anthropological search for the 'essential source' of religion amongst the Aborigines.

3. Aborigines and the Quest for the Origin of Religion

We must begin by mentioning certain areas where early social evolutionists did *not* look for the origin of religion. Firstly, these authors had no interest in the emotional aspects of religion. It has been said that:

> Even in the life of the rudest savage, religious belief is associated with intense emotion, with awful reverence, with agonizing terror, with rapt ecstasy when sense and thought utterly transcend the common level of daily life. How much the more in faiths where not only does the believer experience such enthusiasm but where his utmost feelings of love and hope, of justice and mercy, of fortitude and tenderness and self-sacrificing devotion, of unutterable misery and dazzling happiness, twine and clasp round the fabric of religion (Tylor, 1871, vol. 2, p. 445).

It is astonishing to realize that these words were penned by Tylor. He added:

> Those to whom religion means above all things religious feeling, may say of my argument that I have written soulessly of the soul, and unspiritually of spiritual things. Be it so (loc. cit.).

And it is so ... while Tylor argues here that he had focused on the intellectual side of religion to keep his exposition manageable, the truth is that, except for this brief confession, he had treated religion as though it were nothing but a body of beliefs. Religious feeling was not adequately treated by anthropologists until the time of Marett, of whom Otto said, he 'comes within a hair's breadth of what I take to be the truth about the matter' (1917, p. 15 n.1).

Early social evolutionists similarly denied that primitive religion had any association with morality. Some scholars, such as Lubbock and Wake, denied that the Aborigines were in possession of anything which could properly be called morality. In his *The Evolution of Morality* (1878) Wake amassed a great deal of available evidence to prove Aboriginal attitudes towards homicide, theft, adultery and parental respect shared nothing in common with the Hebrew Decalogue (1878, vol. 1, pp. 66-77 ff.) Tylor was less ethnocentric in his criteria for 'morality'. Concerning the Tasmanians:

> Morally, the descriptions of their character present the usual contrast of savage life; the mother would rush through the fire to save her child, the son would abandon his sick or aged parent under a ledge or rock or in a hollow tree (1893, p. 150).

However, while Tylor does not deny primitive morality, he does deny that this morality is in any way associated with religion (1871, vol. 2, p. 11). This was also the position of T.H. Huxley:

> In the simplest condition, such as may be met with among the Australian savages, theology is a mere belief in the existence, power, and disposition (usually malignant) of ghostlike entities who may be propitiated or scared away; but no cult can properly be said to exist. And in this stage theology is wholly independent of ethics (1886, p. 346).

These views were attacked by Andrew Lang who argued that the Aborigines believed in a moral creator (see chapter 5), and were totally discredited by functionalist anthropology which detailed the relationships between religion and Aboriginal morality (see chapter 6).

The evolutionists likewise assumed the primacy of belief over religious practices. As early as 1889 Robertson Smith had recognized the weakness in the assumption whereby a predisposition to focus on Christian belief meant that 'when we approach some strange or antique religion, we naturally assume that here also our first business is to search for a creed' (1889, p. 16). Robertson Smith's dictum that 'ritual and practical usage were, strictly speaking, the sum-total of ancient religions' (ibid, p. 20) made its impact on Aboriginal studies via Durkheim's works although the issue of the relative primacy of myth and ritual is still being debated.

Other factors besides morality, emotion and ritual might have been mentioned, but these will suffice to highlight the fact that early anthropologists treated religion merely as a conglomeration of beliefs. Perhaps this was unavoidable. After all, they were dealing with fragmentary reports about phenomena which are even today difficult to relate convincingly to other psychic and social realities.[13] Yet they were also writing in the wake of eighteenth-century rationalism which had confined religion to a system of beliefs.

Thus, the origin of religion lay in a thought. Given the doctrine of the psychic unity of man, this thought must be rational, although, of course, invalid. Like science, religion began with the 'conviction that the existence of the world with all it contains, and all which surrounds it, is a mystery calling for interpretation' (Spencer, 1862, p. 33). Unlike science, the answer was false. Hobbes' theory was revived (see chapter 1), when it was stated that religion was a mistaken account of a mystery — specifically, the mystery of dreams and death. For Tylor:

> Man's earliest and primitive conception of a spiritual being may well have been that of his own human soul, the idea of which served to explain many of the great phenomena of his own existence — life, death, sleep, dreams, visions, ecstasy, disease' (1870, p. 379).

For Lubbock:

> The ideas of religion among the lower races of man are intimately associated with, if indeed they have not originated from, the condition of man during sleep and especially from dreams (1870, p. 214).

And for Spencer:

> The root of this belief in another self lies in the experience of dreams (1870, p. 537 n.1).

