

Chapter 1

Anthropology and Origins

History itself is a *real* part of *natural history*, of the development of nature into man. Natural science will one day incorporate the science of man, just as the science of man will incorporate natural science; there will be a *single* science.

Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844)

The question of human origins has always held a central place in Marxist theory, and for a good reason. Marx aimed to unite the natural with the social sciences, and was aware that an understanding of our origins was an essential precondition. As 'everything natural must have an origin', he wrote, 'so man too has his process of origin, history, which can, however, be known by him and thus is a conscious process of origin that transcends itself' (Marx 1971a [1844]: 169). By knowing our process of origin, we know what we were, are and must become, and this knowledge 'transcends itself' – that is, enters as a factor in our further development.

Every human tribe or civilisation has its origin-myth, and western society is no exception. Judaeo/Christian mythology held that God made Man and Woman on the Sixth day of Creation, after dividing heaven from earth, light from darkness, land from water and after creating the various celestial bodies, plants and animals on the five previous days. Man's sudden creation, semi-divinity and decisive elevation above the beasts were central features of this myth. Adam and Eve owed their existence to a miracle, and could trace their descent back to God. The cosmos had a meaningful structure and purpose. The earth was the pivot of the material universe, Man was first among mortal creatures, and Woman and all lesser beings existed to fulfil Man's needs and God's plan.

This biblical Genesis was capable of different interpretations and was used in legitimising various social arrangements, but by and large – despite the Copernican revolution in astronomy, despite centuries of social and religious turmoil and despite the slow advance of science – it continued to prevail in

European cultures until the publication in Britain of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *Descent of Man* (1871). Then, once the initial controversy over apes and angels had died down, a new and very different story came to be believed. It was concluded that our origin (like that of other species) had been a natural one, unconscious, unplanned – the chance product of utterly blind impersonal forces. There had been no miracle, no shattering event, no aim in mind. It was just that upon one particular planet among innumerable dust grains within the universe random events combined with natural selection had produced microscopic marine life, then fish, and eventually the human animal. Humans were simply a zoological species, their mental powers differing in degree, but not in kind, from those of other beasts. Man had begun as an ape, and, at the end of the evolutionary process, he was still essentially an ape – albeit one with peculiar talents and a rather large brain (Darwin 1871).

With firm roots already in social theory, the idea of evolution conquered biology and quickly became the cornerstone of the new science of anthropology as well. The more ardent champions of the new paradigm applied it to human history in uncompromising fashion. All the earliest human institutions were seen as behaviour patterns evolved from the animal world. Earliest human language – far from being the breath of the gods – was made up of animal-like grunts; the first marriage – far from being a God-given sacrament – was in essence indistinguishable from sexual union among apes; the earliest human communities were polygamous ape-like hordes. All this was thought to be confirmed by reports on the animal-like behaviour of 'the savages of today' (Letourneau 1891: xi).

Social and political implications could be derived from the new story. Whereas Christianity had advocated the subordination of the egotistic individual to higher cosmic purposes, popular Darwinism preached 'the survival of the fittest', this concept being borrowed directly from capitalist – specifically Malthusian – economic and social doctrine. In a letter to Engels written in 1862, Karl Marx (n.d. [1862]) noted Darwin's claim to be

applying the 'Malthusian' theory *also* to plants and animals. . . . It is remarkable how Darwin recognises among beasts and plants his English society with its division of labour, competition, opening up of new markets, 'inventions', and the Malthusian 'struggle for existence'.

Darwin – Marx argued – was transposing the logic of his own society to the natural world, and then deriving from 'nature' a supposed validation of the very cultural logic from which he had set forth.

In *The Dialectics of Nature*, Marx's collaborator, Engels (1964 [1873–86]: 35–6), agreed, adding that Darwin

did not know what a bitter satire he wrote on mankind, and especially on his countrymen, when he showed that free competition, the struggle

for existence, which the economists celebrate as the highest historical achievement, is the normal state of the animal kingdom.

If Darwin saw no satire in this, it was because he was unaware of an alternative. The possibility of a different principle of human social organisation was simply not present within his conceptual universe. He therefore saw capitalism's logic as an expression of permanent natural necessity, the laws of individualistic competition embracing the entirety of natural and human history alike.

Darwin's case appeared well founded. The parallels between capitalist and zoological laws of competition seemed real enough. Marx himself, after all, had earlier written that capitalist society 'is not a society; it is, as Rousseau says, a desert populated by wild animals' (Marx and Engels 1927, 1, 5: 394; quoted in Kamenka 1962: 36). But like any great prophet exorcising rival gods, Darwin had unconsciously excluded other possibilities, thereby anchoring the values of his own particular culture in the inescapable nature of all life itself. Engels (n.d. [1865]) commented: '... nothing discredits modern bourgeois development so much as the fact that it has not yet got beyond the economic forms of the animal world'.

The Origin Myth of Western Capitalism

'Origin of man now proved.' Darwin wrote these words in his notebook in 1838 (Fox 1975a: 265). He jotted: 'He who understands baboon would do more towards metaphysics than Locke.' The use of non-human primates (apes and monkeys) as models for early human life, and the belief that the problem of human origins had now been 'solved' – in principle if not in detail – were to characterise scientific discussions of human evolution not only for much of the remainder of the nineteenth century, but for most of the twentieth century, too.

Almost every time the question of human origins has been discussed within evolutionary science, it has been within the conceptual framework provided by Darwin. The question has been treated in essentially biological terms – as the problem of determining when and how a certain brain size, configuration of teeth and jaws and other characteristics evolved to produce a creature which could be called human. Even when the evolution of speech and social behaviour has been discussed, it has been assumed that the human stage was reached when social interactions between individual organisms led to the development of 'speech-areas' in the brain, or to the growth of increasingly subtle social instincts or learning skills.

To many, all this may seem natural and even inevitable. In what other way can the question of human origins be discussed? Is it not merely our own conceit which makes us think that we humans are special? Are we not

essentially animals like any others, however much we may wish to avoid the fact? And does not a materialist approach compel us to root our behaviour in that most material of realities – our bodies, whose forms have evolved in materialistically comprehensible ways through interaction with one another and with the environment?

Another view, however, is that '... the essence of man is not an abstraction inherent in each particular individual. The real nature of man is the totality of social relations' (Marx 1963d [1845]: 83). The attractions of Darwinism are understandable, because unless we grasp the real uniqueness of humanity's social and symbolically constructed essence, we are obliged to treat the problem of origins in a biological way – seeking in the physical individual those 'material' properties responsible for our humanity. To quote Marx (1963d [1845]: 83–4) again, we are forced 'to conceive the nature of man only in terms of a 'genus', as an inner and mute universal quality which unites the many individuals in a purely natural (biological) way'.

As we seek our essence in biology, the importance of language, labour, ideology and consciousness in producing and defining our humanity is simply overlooked. Instead of seeing humans as symbolically constituted persons, our minds formed through childhood socialisation and through collective cultural products such as language, we see only the activities of bodies and brains. Instead of standing back and bringing into focus the evolving collective dimensions of all human life – dimensions such as economic systems, grammatical systems, religions – we view the world as if through a microscope. Increasing the magnification, we shorten our depth of focus, until the only visible realities become physical individuals eating, breathing, copulating and otherwise surviving in their immediate physical environments, their localised interactions filling almost our entire field of vision. Within this myopic perspective, the global, higher-order plane of existence of these physical individuals becomes invisible to us. We are left unaware of the existence of any transpatial plane of collective structure embracing and shaping the biological, localised life processes in which we are all involved. The subject matter of social anthropology – the study of economics, cultural kinship, ritual, language and myth – is not only left unexplained. It is not even seen as a higher-order level of reality in need of being explained.

In the late nineteenth century, many natural scientists, anthropological writers and sociologists within the materialist camp were inspired by Darwin's achievements to such an extent that they saw no other way of looking at human life. They assumed that the laws of competition and selection uncovered by Darwin could be extended to embrace the entirety of the human social sphere. Where origins were concerned, it seemed logical to assume that if humans had inherited their anatomy and physiology from

some ape-like ancestor, then they had probably inherited their social institutions, their language and their consciousness in the same way.

As far as social life was concerned, the most basic institution was thought to be 'the family', which was said to have evolved from non-human primate mating systems. Darwin's conception of the origin of marriage was based on the observation that male mammals typically compete with one another sexually, the victors succeeding in monopolising the females. He cited a report on the gorilla, among whom 'but one male is seen in a band; when the young male grows up, a contest takes place for mastery, and the strongest, by killing and driving out the others, establishes himself as the head of the community' (Darwin 1871, 2: 362). In the human case,

if we look far enough back in the stream of time, . . . judging from the social habits of man as he now exists . . . the most probable view is that primaeval man aboriginally lived in small communities, each with as many wives as he could support and obtain, whom he would have jealously guarded against all other men. (Darwin 1871: 2: 362)

One popular writer concluded that 'primitive marriage' was 'simply the taking possession of one or several women by one man, who holds them by the same title as all other property, and who treats adultery, when unauthorised by himself, strictly as robbery' (Letourneau 1891: 57). This was supposed to be the expression of a universal 'sexual law' – applying equally to humans and animals – termed by Darwin himself 'the law of battle', according to which the males 'dispute with each other for the females, and must triumph over their rivals before obtaining them' (Letourneau 1891: 10–11). For more than a century, cartoon images of 'cavemen' colluded in depicting these as rapacious brutes battling against each other with clubs, each victor dragging home a clump of recently seized, voluptuous cave-females by their hair.

In the sense that the 'law of battle' fits baboon sexual organisation moderately well, Darwin's and Letourneau's views in this context could be called the 'baboon' theory of human origins. This theory did not disappear with the nineteenth century but continued to haunt discussions of origins, figuring centrally in Freud's magnificent myth of the 'Primal Horde'. Freud took the horde-motif directly from Darwin. He assumed that our pre-cultural ape-like male ancestors were ferocious sexual rivals, each pitted in violent conflict against all the others in an attempt to monopolise whole harems of females. In *Totem and Taboo*, however, Freud conceptualised the actual transition to the cultural level not as a simple extension of all this, but as a revolutionary negation achieved when a band of sexually expropriated Sons within a primal horde rose up against their tyrannical Father, killed him, ate him – and collectively outlawed future conflict (Freud 1965 [1913]).

Freud's haunting theory entered subtly into the thinking of many anthro-

pologists, including Malinowski, Róheim, Lévi-Strauss and more recently Robin Fox. Common to the theories of Darwin, Freud, Lévi-Strauss and Fox was an unquestioned, seemingly axiomatic assumption: females are and always have been passive sexual valuables to be fought over, renounced, exchanged or otherwise manipulated by dominant males. In the works of all these thinkers, male dominance is said to have preceded the establishment of human society, and to have continued unbroken and unchallenged throughout humanity's origins and subsequent development.