Each of these statements was published in 1870, and from this time forward the dream-theory of the origin of religion became immensely popular. I would reservedly suggest that, in its nineteenth-century form, the theory was initially the brain-child of Tylor.[14]

The theories of Lubbock, Spencer and Tylor are by no means identical. However, in order to keep my exposition manageable I will highlight their meeting points. Two basic propositions underly the dream-theory. The first of these postulates that primitive man came to an awareness that he possessed a double. Thus duality was a rational and logical (but invalid) deduction from the contemplation of certain irregularities in nature. For example, the shadow of an individual was considered to be an essential part of his person, and yet it was thin, ineffable and regularly disappeared. This gave credence to the supposition that the shadow was associated with man's double. It was no coincidence that 'The Tasmanian word for shade or shadow is that for Spirit' (Bonwick, 1870, p. 182; Spencer 1876, p. 152; Tylor, 1871, vol. 2, p. 14). Likewise, reflections, echoes and disruptions to normal mental functioning evidence a double. Thus some South Australian Aborigines equate their word for 'unconscious' with *wilyamarraba*, 'without soul' (Spencer, 1876, p. 148; Tylor, 1871, vol. 2, p. 16). However, the primary source of their awareness of duality came from dreams. While dreaming the sleeper visits distant regions and converses with absent friends. Yet upon awakening he finds his physical form has not moved. Surely he must have an invisible counterpart? We can only marvel at what these theorists might have made of the Arunta term *alcheringa* ('dreaming') had they known of it (first documented by Schulze, 1891, p. 242).

The double, soul, or spirit was imagined to be very much like the physical body, except in that it was less substantial. Because of this, the breath is often synonymous with the soul, and among the Aborigines of Western Australia the word *waug* means both 'breath' and 'spirit' (Tylor, 1871, vol. 2, p. 16). There was further Australian evidence for the ethereal nature of the soul. According to Smyth, the Fraser Island Aborigines placed their dead in a blanket which they buried at a depth of four feet. A piece of bark was placed on the grave, but care was taken to ensure there was a gap through which the ghost or spirit could depart (Smyth, 1878, vol. 1, p. 107). Again, Bonwick had described a ceremonial dance in which a boldly painted Aborigine darted about looking for spirits, and then beat the air to drive them away (1870, p. 187f.). These and other examples

convinced early social evolutionists that the Aborigines believed spirits to be quite material, although airy.

The second basic proposition underlying the dream-theory follows logically on from the first. Since deceased individuals appear in dreams, the primitive assumes that their souls must have survived death. Furthermore, when a person is asleep he is motionless like a corpse, and so it was obvious to assume that death was merely an extended sleep, and that a ghost is but an extensively disembodied soul. The dream-theory is thus equally a ghost-theory. Like souls, ghosts are quite material and have all the requirements of corporeality. Bonwick furnished a popular piece of evidence, illustrating this point. He describes a pyramidal-shaped grave in an Aboriginal cemetery. A spear pierces through the grave. When the native guide was asked 'the reason of the spear being struck into the tomb, he repeated quietly, "to fight with when he is asleep"' (Bonwick, 1870, p. 182).

These were the basic tenets of the dream-theory, or 'animism' as Tylor called it. The Aborigines neatly fitted this scheme. Tylor said:

> ... as a whole, the Tasmanian religion was a rude animism, based on the same fundamental principles as the religions of the lower races elsewhere in the world (1893, p. 151f.).

These first principles could be expanded to account for the whole spectrum of religious manifestations. Since the breath is equated with the soul, primitive man would quickly deduce that all breathing things had a spiritual counterpart. Vegetal souls might be derived from the shadows of plants. Spencer believed that the conception of plant doubles was a relatively advanced development, and thus 'we do not read of this belief among the lowest races. It does not exist among ... the Australians ..., or if it does, it is not sufficiently pronounced to have drawn the attention of travellers' (1876, p. 177). With or without plant souls, it is clear that, as Tylor says,

> The philosophy of the savage recognizes a countless host of spirits pervading all nature. To the Australian all his world swarms with spirits; and it is a dismal symptom of the unhappiness of his condition that he regards them as generally ill-disposed to the poor black fellow (1870, p. 377).

The first-hand reports of Oldfield confirmed this opinion.

> The number of supernatural Beings ... feared if not loved, that they acknowledge is exceedingly great, for not only are the heavens peopled with such, but the whole face of the country swarms with them; every thicket, most watery-places, and all rocky places abound with evil spirits (quoted in Bonwick, 1870, p. 182).