Throughout the 1960s – when the theoretical premises of the present book were first beginning to take shape – the majority of evolutionist-minded writers accepted the 'baboon' theory in a fairly simple Darwinian form, without bringing Freud's suggestion of revolutionary overturn into the picture. Most experts saw trooping, ground-dwelling monkeys – typically, baboons – as the best model for 'the proto-human horde' (Fox 1967a: 420). It was noted that among baboons, male sexual rivalries tend to be fierce, the victors typically monopolising whole harems of females whilst excluding their rivals completely from the breeding system.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, Fox was the best-known social anthropologist to show an interest in evolutionary theory and in human social origins. Fox (1967a: 420; 1975a: 52–3) took it for granted that earliest 'man' organised his sex life through conflict, the males competing with each other for females. With men as with baboons, 'the status of the male is measured by his control over females' (Fox 1975a: 55). In the case of both species: 'The result of the reproductive struggle is a social system that is profoundly hierarchical and competitive' (Tiger and Fox 1974: 43). And in both human and animal systems: 'Competition for scarce resources – food, nest-sites, mates – is the basis of society and the stuff of politics' (Tiger and Fox 1974: 44).

In Britain and the United States, books such as Desmond Morris' *The Naked Ape* (1967) and Robert Ardrey's *The Territorial Imperative* (1969) elaborated such notions and became overnight bestsellers, being serialised in the popular press and aired repeatedly on radio and television. For the first time in decades, anthropology seemed set to become a popular science! The political implications were seized on with delight. Nicholas Tomalin (1967, quoted in Lewis and Towers 1969: 24) told his socialist readership in the *New Statesman* that the 'new facts' about early human competitiveness 'must make, if not reactionaries, at least revisionists, of us all. Man, and consequently his nature, is immutable. The old adage, "you can't change human nature" becomes true once more.' And Katharine Whitehorn, educating Britain's middle classes through her column in *The Observer* (29 October 1967), expressed gratitude ('I for one feel a lot better for it') for the revelation that the bourgeois world's aggression and violence is 'natural', adding: 'The desire to have and to hold, to screech at the neighbours and say "Mine, all mine" is in our nature too.' Marshall Sahlins (1977: 100) has described all

this as 'the origin myth of Western capitalism' – a myth which has decisively pushed Genesis into the shade.

The Culturalist Reaction

But there has always been more to anthropology than Darwinism. The first anthropologists were social philosophers. Hobbes, Rousseau and Comte presented what would nowadays be called 'anthropological' theories of human nature – as did Marx, whose *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1971a [1844]) and *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels 1947 [1846]) covered such topics as the nature of labour, the emergence of human language and the origins of the family.

It was a range of interests shared by Lewis Henry Morgan, the American radical business lawyer who is often regarded as the principal founder of kinship studies and of anthropology in its modern sense. In the mid-nineteenth century, Morgan discovered the 'classificatory' system of kinship terminology among the Iroquois Indians, and from this and much other evidence concluded that human society had everywhere evolved from communistic beginnings.

Like Morgan, most nineteenth-century anthropologists used ethnographic findings to throw light on issues such as the origins of human society, the causes of social inequality and the foundations of human morality. 'Grand theory', in other words, was the order of the day. While Morgan's work became central to the thinking of Engels and Marx, the findings of early anthropologists in Australia shaped Durkheim's theories of primitive religion, and Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* – still produced within the Victorian evolutionist tradition – later influenced a generation of poets, writers and thinkers. It is important to remember all this today, when imaginative anthropological theory building has become rare, few publications within the discipline arouse much popular interest, and not many people even know what 'anthropology' means.

More than any other field of knowledge, anthropology taken as a whole spans the chasm which has traditionally divided the natural from the human sciences. Potentially if not always in practice, it therefore occupies a central position among the sciences as a whole. The crucial threads which – if joined – might bind the natural sciences to the humanities would have to run through anthropology more than through any other field. It is here that the ends join – here that the study of nature ends and that of culture begins. At which point on the scale of evolution did biological principles cease to predominate while other, more complex, principles began prevailing in their place? Where exactly is the dividing line between animal and human social life? Is the distinction here one of kind, or merely one of degree? And, in the light of this question, is it really possible to study human phenomena

scientifically – with the same detached objectivity as an astronomer can show towards galaxies or a physicist towards subatomic particles?

If this area of *relationships between the sciences* seems to many to be confused, it is only in part because of the real difficulties involved. Science may be rooted at one end in objective reality, but at the other end it is rooted in society and ourselves. It is for ultimately social and ideological reasons that modern science, fragmented and distorted under immense yet largely unacknowledged political pressures, has stumbled upon its greatest problem and its greatest theoretical challenge – to incorporate the humanities and the natural sciences into a single unified science on the basis of an understanding of humanity's evolution and place within the rest of the universe.

Not all anthropologists accept that humanity is 'just another species', that culture is no more than 'an adaptation' or that Darwinism is the best and only necessary framework within which to study the nature or origin of human social life. In fact, most of twentieth-century social anthropology has defined itself as a discipline precisely in opposition to such ideas. In the process of doing so, however, it has accentuated rather than transcended intellectual schism and confusion. Instead of addressing from its own standpoint the problems raised by the evolutionary sciences in relation to human life – cultural anthropology has simply turned its face away. Extraordinarily – as will now be shown – the very idea of research by cultural specialists into the origins of human culture has in effect been tabooed. As a result, *culturally informed* theorising about human origins has been disallowed.

The nineteenth-century evolutionist founders of anthropology almost always regarded 'savages' as on a lower evolutionary rung than themselves, and mixed Darwinian with cultural-evolutionary concepts in illegitimate ways. Their view of evolution tended to be simple and unilinear, each world-historical evolutionary stage being treated as mandatory for all peoples everywhere, and linked in an oversimplified way with some technological advance or other assumed causative factor. Thinkers tended to explain away the more puzzling features of traditional cultures by describing them as anachronistic 'survivals' from some earlier stage – failing to appreciate that unless an institution has some value and meaning in its present context, it is unlikely to 'survive' at all.

Such criticisms could be extended almost indefinitely – and indeed have been, repetitively, for most of this century. But not all the Victorians were equally guilty of such mistakes. Theoreticians such as Tylor, Lubbock and Morgan – or painstaking ethnographers such as the Australianists Spencer and Gillen – were superb scholars, of immense erudition and integrity, making many of today's experts and authorities seem dwarves by compar-

ison. Much twentieth-century criticism of them has been ideologically motivated, ill informed and unworthy. In any event, at its best, the evolutionist school was united by something of immense value – a passionate belief in the methods of natural science and in the ultimate reality of discoverable lawful principles governing human history. Courageously, they faced even the most daunting questions, refusing to evade issues which might appear at first sight baffling, inconvenient or too immense to contemplate.

The war years from 1914 to 1918 were the great intellectual buffers into which the idea of 'progress' ran. At this point, the Victorians' widespread optimism and belief in the potentialities of science was decisively repudiated. Almost simultaneously, in England, France, Germany and the United States, there arose schools of anthropology which, as Marvin Harris (1969: 2) has written, 'in one way or another rejected the scientific mandate'. It came to be widely believed that anthropology could never discover the origins of institutions or explain their causes. In Britain, 'evolutionism' became not merely unfashionable but effectively outlawed. In the United States, the dominant school flatly asserted that there were no historical laws and that there could not be a science of history.

Despite the presence of continental giants such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Britain and the United States have been the two dominant national centres of world social-anthropological research for most of the twentieth century. American cultural anthropology was based initially on the study of the Indians of North America, while British social anthropology was a product of colonialism, being shaped very largely by the requirements – real or imagined – of administrators in various parts of the British Empire in the period 1920–45.

Almost all American anthropologists are the intellectual descendants of Franz Boas (1858–1942), the German-born founder of the American 'diffusionist' or 'historical particularist' tradition. In a similar way, almost all British social anthropologists are the descendants of Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955), founders of the 'functionalist' and 'structural-functionalist' traditions respectively.

In what follows, no attempt will be made to discuss the history of western anthropological theory as a whole. Indeed, the reader may feel that the concentration on three English-speaking figures – Boas with his students, and Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown with theirs – is a narrow and unrepresentative focus. However, the three are selected because, more than any others, they succeeded in altering the course of western anthropological history. In the early decades of the twentieth century they achieved an almost complete rupture in the traditions of the discipline. Prior to their appearance, social anthropology had been dominated by Morgan and his followers,

evolutionary investigations remaining loosely but ultimately integrated with studies of living traditional cultures. After their work had been done, Morgan was disowned, whereupon cultural studies on the one hand, the evolutionary sciences on the other, went their separate ways. All subsequent anthropological writers and thinkers of any influence in the West, however original or independent, have worked and thought essentially within the parameters established in the course of that rupture. An adequate re-evaluation of twentieth-century western anthropology as a whole would require us to return to the point at which the break was made, retie some of the threads – and make a fresh beginning.

American Diffusionism

To an extent, the Boasian reaction against nineteenth-century evolutionism was understandable – even progressive. Firstly, the untrammelled theorising of many of the nineteenth-century armchair anthropologists had produced innumerable theories to explain the primordial beginnings of marriage, the family, religion and much else, but very few suggestions as to how or why one theory should be selected in preference to another. There were simply too many theories, many of them spun out of thin air, and it began to be felt that an emphasis on fieldwork and a more rigorous, methodical, *fact-finding* approach was required.

Secondly, among social anthropologists early in this century a fierce reaction set in against the view that 'savages' were close to animals, that certain of their customs were 'survivals' from a previous, perhaps ape-like, stage, that biology was the basis of sociology and so on. Actual contact with 'primitive' tribes had been convincing ethnologists that all of this was absurd – that people in all cultures were equally human, that their languages and thought processes were in a formal sense equally complex and 'advanced', that none of their customs showed any signs of being survivals from the apes and that the whole idea of studying simpler cultures to find clues to ultimate origins was a mistake. It became one of the cardinal tenets of anthropologists that, as Franz Boas (1938 [1911]: v) put it, there 'is no fundamental difference in the ways of thinking of primitive and civilized man'. All cultures were equal – and all were therefore equally separated from the animal world. The new anti-evolutionism of Boas, therefore, was to a large extent a campaign against the *biologism* and implicit *racism* of much of the old evolutionist tradition.

The new American anthropologists were fired by hostility to what they saw as grandiose oversimplifications. Nineteenth-century social evolutionary theory, alleged Franz Boas in 1911, had been 'an application to mental phenomena of the theory of biological evolution' (Boas 1938 [1911]: 177). Although there was some truth in the statement, it was one-sided and exaggerated. The best nineteenth-century evolutionist scholars had been

quite aware of the need to go beyond Darwin in constructing on an adequate basis the new 'science of man'. But once Morgan, Tylor, Engels and other evolutionists had been lumped together with the real Social Darwinists, the discrediting of their aims and theories – and, indeed, the discrediting of all attempts at 'Grand theory' – became a relatively simple task.

Nothing can ever detract from the inestimable value of Boas' and his students' work in recording myths, recipes, designs and other details of native American cultures. Boas in particular recorded vast amounts of undigested and often indigestible information, and usually did so just in time, a few years before his older native informants were to die and take their irreplaceable store of knowledge with them. It may well have been precisely Boas' lack of interest in theory which enabled him to record so much: it would seem that he simply wrote and wrote, leaving it for later generations to sort the information into some kind of intelligible order. This was an immensely valuable contribution to human knowledge, but it remains the case that his records are often maddeningly unstructured, with vital questions left unasked and unanswered. To attempt to record 'facts' without any guiding theory at all betrays a hopeless misunderstanding of what 'facts' are (Kuhn 1970). And on a broader level – returning, now, to the development of anthropological theory as a whole – a disastrous fragmentation of anthropology as a discipline was one of the costs.

The concept of 'culture' was used as a means of rigidly isolating the study of human social life from evolutionary theory. An impenetrable barrier was set up between the two wings – physical and cultural – of anthropological science. While evolutionary biologists continued – and have continued to this day – developing the methods of Darwin in the study of the human species, the specialists in culture (particularly in the United States) clung to an impassioned belief in the uniqueness, freedom, unpredictability and autonomy of the cultural realm. Although the culturalist reaction had some justification, it has often been argued – plausibly enough – that this new anti-evolutionism was a return to religion in another guise (Fox 1975a: 245–6).

The cultural domain was depicted as in essence an unpredictable and inexplicable mystery – inherently so by virtue of its basis in behaviour which was not genetically inherited but freely and voluntarily learned. Boas' student Kroeber (1917; quoted in Murdock 1965: 71) in a famous passage wrote that two ants can be raised from eggs, in complete isolation from any others of their kind, and will nonetheless soon recreate of their own accord the entirety of their social system. By contrast, two human babies provided for physically but unable to *learn from others* will produce only 'a troop of mutes, without arts, knowledge, fire, without order or religion'. 'Hereditity', concluded Kroeber, 'saves for the ant all that she has, from generation to generation. But heredity does not maintain, because it cannot maintain, one particle of the civilization which is the one specifically human thing'.

Kroeber went on to argue that since culture was independent of genetic determinism, history must be entirely free from the evolutionary principles uncovered by Darwin.

Unfortunately, however, the insistence that cultural anthropology was not reducible to biology was then used by Kroeber and other Boasians to argue that culture was 'free' in a more absolute sense: free from all forms of necessity or determinism, and hence free from any constraints or patterns which could be formulated as general principles or scientific laws. Anthropologists, according to Boas (1932: 612), could hope to describe not 'general laws' but only 'individual phenomena'. This was in the nature of 'learned behaviour': a person could learn anything – a myth, a design, a technique – from anywhere, or not learn it, or combine it with anything else which was learned. Since people in any human culture could learn virtually any 'custom' from people in any other culture (cultural traits in this way 'diffusing' across time and space in unpredictable ways), the result – so it was argued – was for each culture to be an arbitrary and utterly unique conglomeration of disparate elements. This was certainly the impression created by Boas' and his students' papers and notes.

In 1920, Boas' student Robert Lowie (1920: 440–1) justified this impression of disorderliness in his *Primitive Society*. No 'necessity or design' appears from the study of culture history, he wrote. 'Cultures develop mainly through the borrowings due to chance contact.' Civilisation is a 'planless hodge-podge' to which we should no longer yield 'superstitious reverence'; it is a 'chaotic jumble'. Although there were soon to be retreats from and reactions against this position – for example in the works of Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead and the 'culture and personality' school – to a very great extent, twentieth-century American cultural anthropology was founded on the basis of this extraordinary judgement.

The diffusionism of Boas, Kroeber, Lowie and others had political dimensions. The element of anti-racism has been mentioned already. Equally important, however, was opposition to the by no means racist American anthropological tradition established by Lewis Morgan. Morgan's admiration for the egalitarian and matrilineal Iroquois Indians and his vision of worldwide human democratisation had earlier been incorporated into the framework of Marxist theory. By the early years of the twentieth century the socialist movement in the United States was becoming a significant force. When Franz Boas (1938 [1911]: 193) attacked the search for laws of history, he linked Social Darwinism in this respect with the view that 'social structure is determined by economic forms' – an obvious reference to Marxism.

Robert Lowie (1937: 54–5) was politically aware enough to note how Morgan had become identified with Marxism in the eyes of anthropologists

of his generation. 'By a freak of fortune' Lowie observed, Morgan 'has achieved the widest international celebrity of all anthropologists'. This was 'naturally' not due to Morgan's solid achievements 'but to a historical accident': his *Ancient Society* (1877) attracted the notice of Marx and Engels, who accepted and popularised its evolutionary doctrines as being in harmony with their own philosophy. As a result, Morgan's work was promptly translated into various European tongues and, continued Lowie, 'German workingmen would sometimes reveal an uncanny familiarity with the Hawaiian and Iroquois mode of designating kin, matters not obviously connected with a proletarian revolution'.

Lowie went on to note that Morgan 'has been officially canonised by the present Russian regime', whose spokesmen declare his work 'of paramount importance for the materialistic analysis of primitive communism'.

The Boasians therefore felt obliged to fight on two fronts. On the one hand, they attacked racist and biological-reductionist theories of evolution and history; on the other, they aimed to demolish key Marxist notions such as that of 'primitive communism', arguing repeatedly – in direct opposition to Engels – that private property, the state and 'the family' were timeless universals of all human existence. 'With Morgan's scheme incorporated into communist doctrine', concludes Marvin Harris (1969: 249), 'the struggling science of anthropology crossed the threshold of the twentieth century with a clear mandate for its own survival and well-being: expose Morgan's scheme and destroy the method on which it was based'.

Harris argues that this consideration was more important than anti-Darwinism, and that virtually the whole of twentieth-century anthropological theory has been shaped by the perceived need to suppress the tradition of Morgan and the influence within anthropology of Engels and Marx.

Despite this, there was something refreshingly honest and uncomplicated about the writings of the American diffusionists. Unlike Britain's functionalists, they had no great pretensions, and apparently few axes to grind. Although they were hostile to Marxism, and in particular to the notion of primitive communism, they were quite able to admit the drawbacks of their own chosen methods and conclusions. When Kroeber reviewed Lowie's *Primitive Society*, he praised the author for his 'chaotic jumble' remarks, identified with his methods – yet admitted that the result was a *basically useless* form of knowledge: 'its products must appear rather sterile. There is little output that can be applied on other sciences. There is scarcely even anything that psychology, which underlies anthropology, can take hold of and utilize.'

Anthropology could only note unique facts, without ever answering the fundamental question: Why? But people, Kroeber went on, do want to know why, and always will. After the absorption of the first shock of interest in the

fact that the Iroquois Indians have matrilineal clans and that the Arunta Aborigines have totems, they want to know why some primitive cultures develop clans and totems while others fail to. In answer, all the diffusionists could offer – admitted Kroeber – was the uninspiring information ‘that we do not know or that diffusion of an idea did or did not reach a certain area’. Kroeber concluded sadly:

That branch of science which renounces the hope of contributing at least something to the shaping of life is headed into a blind alley. Therefore, if we cannot present anything that the world can use, it is at least incumbent on us to let this failure burn into our consciousness.

If anthropology was ultimately useless, the best thing to do was to admit the fact (Kroeber 1920: 377–81).

Kroeber’s misgivings indicate how far the new anthropology had departed from the spirit of Morgan and the nineteenth-century founders. The earlier writers, whatever their faults, had not questioned the usefulness of what they were doing. To them, science was enlightenment – and enlightenment was not something which had to be justified. Morgan had seen science as inseparable from democracy, just as prejudice and superstition were inseparable from tyranny (Resek 1960: 60, 122–30). To Tylor, civilisation was the fruit of man’s intellect; to be human meant to be guided forward by the light of reason (Voget 1975: 49). To men such as these, the anthropological questions they confronted were of immense philosophical importance and intrinsic human interest. Enlightenment was an end in itself; their own new science was an important aspect of the gradually advancing self-awareness of humankind. The idea of debating whether this self-awareness was ‘useful’ would not have occurred to them. And indeed, it was only after the science of culture had isolated itself from almost all related branches of science and had *ceased to ask itself fundamental questions* that such an idea could have arisen.

British Functionalism

If British social anthropology in its ‘Golden Age’ was somewhat less troubled and less uncertain of its practical usefulness in the world, it was for a tangible enough reason. To a far greater extent than the North American Indians – whose resistance in most cases had been savagely broken some time before anthropologists began their studies – the inhabitants of Britain’s colonies presented a real problem in terms of long-term political control. To the extent that North American ethnology answered a practical need, it was largely that of a salvage operation for writers of history books, involving talking to old Indian informants on reservations in order to recover for posterity some idea of what their cultures had once been like. The ‘functionalism’ of Britain’s Bronislaw Malinowski and the ‘structural-functionalism’ of Radcliffe-Brown answered more weighty needs.

Functionalist theoretical frameworks were designed to analyse *living* social structures in order to control them from the outside. As Malinowski (quoted in Harris 1969: 558) himself candidly insisted:

The practical value of such a theory [functionalism] is that it teaches us the relative importance of various customs, how they dovetail into each other, how they have to be handled by missionaries, colonial authorities, and those who economically have to exploit savage trade and savage labour.

Or, as Radcliffe-Brown (1929: 33) put it, anthropology 'has an immediate practical value in connection with the administration and education of backward peoples'. None of Kroeber's fears lest 'we cannot present anything that the world can use' are discernible here.

Britain's functionalists enjoyed poking fun at the notion of culture as a planless hodge-podge. The absurd anti-theoretical stance of the Boasians provided an easy target – and a welcomed one, since without the 'chaotic jumble' idea, the neat and tidy mirror-image theory that cultures are and must always be perfectly functional wholes might have seemed pointless and unnecessary.

According to functionalist dogma, a cultural fact had been explained once its necessary function had been revealed. Once a mythico-religious system had been shown to be useful, that was all that needed to be said. The details, the inner logic, the symbolic connections – these did not need to be subjected to theoretical labour once the functionality of the overall result had been demonstrated. In an early work, Malinowski (1912), for example, 'explained' the complex and elaborate *Intichiuma* ceremonies of the Central Australian Aranda Aborigines by noting that they presupposed the preparation of much food, required strict discipline and synchronised collective effort – and therefore provided excellent stimulus to labour and economic production. From this point of view, precisely what the Aborigines did in their rituals was irrelevant. They could dance or sing in any way they liked: provided the result was to discipline themselves so that they could become adept at physical labour, the function was the same. 'Such conceptual impoverishment', as Marshall Sahlins (1976: 77) much later commented, 'is the functionalist mode of theoretical production'. Fortunately, in his mature, fieldwork-based writings on the Trobriand Islanders, Malinowski allowed his informants to speak for themselves, and gave us some of the most magnificently vivid, rich, detailed and moving ethnographic writing ever to have been penned. No one has surpassed Malinowski as a sensitive observer. The fact remains, however, that Malinowski's theoretical framework – to which he became more and more narrowly committed as the years passed – could only diminish this richness of his output, for it could do no more than harp endlessly on the uninteresting dogma that each 'custom' in each culture must be functional in relation to the whole. Even when we can agree, it is

not an idea which does much to enlighten us or to stimulate investigation into the inner logic of the 'customs' themselves.

With its crassly organic analogies, functionalism left no room for conflict, contradiction, dysfunction or clashes between rival interest groups. The idea that different classes or groups could define mutually incompatible 'functions' seems not to have occurred to anthropologists at the time. Societies were supposed to be harmonious and stable systems whose components all functioned for the benefit of the whole – or, as Malinowski himself tended to express matters, for the benefit of the biological individual whose needs mysteriously coincided with those of the whole. There was more than a touch, here, of the administrator's 'law and order' perspective on life: a vision of the world as a pacified, conflict-free system – if only people would behave! This was not accidental. Anthropology's own function within the world provided one of the more convincing confirmations of the model. Functionalism's declared and explicit function was to enable Europeans more effectively to pacify 'savage' societies in the interests of imperialism as a harmonious whole.