If we add the souls of the dead to the souls of the living we incur the problem of spiritual overpopulation. What happens to the ever increasing number of disembodied souls? Primitive man found two solutions; transmigration and a future abode. The most commonly cited example of Aboriginal transmigration was the belief that the white Australians were dead blacks. To give but one touching example, when Grey was in the Swan River district in Western Australia he was approached by two women who filed towards him saying '*Gwa gwa bundo bal*', 'Yes, yes, in truth it is him'. The eldest woman threw her arms around Grey and wept, while the other woman knelt crying at his feet. To his dismay, Grey discovered he had been recognized as the ghost of the eldest woman's son (which, of course, means this was not really an instance of transmigration at all). Grey concluded: 'This belief that the white people are the souls of departed blacks, is by no means an uncommon superstition amongst them' (1841, vol. 2, pp. 301ff.).

The other fate of the dead entailed a journey to a distant land. According to Spencer, this idea arose after a tribe had migrated. Eventually they would dream of their old home, and they would believe they had journeyed home while asleep. By extension, they would also make this journey upon death. Tylor was more restrained in his speculations on this subject. Whatever the origin of the belief, there was evidence that the Aborigines had some ideas of a future abode. Bonwick had noted that some of the Aborigines of South Australia believe the 'Souls are generally supposed to come from the west, either floating over the sea, or sporting among bush flowers and grass trees' (1870, p. 181). Angus had observed that Aborigines in New South Wales placed dead children in a canoe, with a fishing spear, a throwing stick, and some small articles, and placed all these in the grave. They point to the child, and then the sky, thus indicating the journey the child is to make (1841, vol. 2, p. 228).

So far we have seen how the belief in souls and ghosts arose, and how various notions about a future life developed out of these. Once these beliefs had developed, the primitive found at his disposal an explanation of unusual events. This illustrates the looseness of primitive thought (or anthropological thought, depending on one's bias), since the argument is clearly circular. The idea of a double arose out of irregular occurrences which are in turn explained by the presence of ghosts and spirits. Grey had reported that Aboriginal sorcerers, called *boyl-yas*, became invisible at night, fell upon their enemies and consumed their flesh. They entered their victim as a piece of quartz, which could only be extracted by another *boyl-ya* (1841, vol. 2, p. 337). Dove mentioned a 'fear of pronouncing the name by which a deceased friend was known, as if his shade might thus be offended' (1842, p. 253f.), which implied that the dead might

cause harm to the living. The fear the Aborigines had of travelling at night had been noted by virtually everyone who wrote about the natives. This fear was likewise attributed to the malicious intentions of evil spirits. According to early evolutionists, it was such beliefs that the dead could influence the fate of the living which resulted in the propitiation of the dead and ancestor-worship.

Ancestor-worship was particularly important in Spencer's theories. Although he had maintained that religion began with a 'belief in a being of the kind we call supernatural — a spirit' (1897, p. 6), and that 'the first traceable conception of a supernatural being is the conception of a ghost' (1876, p. 281), he simultaneously argued that 'Using the phrase ancestor-worship in its broadest sense as comprehending all worship of the dead ... we conclude that ancestor-worship is the root of every religion' (ibid., p. 411). According to Spencer, ancestor-worship begins as dead ancestors come to retain their individual identity. He argues that this only begins to flourish once man has left the nomadic life, and thus 'the Australians and Tasmanians show us but little persistence in ghost propitiation' (ibid., p. 282). Nevertheless the phenomenon is not totally absent amongst them. Spencer refers to a statement made by Smyth about the Aborigines of Victoria as typifying the genesis of ancestor worship.

> When an Australian, of mark as a hunter or counsellor, is buried, the medicine-man, seated or lying beside the grave, praising the deceased and listening for his replies, said 'the dead man has promised that if his murder should be sufficiently avenged his spirit would not haunt the tribe, nor cause them fear, nor mislead them into wrong tracks, nor bring sickness amongst them, nor make loud noises in the night'. Here we may recognise the essential elements of a cult' (1897, p. 6).

I hope I have said enough to give the general flavour of the early social evolutionary analysis of Aboriginal religion. It would be tedious to trace the multitudinous permutations of the theory any further. However, I must now make special reference to a phenomenon which was to Spencer a specific form of ancestor worship. This is, of course, totemism. It will be necessary to back-track in order to put this theme in proper perspective.

4. Totemism

I have already drawn attention to some of the earliest references to totemic manifestations at the beginning of chapter two. In 1834 C. Bennett gave a brief account which revealed greater insight than those before him. Bennett reported that

... a native, at Béran plains, desired a European not to kill a *gúnar* which he was then chasing, but to catch it alive as it was 'him brother'. The animal, however, was killed, at which the native was much displeased, and would not eat any of it, but unceasingly complained of the 'tumbling down him brother' (1834, p. 131).

However, it was G. Grey who gave the first account of Australian 'totemism', in that he related the Aboriginal *kobong* with the *totam* of the Ojibwa Indians. Grey also related these totems with the eight subsections of the tribe. He noted:

A certain mysterious connection exists between a family and its *kobong*, so that a member of a family will never kill an animal of the species, to which his *kobong* belongs ... This arises from the family belief, that some one individual of the species is their nearest friend, to kill whom would be a great crime (1841, vol. 2, p. 228).