Whereas in the United States the attack on evolutionism was well under before the First World War, in Britain events moved more slowly. Writers in the evolutionist tradition – such as W. H. R. Rivers and Sir James Frazer – continued to be influential and it was not until the 1920s that the tide began to turn. When the evolutionist tradition was finally repudiated, it was not so much through philosophical scepticism as out of directly practical political interest. In the dying decades of the British Empire, huge administrative problems were presenting themselves, and an answer had to be found to Radcliffe-Brown's question: 'What sort of anthropological problems are of practical value in connection with such problems of administration?' (Radcliffe-Brown 1929: 33).

With the exception of occasional keen amateurs, the administrators of Britain's colonies felt no reason to interest themselves in the origins of humankind or the past histories of peoples or civilisations. What concerned them were the present and immediate problems involved in controlling particular territories and groups of 'natives'. What they needed – according to both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown – was an applied science, a manipulative set of rules, so that 'the natives' could be governed in much the same way that a chemist or physicist can govern and manipulate natural forces. 'To exercise control over any group of phenomena', as Radcliffe-Brown (1929: 35) put it,

we must know the laws relating to them. It is only when we understand a culture as a functioning system that we can foresee what will be the results of any influence, intentional or unintentional, that we may exert upon it.

If, therefore, anthropological science was 'to give any important help in relation to practical problems of government and education' it had to 'abandon speculative attempts to conjecture the unknown past and . . . devote itself to the functional study of culture'.

Colonialism and Anthropology

In the 1920s, most British colonial administrators still tended to be scornful of the traditional image of the 'anthropologist' – thinking of this figure as something of a crank, perhaps a fraterniser with the natives, and almost certainly someone of an impractical frame of mind, wrapped up in strange antiquarian interests and theories about the origins of the race. Of what conceivable practical value to an administration could an anthropologist of this sort be? (James 1973: 53–4). Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown were well aware of such official scepticism and were determined to transform their image. Their endlessly repeated denunciations of 'speculations', or of evolutionism, Darwinism, 'Bolshevism' and other 'unsound' or 'dangerous' theories are best seen in this light. Like Darwinism itself in the previous century, anthropological evolutionism had never been altogether respectable. It was necessary to make a clean break and repudiate anthropology's past.

One of the first things to be repudiated was any interest at all in evolutionary origins. In his early book on the family among the Australian Aborigines, Malinowski (1963 [1913]: 89) was already arguing that questions about the past were a problem with which 'we need not concern ourselves . . .'. He later wrote: 'I have grown more and more indifferent to the problems of origins . . .'. (Malinowski 1932: xxiii–xxiv). In a footnote to his *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski declared with some pride that, while he was presenting 'the facts' about native institutions as carefully as he could, it was 'hardly necessary perhaps to make it quite clear that all questions of origins, of development or history of the institutions have been rigorously ruled out of this work' (1922: 100). In introducing *The Sexual Life of Savages* (1932: xxiii–xxiv) he guaranteed 'the complete elimination' from the text of all 'statements about "origins", "primeval states" and other fundamentals of evolutionism', adding that he 'would rather discountenance any speculations about the "origins" of marriage or anything else than contribute to them even indirectly . . .'.

Radcliffe-Brown's attacks on the evolutionist tradition were still more vitriolic. Lecturing on the 'historical bias' of the early anthropology and of 'the false idea of evolution to which it led such writers as Morgan', he complained: 'We have had theories of the origin of totemism, of the origin of exogamy, and even theories of the origin of language, of religion, and of society itself . . .'. One can feel and hear Radcliffe-Brown's merriment and scorn, and the audience's laughter. Radcliffe-Brown was here addressing a

white South African audience, to whom problems of 'origins' were hilariously irrelevant in comparison with the need to maintain white supremacy in troubling times. 'In this country', Radcliffe-Brown continued.

we are faced with a problem of immense difficulty and great complexity. It is the need of finding some way in which two very different races . . . may live together . . . without the loss to the white race of those things in its civilisation that are of the greatest value, and without that increasing unrest and disturbance that seem to threaten us

This, he continued, was where anthropology could be 'of immense and almost immediate service'. Provided it was not about origins but about detailing the functions of native institutions to facilitate white control, anthropology would greatly help the authorities 'in dealing with the practical problems of the adjustment of the native civilisation to the new conditions that have resulted from our occupation of the country' (1960: 16, 26).

Social anthropology became important to British colonial administration only in the 1930s and 1940s, in the context of retreat from direct rule as difficulties mounted, wasteful and costly blunders were recognised and the need arose to mobilise the colonies behind the war effort (Feuchtwang 1973: 71–100). Malinowski frequently warned that educated African 'agitators' and nationalists should be understood and if possible won over to European aims lest 'by ignoring them and treating them with contempt we drive them into the open arms of world-wide Bolshevism' (quoted in James 1973: 61). He welcomed indirect rule because it involved 'the maintenance of as much as possible of the Native authority instead of its destruction', providing certain compensations for the natives whilst 'leaving the ultimate control in the hands of Europeans'. The object, Malinowski declared, was 'to create in Native authority a devoted and dependable ally, controlled, but strong, wealthy and satisfied' (Malinowski 1945, in Feuchtwang 1973: 91–2).

A fairly typical liberal, his instincts in a libertarian direction did not extend far. In discussing black 'progress' within white African colonies he was adamant: Europeans should 'make quite clear in preaching the gospel of civilisation, that no full identity can be reached' (Malinowski 1945: 160, quoted in Feuchtwang 1973: 92). Whenever Europeans settle in a colony, he insisted, 'segregation and colour bar become inevitable', a fact which

ought to be remembered by the enthusiastic minority of good-will, who may involuntarily raise high hopes through such doctrines as the brotherhood of Man, the Gospel of Labour, and the possibilities of assimilation through education, dress, manners and morals. (Malinowski 1945, quoted in Harris 1969: 558)

Malinowski's political allegiances were not in any sense with 'the natives'; he simply aimed to make colonialism more efficient through being self-aware. Radcliffe-Brown (1940; quoted in Feuchtwang 1973; 90), voicing a similar aim, put matters well: 'Imperialism is the self-assumed role of controller of other peoples. They will not let this continue indefinitely. In the meantime, let this blind experiment become less blind.'

Until about 1960, it was virtually impossible for anyone to become trained as a social anthropologist without political collusion in all this. Evans-Pritchard (1946: 97) stressed that the anthropologist who was used as a consultant to an administration 'should be a full member of it'. He could not give good advice without knowing the bureaucratic machinery of colonial rule 'from the inside', having full access to all government documents, and meeting the heads of departments around the same conference table as an equal: 'Administrators naturally resent advice from outsiders but will gladly accept it from one who has the same loyalty to the administration as themselves . . .'

From this it followed that those who lacked the necessary 'loyalty' could find it extremely difficult to obtain permission to do fieldwork, whilst those without fieldwork experience were not permitted to contribute to the development of theory at all. In this way, through the allocation of grants and through countless other bureaucratic and administrative means, the 'science of man' was moulded into conformity with the most narrow of political ends.

Conclusion: Anthropology and Origins

In both Britain and the United States, then, twentieth-century social anthropology turned its back upon evolutionary theory and upon all interest in questions of social origins. As late as the 1960s, Evans-Pritchard (1965: 104, 100) was still vigorously repudiating the 'vain pursuit of origins' and theories of evolution, all of which were said to be 'as dead as mutton'. Edmund Leach (1957: 125) spoke for almost all his professional colleagues when he declared that 'whether or not evolutionary doctrine is true, it is certainly quite irrelevant for the understanding of present-day human societies'. France was before long as firmly gripped as Britain or America. The ferocious intolerance of the new consensus expressed itself in the fact that Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* outlined a new theory of human cultural origins, earnestly assured his readers that, on the contrary, 'we have been careful to eliminate all historical speculation, all research into origins, and all attempts to reconstruct a hypothetical order in which institutions succeeded one another' (1969a: 142). The result was a book about origins which was presented as a book about eternal principles or 'structures'. 'We do not know', Lévi-Strauss wrote elsewhere (1969b: 141), 'and never shall know, anything about the first origins of beliefs and customs the roots of which plunge into a distant past'.

The ideological and political motivations involved in all of this have been stressed. The main and overriding aim was to root out Morgan's notion of 'primitive communism' and to discredit Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. So much was this the priority, that on both sides of the Atlantic, from the earliest days, diffusionists and functionalists were quite capable of resorting to arguments about 'origins' themselves – usually in throw-away remarks or casual asides – whenever it served their polemical purposes. It was as if they were warning their students and readers not to investigate such questions too closely, yet claiming to be unafraid of the consequences should such warnings be defied – after all, even if research into origins *were* to be carried out, Marx, Morgan and Engels would surely be found to be wrong! Robert Lowie, for example, wrote a book entitled *The Origin of the State* (1962: 2), in which he endorsed the view of Eduard Meyer that the state was the equivalent of the herd among lower animal species, inherited by humankind without break from the primeval past and therefore absolutely universal. This, of course, was a direct riposte to Morgan's and Engels' view that the state was a relatively recent historical invention. And even as he insisted that all interest in 'origins' was unscientific, Malinowski was not above allowing it to be known that he, too, knew in advance what the origins of the family would turn out to be should anyone ever be so foolish as to investigate the matter. In this context, he stated categorically in a BBC radio debate in 1931: 'marriage in single pairs – monogamy in the sense in which Westermarck and I are using it – is primeval . . . ' (Malinowski 1956: 28).

It is now possible to sum up the effects of the taboo on culturally informed discussions of origins which has been imposed upon us for most of the twentieth century. When Kroeber declared (1901: 320) that 'all search for origin in anthropology can lead to nothing but false results', and when similar statements were made on both sides of the Atlantic for the next fifty years, the effect was not to prevent people from believing in evolutionary theories. The effect was, rather, to allow the public access only to theories of a particular – culturally uninformed – kind.

By remaining aloof from evolutionary debate, social anthropologists of virtually all schools in the West have allowed this dire situation to come about. From the very beginning, the cultural specialists' abstention did not produce any decline in popular interest in questions of human origins. It simply caused a lack of interest in social anthropology which – on this as on so many other philosophically important issues – seemed to have nothing to say. Every society must have its origin myth, and if it cannot obtain it from one source, it will obtain it from another. Finding the social anthropologists silent, the wider public has turned, for lack of an alternative, to Social Darwinists, neo-Darwinists and most recently sociobiologists – in other words, to people who (to exaggerate only slightly) know nothing about

culture at all. In this sense, a division of labour appears to have operated for something like half a century, with both Darwinians and social anthropologists denying our human potentiality for significant change in different ways. On the one hand, unchangeable biological functions have been upheld as the basis of the most important human cultural institutions – institutions such as the family and the state. On the other hand, change has been denied or excluded from view by a diametrically opposite argument: by the insistence that culture simply exists, that cultural principles are not reducible to biological ones, and that ultimate origins can never be known or understood.

Chapter 2

Lévi-Strauss and 'the Mind'

My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of 'the Idea', he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of 'the Idea.' With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought.

Karl Marx, *Capital*. Afterword to the second German edition (1873)

Until recently, Claude Lévi-Strauss was the dominant figure in post-war western social anthropology. His contribution was to make imaginative thinking, speculation and theory building respectable once more. His first major work was an ambitious world survey of kinship systems designed to revolutionise our understanding of human culture as a whole. He remains to this day the only eminent cultural anthropologist to have based his analyses upon a theory of how human culture originated.

Lévi-Straussian methodology was to an extreme degree mentalist and idealist. Its most significant findings were restricted to the cognitive level, whilst even these still cry out for further corroboration and in many cases have *not* been confirmed. Nonetheless, Lévi-Strauss cannot be omitted from any discussion on human origins. Too many Darwinian and sociobiological contributions are in cultural terms simply uninformed. They explain various things, but they do not explain *culture*. No theory can do this, unless it is based on a broad, cross-cultural understanding of the kinship systems, rituals, myths and other institutions of hunter-gatherers and other traditionally organised peoples. We need to know in detail what human culture at the most basic level is. Lévi-Strauss did not satisfactorily provide this understanding, but no one nowadays can even approach such a study without drawing on the contributions that he made.

Structuralism became fashionable in the 1960s, when – as the consequences of the post-war colonial revolution worked through the discipline – social anthropology began seeking new reasons for its existence. Seeming to offer intellectual integrity and lofty, planet-embracing objectivity, the new movement addressed its appeal not to colonial administrators but essentially to western intellectuals attempting to redefine the relationship between their own imperialist, nature-denying, nuclear-age industrial mono-culture and the fast disappearing kaleidoscope of non-industrial cultures of the planet. Promising to make anthropological grand theory a respectable pursuit once more, it gained an enthusiastic following within literary circles and among many social anthropologists from about 1960 until the mid-1970s.

Concurrently with those political developments which were to culminate in the French revolutionary upheavals of May 1968, structuralism fostered a widespread atmosphere of intellectual excitement and anticipation, as if humanity were on the edge of some breathtaking advance in scientific self-understanding. Such hopes were short-lived, however. 'The messianic overtones associated with that intellectual movement', in the words of one former participant (Willis 1982: vii),

which the sibylline pronouncements of Lévi-Strauss himself did much to maintain and promote, are to a considerable extent responsible for the neglect and even obloquy into which structuralism has fallen in more recent years, now that the Promised Land of total human self-understanding seems as far away as ever.

In the bitter aftermath of such disillusionment, structuralist versions of anthropology have now been repudiated almost universally.

Lévi-Strauss published his mature work in three stages. First, in 1949, came *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, which became and remained for three decades the most reviewed, written about and discussed book in contemporary anthropology. In it, the author presented his theory that 'the exchange of women' – resting upon men's conceptual ability to distinguish between 'sister' and 'wife' – gave rise to human culture. In the light of this theory, Lévi-Strauss undertook an ambitious cross-cultural survey and re-analysis of many of the world's most frequently discussed kinship systems. A revised version of the work was published in English translation in 1969 (Lévi-Strauss 1969a).

Then in 1962 Lévi-Strauss published his *Totemism* and *The Savage Mind*. These short works marked a change of course – a shift of interest away from social processes towards systems of cognition. Lévi-Strauss challenged the notion that the concept, 'totemism' – once considered to be the most primitive form of human ritual and religion – had any practical meaning or consequences at all. In his own words, 'totemism is an artificial unity,

existing solely in the mind of the anthropologist, to which nothing specifically corresponds in reality' (1969b: 79). In fact, Lévi-Strauss redefined totemism so as to exclude food taboos and other ritual dimensions from consideration, and described the remaining cognitive aspects as intellectual procedures of classification, in essence no different from those used by people in contemporary western cultures.

Finally – beginning in 1964 – came Lévi-Strauss' *Mythologiques*, which was intended to be the grand consummating achievement of structural anthropology. This four-volume in-depth study of more than 800 American Indian myths was widely expected to reveal, finally, the 'universal mental structures' which structuralism had been promising from the outset.

Mythologiques attempted to prove that the deepest recurrent structures of cultural symbolism are universal because they reflect the genetic constitution and internal organisation of the uniquely human 'mind'. The aim was to reveal what Lévi-Strauss in his *Totemism* had termed 'the least common denominator of all thought' – 'an original logic, a direct expression of the structure of the mind (and behind the mind, probably, of the brain), and not an inert product of the action of the environment on an amorphous consciousness' (1969b: 163).

The first volume, entitled *The Raw and the Cooked*, studied myths which portrayed culinary operations 'as mediatory activities between heaven and earth, life and death, nature and society' (1970: 64–5). The author added a new element to his theory of cultural origins, suggesting that the discovery of cooking fire must have been associated with a conceptual opposition as important as that between 'sister' and 'wife' – the contrast, namely, between raw meat and cooked. Succeeding volumes raised arcane issues such as why, throughout the Americas, noise should have been believed to be antithetical to cooking (1970: 148–9, 287, 294; 1978: 305–6, 322–3, 496–7; 1981: 307), why eclipses should have provoked noisemaking (1970: 287, 295, 300–1) and the overturning of cooking-pots (1970: 298), and why female menstruation should have been linked with moon-spots, incest and cannibalism (1970: 312; 1978: 389; 1981: 219, 268). These were among the findings used to argue that the myths of the Americas were reducible in the final analysis to 'One Myth Only' (1981).

Lévi-Strauss' Anti-evolutionism

The Elementary Structures of Kinship was presented as an exercise in dialectics. Unlike Hegelian dialectics, however, the Lévi-Straussian version excluded the possibility of significant historical change. In this as in other respects, structuralism was about as far removed from both Marxism and classical evolutionism as it is possible to get. Far from viewing things in their change and development through time, Lévi-Strauss sought only static, synchronic consistencies and correlations. Seeking neither origins nor causes but only

patterns, structuralism aimed to isolate significance on one level – an assumed plane of ultimate changelessness beneath all appearances of change. A sympathetic critic (Murphy 1972: 197) put it well when he wrote of *The Elementary Structures*: 'It shows a capacity for seeing a universe in a sand speck and all of evolution in a moment'. It is a good description of Lévi-Strauss' work at its best.

'Structure' was conceptualised as a set of ultimate rules for playing life's game – an invariant logic beneath culture's surface variations. This 'logic' or 'structure', whilst never in fact brought to light or specified, was equated by Lévi-Strauss with the supposedly unchanging and unchangeable internal architecture of the human 'mind', subsisting frozen in timeless eternity. Not only was this anti-materialism on a scale rarely attempted since the time of Hegel – it was also anti-evolutionism carried to its most extreme and bizarre twentieth-century conclusion.

Lévi-Strauss, then – like Boas, Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown – denied any interest in evolution or in the search for ultimate origins. For him, change in human culture was at the deepest level unreal – what really mattered were 'structures', and these were immune to historical change. Nonetheless, structure itself was assumed to have had a beginning, and in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Lévi-Strauss depicted this as some kind of quantum jump which had occurred when the cultural domain had become established. In opposition to the argument that humans are essentially animals, and that all cultural change is ultimately constrained by fixed biological functions characteristic of the species, Lévi-Strauss stressed the nature/culture opposition, depicting human life as emerging from culture's overthrow of nature's reign. But he froze the story of human evolution from this point onwards. Following the decisive moment in which a 'new order' had emerged, the basic structures of culture in this narrative endured eternally unchanged.

The Exchange of Women

Lévi-Strauss' myth of the origins of culture was presented in the opening pages of *The Elementary Structures*. The central focus was 'the incest rule'. The story ran as follows. In the pre-cultural state, groups of males, in seeking sexual partners, had tended to monopolise the females reared in their own group. There was no taboo to inhibit them from this. Boundaries between categories such as 'wife', 'sister' and 'daughter' were non-existent or blurred. Males in this system exhibited sexual selfishness, for 'incest, in the broadest sense of the word, consists in obtaining by oneself, and for oneself, instead of by another, and for another' (Lévi-Strauss 1969a: 489). To the extent that such sexual selfishness prevailed, there were no social relationships of gift-giving or reciprocity between neighbouring groups of males.

At a certain point, however, protohuman males rejected such sexual

selfishness. One group of males 'gave' its females to a second, trusting that the recipients would reciprocate in kind. This was the quantum jump in which culture was born. Gift-giving on such a level was the ultimate in generosity, for a woman was the most precious of possible gifts. From this point on, the daughters and sisters reared in each group were valued as potential gifts, to be used by their male kin in order to make social relationships with other groups of men.

Women, according to Lévi-Strauss, were now reared for exchange rather than for selfish direct use. To guarantee exchange, a new order of reality – a cultural rule – emerged. This was the taboo against incest. With its establishment, each male group, unable to enjoy its own women, had to find another group like itself, exchange its females for theirs – and forge a relationship of mutual trust and reciprocity in the process (Lévi-Strauss 1969a: 3–25). Because of the advantages of such mutuality and co-operation, this pattern came to predominate. Unlike selfish, pre-cultural males, those who were sexually generous formed wide alliances which enhanced their ability to survive.

An important conclusion was that, contrary to the views of most anthropologists of Lévi-Strauss' time, the nuclear family cannot be considered the cellular unit of human kinship. If there is an 'atom' of kinship, it is the unit consisting of a woman, her husband, her child – and her brother who gave the woman away in marriage to the husband in the first place (Lévi-Strauss 1977, 1: 46; 2: 82–112). Without the existence of this incest-avoiding brother, nothing could work. To an incestuous man, a woman would be potentially both sister and wife, and he would be both brother and husband. Lacking polarity or complementarity, building-blocks consisting of such indeterminate individuals would not interlock with one another to form extended chains. *No one would need wives, if they already had sisters who could be sexually enjoyed.* For Lévi-Strauss, the bonds which turn natural kinship into cultural interdependence are therefore neither parent–offspring relations nor sexual pair-bonds. If the fabric of human culture is held together by stitches, the basic stitches are those of marital alliance – essentially, bonds between men as woman-exchanging in-laws. It is alliance which enables biological families to transcend their own limitations, forming into chains of interdependency which constitute the essence of the cultural domain.

In *The Elementary Structures*, Lévi-Strauss touched on physical evolution, but only briefly. He noted among monkeys their 'irremediable lack of language and the total incapacity to treat sounds uttered or heard as signs', adding that this was all the more striking in view of the fact that 'there is no anatomical obstacle to a monkey's articulating the sounds of speech' (1969a: 6). But apart from implying that the use of signs and symbols presupposed some radical reorganisation of the primate brain, Lévi-Strauss left evolutionary

biology out of his discussion. The symbolic function, he felt, had simply 'arisen', quite suddenly, the precise reasons for this occurrence being of secondary interest: 'Whatever may have been the moment and the circumstances of its appearance in the ascent of animal life, language can only have arisen all at once. Things cannot have begun to signify gradually' (1987 [1950]: 59).

More generally, despite brief mention of attempts to teach chimpanzees to speak (1969a: 6), lessons to be drawn from monkey and ape sexual behaviour (pp. 7–8), and research into the Neanderthals and their lithic industries and burial rites (p. 3), Lévi-Strauss made very little use of others' findings in areas usually considered relevant to the study of human origins.