When J.F. M'Lennan wrote his articles on 'The Worship of Plants and Animals' in 1869-70, Grey was his only source of information about Australian totemism. M'Lennan says Grey had argued that 'the natives represent their family names as having been derived from some vegetable or animal common in the district they inhabited' (1869-70, p. 411). In fact, Grey never said this. Although Grey was not particularly concerned with theories, he did have an opinion about the derivation of totemic names which was quite the opposite of the one M'Lennan ascribed to him.

I imagine it more likely [he said], that these [*kobongs*] have been named after the families, than that the families have been named after them (1841, vol. 2, p. 228).

M'Lennan's interest in totemism grew out of his study of *Primitive Marriage* (in which he also refers to Grey on the question of intermarriage among the Aborigines). But it was not until his 1869-70 articles that totemism was to become, and remain, a central anthropological issue. However, I hasten to add that M'Lennan only *began* the subject. Many of the more spectacular claims made about totemism were later additions. M'Lennan did not claim that totemism was the origin of religion. The section of his articles on 'The Mental Conditions of Men in the Totem Stage' shows that his ideas on religion were quite close to Tylor's (1869-70, pp. 422-427ff.), and apparently the two scholars engaged in extended discussions on totems while M'Lennan was writing these articles (Tylor, 1899a, p. 138). In fact, M'Lennan even refers to the 'animation hypothesis' which he considers similar to fetishism. This hypothesis states that the speculations of primitives

... have not carried them as yet beyond the contemplation of the material terrestrial world they inhabit, and that in that world everything is to them

at once material and spiritual, the animate and inanimate being almost undistinguished (1869-70, p. 414).

He refers to *boyl-yas*, water monsters (*wau-gul*) and ghosts as examples of Aboriginal 'fetishism'.

> They have no God in the proper sense of the word; and the only benign beings they know are their totems ... Speculation has not reached as yet among them to the heavens. Their supernaturals are all naturals (ibid., p. 415).

Now totemism was built upon this 'animation hypothesis' or fetishism. He said:

> Fetichism thus resembles Totemism; which, indeed, is Fetichism *plus* certain peculiarities. These peculiarities are, (1) the appropriation of a special Fetich to the tribe, (2) its hereditary transmission through mothers, and (3) its connection with the *jus connubii* (ibid., p. 422).

Thus, if M'Lennan had offered a theory of the origin of religion, it would have laid its foundation well below the totemic line.

It should also be noted that M'Lennan never published a theory of the origin of totemism. According to his brother,

> ... he had for some time an hypothesis as to the origin of totemism, but ... he afterwards came to see that there were conclusive reasons against it. At last, as far as I know, he had none — which should be easily intelligible to anyone who knows the subject (quoted in Frazer, 1910, vol. 4, p. 73).

We can only speculate as to what this theory might have entailed.[15] What we can say is that he had attempted to show that the totemic stage had been passed through by many ancient nations. M'Lennan thus concludes that his theory

> ... is not an hypothesis explanatory of the origin of *totemism* ... but an hypothesis explanatory of the animal and plant worship of the ancient nations. It is quite intelligible that animal worship growing from the religious regard for the Totem or Kobong — the friend and protector — should, irrespective of the nature of the animal, be a religion of love. What we say is our hypothesis explains the facts (1869-70, p. 213).

When Spencer reviewed M'Lennan's articles, he took the opportunity to put forward (for the first time) his matured view of the origin of religion. He was dissatisfied with M'Lennan's work because it stopped short of the essential question. So, said Spencer,

> ... we have still to ask — Why have savage tribes so generally taken animals and plants and other things as their totems? (1879, p. 535)

And thus Spencer also provided in this review the first theory of the origin of totemism. The theory runs as follows: Primitives refer to individuals by distinctive nicknames. A cross person is called 'bear', a red-head is called 'carrot'. Usually each new generation receives a

new name, but, if there arises a very memorable person, his descendants will adopt his name. They will thus say 'I am descended from bear'. Since the languages of savages like the Australians lack fine distinctions, within a few generations it will no longer be remembered that 'bear' was the nickname of a person, and the natives will believe that they are, in fact, the descendants of a real bear.

This brief outline must suffice as an introduction to totemism. I will take the subject up again in chapter five, where I will be able to focus more specifically on Aboriginal totemism.

Meanwhile, however, we must turn to examine the effects these early theories and their authors had on field-workers amongst the Aborigines. The real difference between the first and second generations of evolutionary anthropologists was not in their theoretical orientation, but rather in the quality of the material they had to work with. At the turn of this century the Aborigines were not only the race with the most significant influence on theories of the origin of religion, but they were also the natives about whom there was the most thorough-going and detailed ethnographical information. How this came about is the subject of the next chapter.