A modern response to the 'exchange of women' idea would be to ask how such exchange differed from the familiar finding that females are transferred between groups of non-human primates, such as chimpanzees. To the extent that differences could be demonstrated, the need would then be to seek some explanation in terms of changing ecological conditions and foraging strategies. What changing mode of production required and determined the hypothesised changes in the way sexual relations were organised? Lévi-Strauss said nothing of the mode of subsistence associated with the transition from nature to culture. Nothing was said of gathering, or of the evolution of hunting. And just as the mode of production was not specified, neither was the technological level. The notion of 'Man the Tool-maker' – staple of most origins theories of Lévi-Strauss time – was not criticised, but ignored. What was the connection, if any, between technological development and the sexual developments that Lévi-Strauss envisaged? Lévi-Strauss seemed simply uninterested in questions such as these.

A transformation in male sexual strategy as profound as that envisaged by Lévi-Strauss would also have had anatomical and physiological evolutionary consequences. Over time, differing sexual selection pressures would have produced different anatomical and physiological results. Lévi-Strauss excluded from his discussion this dimension, too, offering only a few hints that there must have been internal changes taking place within the brain – changes resulting in pan-human mental 'structures' helping to shape the patterns of kinship and culture.

To be fair, Lévi-Strauss' anti-evolutionism led him explicitly to deny any attempt to contribute to evolutionary theory. His origins-scenario was presented hesitantly and almost apologetically, emphasising not so much the processes or determinants of the nature/culture transition as the mere fact of the transition itself. As the incest taboo comes into operation,

the whole situation is completely changed. . . . Before it, culture is still non-existent; with it, nature's sovereignty over man is ended. The prohibition of incest is where nature transcends itself. . . . It brings about and is in itself the advent of a new order. (Lévi-Strauss 1969a: 25)

In passages such as this, the contrasting patterns 'before' and 'after' the establishment of the incest taboo are compared, but the details of any evolution from one to the other are left to the imagination.

Lévi-Strauss' theory was certainly an advance on certain others of the time in that it went beyond the idea that biological pair-bonds or 'nuclear families' were sufficient to form the cellular units of culture: it emphasised that some higher-order emergent configuration had to transform the significance of this biological material in order for the realm of culture to be established. It examined the large-scale integrative effects of marriage rules and rules of incest avoidance or exogamy, concentrating not on families but on the higher-order, collective and impersonal domain of relationships between them. But although these were advances, the origins theory was presented in a manner all too reminiscent of the conjectures of theorists of the nineteenth century. Few if any predictions were made which archaeologists, primatologists, evolutionary biologists or even social anthropologists could follow up and test – and indeed Lévi-Strauss expressed his disdain for the whole notion of testability by saying: 'Social structure . . . has nothing to do with empirical reality but with models built up after it' (Lévi-Strauss 1977, 1: 279). The theory was largely indeterminate in all but one particular – its stipulation that men must have inaugurated culture through the 'exchange of women'.

For Lévi-Strauss, it hardly needed stressing – because it was indisputable and virtually self-evident – that sexual rather than economic or ecological/foraging relations were primary in the transition to culture; and that males were responsible for the origins of culture, the female sex playing no active or initiating role. Almost the only potentially falsifiable prediction, consequently, was that human kinship systems should turn out to be systems of male-regulated sexual exchange. In *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, this expectation was elaborately explored and in many instances confirmed, but this was insufficient to confirm the theory as such. Even if many cultures are male-dominated and do exchange women in something like the manner described, we are not obliged to accept the view that culture as such was invented by men who discovered the advantages of man-to-man bride-exchanging alliances! The cultural incest taboo could have evolved in some other way whilst still giving rise to the exchange systems which Lévi-Strauss so exhaustively analysed.

Lévi-Strauss' theory has appealed to cultural anthropologists because it reflects an awareness of the richness and relative autonomy of the symbolic level of culture. But in the eyes of most evolutionary specialists it fails because it does not explain the mechanisms through which biological evolution could have produced such a result.

Why did those previously 'selfish' males suddenly become animated in their sexual lives by the 'spirit of the gift'? Lévi-Strauss suggests a selective advantage (the advantage of being part of an alliance) but provides no evolutionary timescale, no hypothesised ecological context, no theory of

foraging behaviour or economics to supplement his theory of sex. Most of his life's work has been devoted to the demonstration that the distinction between 'sister' and 'wife' is a binary distinction of immense symbolic significance in all human cultures, that it emanates from certain basic categorising propensities or 'structures' of the human brain, and that other binary contrasts – such as that between raw meat and cooked – demonstrate the existence of the same 'structures'. But the idea has gained little enduring support, not only because the locus and nature of the supposed 'structures' has seemed mysterious, but also because the theory presupposes these structures without in fact accounting for their origin.

Mythologiques

After writing *The Elementary Structures*, Lévi-Strauss felt dissatisfied with the results. His reservations struck many of his colleagues as strange, however, for they were based, not on a realisation that he might have made certain errors, but on the fact that he had studied 'life' rather than 'thought'. He had concentrated on the analysis of embodied, acted-out, practical forms of social organisation: kinship systems as systems of matrimonial exchange. He now felt that such a study was not the best way to reach a 'pure' picture of the internal architecture of the human brain. For this, the study of myths was required.

The Elementary Structures, he writes, had discerned behind an apparently chaotic mass of seemingly absurd rules governing the question of who could marry whom in various traditional cultures 'a small number of simple principles' thanks to which the entire field could be reduced to an intelligible system. The book had revealed the force of certain inescapable obligations, as coercive as the laws discovered by physicists and chemists in other spheres, to which the world's kinship systems of necessity conformed. 'However', Lévi-Strauss (1970: 10) writes – and in this lies his real criticism – 'there was nothing to indicate that the obligations came from within'. He had not proved that the structures of marital exchange which he had isolated really displayed for our inspection the internal architecture of the human brain.

This was simply because kinship systems – the subject matter of *The Elementary Structures* – are material in their functions and effects. However much they may display a mental or cognitive dimension, they are contaminated through their inevitable involvement in sex, babies, practical affairs, institutionalised social demands, economic necessities, historical contingencies and other 'external' factors. Although Lévi-Strauss wishes he could have claimed that the constraints discovered in his kinship analyses were purely internal, deriving from the inner properties of the human brain, he concedes a point to his opponents on this score: 'Perhaps they were merely the reflection in men's minds of certain social demands that had been objectified in institutions' (1970: 10). In other words, materialists could still

claim that it was social life which had determined the structures of human consciousness, rather than the architecture of the human brain which had produced the patterns discernible in social forms.

Impatient to prove that the internal structure of the mind was the source of all structure in culture, he would now focus not on social practice but on cognition. He began to delve into what Leach (1967: 132) memorably termed 'the land of the Lotus Eaters' – the world of mythology considered as the free creation of the human mind 'communing with itself'.

The significance of Lévi-Strauss' *Mythologiques* lay here: the new study would at last demonstrate the independent structure-imparting contribution of the human 'mind'. Unlike kinship systems, as Lévi-Strauss writes in the opening pages (1970: 10), mythology 'has no obvious practical function'. It is 'not directly linked' with more 'objective' kinds of reality which might be considered to constrain it. 'And so', he continues, 'if it were possible to prove in this instance, too, that the apparent arbitrariness of the mind' displays 'the existence of laws operating at a deeper level', we would have to conclude

that when the mind is left to commune with itself and no longer has to come to terms with objects, it is in a sense reduced to imitating itself as object; and that since the laws governing its operations are not fundamentally different from those it exhibits in its other functions, it shows itself to be of the nature of a thing among things. (1970: 10)

The Problem of Ritual

Now, the project to isolate myths from their social context immediately came up against a problem. Lévi-Strauss' specialist colleagues had long held that myths *do* in fact have ideological and other practical functions, and that ritual action in particular mediates between mythology and life, shaping and constraining the logic of myths. Lévi-Strauss wanted to demonstrate that myths emerge *not* from collective, social action as this structures people's minds, but independently from a 'mind' which lies behind culture and whose 'structures' are already fully formed prior to any influences which might be derived from culture. It was his intransigent insistence on this point which had led to his dissolution of the classically defined concept, 'totemism' (1969b). Similar objectives would now lead to perhaps the most extraordinary characteristic of his later work: his unrelenting campaign either to deny the significance of ritual in general, or – where that proved impossible – to depict ritual as the very antithesis of the 'thought' which is embodied in myths.

It is difficult for non-anthropologists to appreciate the significance of ritual in non-western cultures, because, as Mary Douglas (1982: 34) has written, the belittlement of ritual is central to our European tradition. To us

ritual means, as she writes, 'the formal aspect of religion. "Mere ritual", one can say, and "empty ritual", and from there to mumbo jumbo and abracadabra'. Ritual is merely external; Europeans give priority to the internal, 'spiritual' aspects of religion. Ritual is mere form; we give priority to content. Ritual seems like a façade – we want to know what lies behind the façade.

But in non-western cultures, such activities as singing, dancing, healing, rain-making, life crisis ceremonial and public mourning are not façades or masks drawn across life. They are the meaningful stuff of life itself. Without ritual there would be no sociality, no collective power, no sharing of life's central and most meaningful moments. In some of the finest anthropological studies, such as Godfrey Lienhardt's (1961) work on the Dinka of the Sudan, ritual is shown not as a mask or dead crust over the face of living experience, but as that which creates and inspires it. 'It is form indeed,' Mary Douglas (1982: 36) comments, 'but inseparable from content, or rather there could be no content without it. It is appearance, but there is no other reality.' For many people in non-western cultures, ritual *is* culture.

Perhaps the best starting point in attempting to define ritual is to think of it as the collective dimension of intimate, emotionally significant life. It is collective action at those points where this reaches deep into personal, sexual and intimate emotional experience. Hence sexual intercourse is not necessarily a ritual, but if it occurs during a preordained 'honeymoon' following a public marriage ceremony it is. A young woman's first menstruation is not a ritual, but her puberty ceremony makes it so. To eat food is not ritual, but to participate in a public feast is. What turns even the most intimate and physiological of personal experiences into 'ritual' is symbolic behaviour which makes it collectively acknowledged, sanctioned and controlled. And with collective control comes power.

Ritual is *collective* symbolic action which in the most powerful way organises and harmonises emotions. Without this, there could have been no early human language, no 'kinship', no culture. A society which was a mere assemblage of egotistic, competing individuals would have no ritual domain and could not have one. On the other hand – turning to the opposite extreme – let us visualise an imaginary society whose members were unwilling to eat, to make love, to speak, to mourn their dead or to do anything unless they were sure that what they did formed part of a collective act. In such a society, each person would try to *synchronise* her or his behaviour with that of others – with the result that life would seem 'ritualised' to an extreme degree.

This is why 'form' in ritual is so important. It is simply not possible for humans to synchronise their behaviour collectively without reference to recurrent, standardised, memorable patterns. To Westerners, this may make ritual seem insincere or artificial. How can genuine tears – as at a funeral – be brought on to order at a precise moment determined in advance? How can a *chorus* legitimately express joy or love? It is thought that no act which has to

be directed or controlled collectively can be as valid as the spontaneous action of an individual. This, however, says much about the individualistic assumptions of western culture. It helps to explain 'the poverty of our rituals, their unconnectedness with each other and with our social purposes and the impossibility of our having again a system of public rituals relating our experiences into some kind of cosmic unity' (Douglas 1982: 38). In general it can be said that societies or groups value ritual to the extent that they value the maintenance of collective solidarity, and disregard it to the extent that individualism becomes the dominant ethic.

Perhaps the most important point, however, is that ritual is inseparable from myth. 'Myth and ritual', as Edmund Leach (1954: 264) put it, 'are one and the same. Both are modes of making statements about structural relationships.'

In certain cases, the identity may be so close that a myth functions in effect as the rule-book for a recurrently staged ritual performance. Hence the many versions of a Northern Australian myth about being swallowed by a Great Snake-Mother were acted out in real life – young men and boys were ritually 'swallowed alive' by older male actors playing the part of 'the Mother'. Until recent decades, the terrifying experience of being thus 'swallowed' and then 'regurgitated' was all part of young men's initiation into adult life. It is true, the great Australianist W. E. H. Stanner (1966: 157) conceded, that some myths in Western Australia were not acted out in any particular ritual. But taken as a whole, the myths made sense only within the total framework of Aboriginal ritually structured experience. If certain myths became detached from rituals, it was because – like stone monuments – magical stories many often survive even when their ritual re-enactments have ceased to be performed. Myths currently disembodied – floating free of any particular ritual tradition – are therefore (writes Stanner) 'as much the memorials of old formations of cult' as are the still-surviving stone circles or other patterns marking out the ritual dance grounds in which performances were once staged.

The classical scholar Fontenrose (1959: 3–4) proposed for this reason that we should really reserve the term 'myth' for stories which act as native scripts for ritual performances; other stories would then be 'legends' or 'folktales'. Robert Graves (in Cohen 1969: 345) made a similar point: 'True myth may be defined as the reduction to narrative shorthand of ritual mime performed on public festivals . . .'

However, if all magico-religious myths refer ultimately to ritually induced experiences, there may be no need to draw so sharp a distinction between 'true' myths and mere 'folk-tales' or 'fairy-tales'. Lévi-Strauss' great precursor in structural analysis, Vladimir Propp (1968: 105–7), viewed Russian and European magical 'fairy-tales' as surviving intellectual remnants

left over from a time when ritual and myth had been inseparable: 'A way of life and religion die out, while their contents turn into tales.'

The Attack on Ritual

Lévi-Strauss' view of the relationship between myth and ritual, however, was very different from all this.

In 1964, the first volume of *Mythologiques* appeared in French. It had been widely looked forward to, Lévi-Strauss' more eager supporters anticipating an elegant revelation of the simple logic underlying even the most complex categories of cultural phenomena. But as *The Raw and the Cooked* and subsequent volumes appeared, a sense of disappointment set in.

Amongst other criticisms, it was soon noted that while Lévi-Strauss laboriously attempted to explain myths by reference to countless other myths, he seemed unwilling to take the obvious step of interpreting any one myth by reference to its living social context. In particular, he maintained an 'almost complete silence on ritual' (Yalman 1967: 82). In *The Raw and the Cooked*, even the Amazonian Bororo 'key myth' about a bird-nester – a story which referred to the youthful hero's impending initiation ritual in its opening lines (1970: 35) – was not interpreted in the light of this evidently important ritual context.

To the consternation of many of his admirers, Lévi-Strauss' rigidly maintained silence on ritual proved to be sustained throughout the four volumes of *Mythologiques*. It was not until the closing pages of the last volume, *The Naked Man*, that the author at last came to an attempt to justify this stance. He then gave ritual such a dismissive treatment that one former admirer (De Heusch 1975: 371) could only term it 'astounding'. Another sympathetic critic (Willis 1982: ix) described it as 'idiosyncratic and misleading'. Such adjectives are hardly surprising, for Lévi-Strauss (1981: 675–9) summed up the situation as follows: 'On the whole, the opposition between rite and myth is the same as that between living and thinking, and ritual represents a bastardisation of thought, brought about by the constraints of life' (1981: 675). 'Ritual', Lévi-Strauss continued, 'reduces, or rather vainly tries to reduce, the demands of thought to an extreme limit, which can never be reached, since it would involve the actual abolition of thought'.

Ritual, in this view, is not the fertile soil within which myths grow. It is, on the contrary, the 'bastardisation' of mythological thought, aiming at 'the actual abolition of thought'.

It is difficult to sympathise with Lévi-Strauss' reasoning here, but he seems to mean the following (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 679). Life is unstructured sense experience; it is the realm of 'the continuous', in which everything poten-

tially merges into everything else. When 'mythic thought' is superimposed upon life, the latter is put under an intellectual grid: it is segmented by means of artificial 'distinctions, contrasts and oppositions', a process which leads to 'an ever-increasing gap between the intellect and life'. This gap arises because thought's work in fragmenting the world into polar-opposite concepts leads to a loss of concreteness, a loss of sensuous unity with nature, threatening to 'make it impossible to recover contact with the continuity of lived experience'. Unthinking human impulses revolt against this, desiring to get back from the realm of thought to sensuous life, and they express this revolt through ritual. But their irrational revolt cannot be allowed to succeed. Mythic thought represents culture's supremacy over nature, a supremacy which is irrevocable, and so ritual is doomed to impotence, a situation which explains its 'desperate, maniacal aspect'.

What actual evidence does Lévi-Strauss have for such a picture of ritual? In referring to the 'abolition of thought', he apparently has in mind not only ritual's general identification with the physical intimacies of 'life' but also the fact that few recurrent features of ritual in traditional cultures seem to uphold his notion of what 'thought' ought to be. Ritual, he feels, does not seem to single out for special attention men's marital alliances or 'the exchange of women'. Instead, it appears to foster confusion between the categories of 'sister' and 'wife', as also between 'animal' and 'human'. Far from crystallising the observance of marital obligations and the incest taboo, ritual often seems to celebrate sexual licence and symbolic incest. Far from creating the 'axioms underlying social structure and the laws of the moral or natural order', ritual 'endeavours rather, if not to deny them, at least to obliterate, temporarily, the distinctions and oppositions they lay down, by bringing out all sorts of ambiguities, compromises and transitions between them' (1981: 680).

Correspondingly, the shaman or other ritual leader – according to Lévi-Strauss – is often not a normal husband or wife but is bisexual, or a transvestite, or half-animal. 'There are myths', writes Lévi-Strauss (1981: 769),

which say that, for ritual to be invented, some human being must have abjured the sharp, clear distinctions existing in culture and society; living alongside the animals and having become like them, he must have returned to the state of nature, characterised by the mingling of the sexes and the confusion of degrees of kinship. . . .

Lévi-Strauss deduces from all this that ritual 'moves in the opposite direction' to thought, systematically merging and confusing the very polar-opposite categories which 'the mind' strives continually to differentiate (1981: 679). In short, Lévi-Strauss sees ritual as anti-culture, vainly attempting to drag humanity back from the accomplishments of the intellect, pulling people

away from the achievements of the 'mind' and towards animalistic life, or towards undifferentiated unity with nature.

Viewing myth and ritual as 'opposites' – the first upholding culture, the second striving to undermine it – Lévi-Strauss goes on to attack those anthropological colleagues who 'confuse' ritual with myth. Thinkers such as the eminent Africanist and ritual specialist Victor Turner, for example, are accused of taking no account of 'the fact that mythology exists in two clearly different modalities' (1981: 669). They are charged with failing to realise that 'explicit' myths ranking as 'works in their own right' are quite separate from myths which are mere adjuncts of rites, told only in the course of ritual performances. Such anthropologists, Lévi-Strauss continues, fail to draw 'the dividing line' in the correct place – that is, between mythic thought in any form and ritual in any form – and so get everything 'thoroughly confused', treating rituals as if they were inseparable from the myths which in native terms describe, regulate and explain them:

Having mixed up the two categories inextricably, they find themselves dealing with a hybrid entity about which anything can be said: that it is verbal and non-verbal, that it has a cognitive function and an emotional and conative function, and so on.

Lévi-Strauss' answer here is 'to study ritual in itself and for itself, in order to understand in what sense it exists as an entity separate from mythology'; this can only be done by 'removing from it all the implicit mythology which adheres to it without really being part of it . . . ' (1981: 669).

In practice, for Lévi-Strauss, this meant not studying ritual action at all, on the grounds that it has nothing to do with myth, and nothing to do with culture or thought either.

An alternative view, of course, would be that ritual action in traditional cultures is inseparable from mythic thought, does intelligently follow logic and does uphold social structure, the problem being simply that human culture rests on a basis quite different from that imagined by Lévi-Strauss. Were we to follow up this thought, it might be concluded that only a thinker setting out with an inverted picture of the relationship between thought and social reality, and with an upside-down model of culture's inner logic, could imagine that for millennia, ritual performances throughout the world had consistently run counter to their own associated myths and striven continuously for the overthrow of 'thought' and of the cultural domain.

In Lévi-Strauss' case, it seems that once an inadequate and one-sided origins theory had been embraced, the struggle to defend it involved an increasingly difficult battle against the evidence. This had its own inescapable dynamic. It led to a model of social structure which, since it was clearly not upheld by ritual action in traditional societies themselves, had to be

explained as emanating from some other source. In the end, Lévi-Strauss could find no other source but the mind as an entity which stands opposed to the social reality which surrounds it. This led him to deny all continuity between mythic thought and ritual performances of any kind – and ultimately all continuity, indeed, between thought in general and life itself.

Lévi-Strauss in Retrospect

For nearly two decades, Lévi-Straussian structuralism was the most influential anthropological strategy in Western Europe, and this has had an enduring effect. More daringly than anyone before him, Lévi-Strauss rejected the narrowness and parochialism of so much twentieth-century anthropology. He followed Morgan and the classical founders not in all respects, but certainly in striving as a kind of internationalist to reduce the entirety of our planet's cultural domain to some kind of intelligible order.

His grandiose conception of the collective mind as a precisely wired, pan-human, computer-like generator of culture inspired him to reject completely the parochialism of Malinowski's functionalism – its myopic focus on individual 'cultures' and its rejection therefore of cross-cultural comparisons. Although his special area of interest was native America, he was happy to cull evidence from almost anywhere; social anthropology was for him the study of humanity as a whole. His ultimate focus was not individuals, nor cultures, nor even continent-wide culture areas – but a planetary web of cultures viewed as if from a point high above our world.

Lévi-Strauss' methods produced, as we have seen, some disastrous blind spots. But whatever else may be said of them, his procedures at least enabled him to focus upon cognitive details – perhaps most spectacularly and exhaustively, the details of traditional myths. A vast number of such myths had been recorded before Lévi-Strauss appeared on the scene, but few anthropologists had ever thought of anything very useful or interesting to do with them. Rather little theoretical attention had therefore been paid to myths except by folklorists, religious thinkers, mystics, artists and various writers outside the discipline of anthropology.

In his understanding of the internal logic and cross-cultural uniformity of Amerindian (and by implication world) mythology, Lévi-Strauss was in fact far ahead of his time. Frequently in the history of science, intuitive thinkers prematurely perceive significant patterns which current theories cannot account for. In the period before normal science catches up, such patterns – those underlying the periodic table of the elements, for example, or those which were to lead to the theory of continental drift – are dismissed as no more than coincidental. Only a small number of people insist that they are significant, and that they will eventually necessitate a new understanding of how the world works. These thinkers, however, can only assert their findings – they cannot explain them in terms of current materialist theories.

And in the absence of any real explanation, the arena opens wide to a variety of idealist rationalisations which may seem helpful until a genuine explanation is eventually found.

Lévi-Strauss discovered some extraordinary patterns linking myths from far-flung corners of the Americas, patterns to which we will turn in the closing chapters of this book. Myths, Lévi-Strauss has shown us, are surprisingly rigidly determined, virtually identical sequences sometimes revealing themselves in stories from cultures separated by thousands of miles. When he was writing, no one had expected such patterns, and no materialistic scientific paradigm could as yet account for them or find any place for them. In this context, Lévi-Strauss' weakest point was for him paradoxically a strength. His idealist belief in the world-governing supremacy of a logical human 'mind' (which he equated, in his hour of grandeur, with his own mind as it worked on *Mythologiques* – 1970: 6, 13) enabled him to seek and to find meaning and law-governed necessity in even the tiniest details of every myth, ignoring the fact that no currently accepted theory could possibly explain such patterns. His belief gave him the courage to press on regardless, roaming as he pleased, linking any myth from any culture with virtually any other story from anywhere else in the world, carrying the reader along the most convoluted paths, almost any digression whatsoever being justified on the grounds that one and the same human 'mind' must have been responsible for whatever happened to be found. Lévi-Strauss' idealism in this context was a kind of magic carpet, enabling him to skim over all theoretical difficulties and simply keep going.

In the end, Lévi-Strauss' real achievement has been to lead us to suspect *more* intelligibility and significance in the cross-cultural symbolic record than had previously been hoped for:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand,
And Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in an hour.

Seeing the universe in William Blake's way (Murphy 1972: 197) is not necessarily such a bad thing; it may indicate an awareness that there is probably more intelligibility and meaning to be gleaned from the world around us than we currently understand.

Stated most positively, it is thanks to Lévi-Strauss that we now know the scale of the tasks facing us in understanding what human symbolic culture is. It turns out to be an exceptionally complex planetary entity which we are barely beginning to understand, although we have glimpsed enough to know that it has its own consistent and comprehensible inner logic, involving recurrent patterns and connections many of which were wholly unsuspected before the founder of structuralism drew our attention to them. *Mythologiques* is a vast, unwieldy, shapeless and ultimately confused and confusing work,

but no one can carefully read it without suspecting that the order which eluded its author does in fact reside somewhere within this vast storehouse of material, waiting to be brought out.

Some of Lévi-Strauss' earlier findings – for example, the idea that kinship systems are systems of marital exchange – were not entirely new and have become part of the conventional wisdom of kinship studies. But whoever would have thought that an equation linking lunar eclipses with incest, rebellion, ritual noise-making and 'the coloured plumage of birds' (1970: 312) should have been central to the mythological systems of virtually the whole of South America?

And who would have thought that the many different versions of a pan-American myth justifying male dominance should have blamed women for their supposed inability to synchronise correctly their cosmos-regulating menstrual periods, advocating male intervention to control women's blood-flows as the only means to avert universal chaos? In presenting this finding in the third volume of *Mythologiques*, Lévi-Strauss (1978: 221–2) described himself as lifting a veil to reveal the basic secret of 'a vast mythological system common to both South and North America, and in which the subjection of women is the basis of the social order'.

Lévi-Strauss' findings regarding such things have irritated anthropologists who simply do not know what to do with them, and certainly few if any sociobiologists or students of human origins have considered them interesting or relevant to their specialist concerns. But if they are true – and some certainly are – then they are important. Anthropologists cannot be simple behaviourists. What native peoples believe, think and mythologise – and what their palaeolithic ancestors may also have thought – is an essential component of their collective being. It would be a point in its favour if a theory of cultural origins and evolution could help account for such findings as these.

Chapter 3

Totemism as Exchange

In so far as man is human and thus in so far as his feelings and so on are human, the affirmation of the object by another person is equally his own enjoyment.

Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844)

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

Lévi-Strauss’ finding that ‘totemism’ is simply ‘imaginary’ has been widely accepted. For over twenty years, the verdict of many scholars has been that the whole issue is now closed. In this chapter I challenge this consensus, surveying some of the classical literature on totemism in the light of the preceding discussion. Many of the texts to be cited will seem outdated to the modern reader; I draw on them in order to locate Lévi-Strauss’ work in its context as one particular contribution to a long-standing and still unresolved debate.

In making his case, Lévi-Strauss devoted much care to the refinement of definitions enabling him to set apart ‘sacrifice’ as wholly distinct from ‘totemism’, and ‘totemism’ as quite unconnected with other beliefs and institutions such as food taboos. Here, by contrast, I aim to show that ‘sacrifice’ is not a separate ‘thing’ from ‘totemism’ or ‘food taboos’, any more than these are separate ‘things’ from beliefs in the immortality and supernatural efficacy of animal ‘souls’. It is a fruitless endeavour to pull portions of a reality which is continuous into neat and tidy separate bits. If we are to succeed in accurately describing ritual phenomena and cataloguing and classifying them in an intelligible way, more than ingenious definitions and counterpositions will be required. What we need is a grasp of underlying principles – of abstract generative structures. We also need a dynamic model

which explains how these structures – not separately but as an integrated, logical totality – came into being.

My argument is a simple one. Culture starts not only with the incest taboo, but also with its economic counterpart in the form of a rule prohibiting hunters from eating their own kills. This second taboo – like strict exogamy – is not always rigidly adhered to. *It is in fact systematically evaded or undermined in a multiplicity of historically determined ways.* It is out of this process that 'totemic' and related phenomena arise.

Before turning to my examples, let me quickly survey the territory which this chapter will cover. I am interested in *methods of getting around the rule that one's own kills are for others to enjoy.* The possibilities are virtually limitless, but it will clarify my argument if I list some of the more obvious potential loopholes in the law here.

Firstly, the 'own-kill' rule can be partially evaded *by applying it only to hunters prior to their reaching a certain age.* Older men can be allowed to escape from its obligations altogether. Related to this can be the argument that a hunter should adhere strictly to the rule until his wife has had her first baby, or until some other risk-laden life crisis is safely over.

Another way to lessen the rule's rigours is to apply it only to 'firsts' – for example, to the first animal a man kills in a given season, or the first he kills of a given species, or in a given place. As in the previously mentioned case, this at least preserves *the principle* of the rule, whose material costs may be thought to be more safely diminished or evaded as a result.

Then come the apologies, atonements and restitutions. A hunter may be allowed to eat his own kills *provided he apologises.* Whether this apology is addressed to a shaman, to one's in-laws, to 'the spirits' or to the animal itself is of less importance than the fact that the speech, perhaps accompanied by a request for forgiveness, enables once again the *principle* of the taboo to be maintained. There is an obvious link between such apologies and claims that the animal is 'not really dead' – its 'life-essence' or 'soul' being claimed to survive unharmed.

Linked to his apologies and as reinforcements of them, the hunter may feel that he can safely eat his own kill provided he *first symbolically offers it to someone else.* This recipient need not be a flesh-and-blood person or social group. It might be an imaginary being – a 'spirit' or 'god'. If it becomes more and more established that the offering is merely a gesture – the recipient being expected to return or decline the gift – then the potential for guilt can still be lessened in various ways. It can be said, for example, that the recipient retains and is empowered by the metaphysical 'essence' or 'life-blood' of the kill, allowing the killer only the baser parts. It may be conceptualised as no more than good fortune that such base, fleshy cuts of meat happen to be precisely those which the hunter's stomach needs! I derive

much of the earliest logic of 'sacrifice' from this source.

All of the evasive strategies mentioned here involve segmentation, fragmentation, theological logic-chopping. Debates about the precise age of the hunter, the precise nature or condition of his kill, the precise motives involved in his offerings may now abound. An obvious further way to enrich the debates and evade the rule would be to claim that generosity is obligatory with respect only to certain *parts* of a killed animal – say, to its head, or its blood – the rest being exempted. Alternatively, only certain *species* may be said to come under the gift-giving rule's ambit. 'Totemism' in my view starts here.

Where the aim is to escape as far as possible from the material burdens of the rule, the various species chosen to taboo can be those which are rare, unwanted or virtually inedible – their 'respect' then becomes of purely symbolic significance. On the other hand, if for historical reasons the material consequences of economic generosity seem less burdensome, different criteria for selecting 'totemic' species may be used. For example, it may be said that the own-kill taboo applies only to 'large' animals which it is virtually impossible not to share, 'small' animals not counting. Theological metaphysics may again flower here, as the need arises to decide on definitions of what counts as 'large' or 'small'.

Finally, the segmentation of the world of edible species can be mapped carefully on to the segmentations of the human social world. That is, what is tabooed for one clan or segmentary group can be declared perfectly edible for another. This avoids the problem of resource under-utilisation which might ensue if everyone tabooed the same species. If kangaroos, for example, were said to be subject to the own-kill taboo in a situation where no one wanted to hunt except for their own needs, the upshot might be a total lack of interest in kangaroos! Far better to let one group 'respect' one species whilst others 'respected' others. Then no resource need be wasted, and ritualised exchanges serving to emphasise the 'own-kill' principle could be organised whenever the need or opportunity arose. This, I think, gives us some of the more elaborate forms of what used to be termed 'totemic ritualism'.

Totemism by Elimination

I now turn to my examples. Among the Kaingang in Brazil, when a tapir has been killed and eaten, a short speech is addressed to its soul or *kuplêng* 'in order that succeeding tapirs may stand still and allow themselves to be shot. . . .' (Henry 1964: 85). The derivation of this might have remained obscure had not the ethnographer clarified a vital point. Under normal circumstances, a man '*must never eat of the tapir he has brought down himself, although he may share the kill of other men*' (1964: 85; my emphasis). Any older hunter who, despite this, does in practice regularly eat his kills, must be doing so through a special privilege, conferred upon him as he reaches a

suitable age. He is then deemed to have at last reached the point where, without fear of death from supernatural causes, he may evade the own-kill taboo. The evasion is welcomed, because it implies liberation from an earlier framework of collective accountability and control: 'Previously, not being able to eat the meat of the tapir he had killed, he was dependent on others; no matter how great his prowess, he had to remain in the group or run the risk of starvation.'

Now that the older hunter can eat his own kills, he is more free – although, as we have seen, he is still careful to continue to 'respect' his own kills in other, more symbolic, ways (Henry 1964: 85).

My second South American case is the Bolivian Siriono, who appear to have gone even further in releasing hunters from the 'own-kill' rule. Holmberg (1948: 462) writes as follows in an early brief article on this tribe: 'A hunter is not allowed to eat the meat of a particular animal of certain species that he kills (e.g. the tapir) lest he offend the animal and be unable to hunt another.'

This looks like a very unexceptional hunters' taboo, of a religious kind familiar from countless cross-cultural hunter-gatherer studies. Had no further information been given, we might have had little reason to suspect that a rule of economic exchange lay behind it.

But fortunately, in his major later work on the Siriono, Holmberg (1950: 33) provides sufficient data to make it clear that here as elsewhere the supposed tapir avoidance rule is only a *residue* left when a more substantial rule of exchange (applying in principle to *all* game) is partly relaxed:

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

What has this to do with the 'totemic' idea that the tapir is specially to be avoided as food? Holmberg gives us the answer: the own-flesh rule has fallen into disuse, applying to fewer and fewer species until only one or two are left within its ambit. As he puts it, the taboo on eating one's own kill

may formerly have been an effective mechanism by means of which to force reciprocity in the matter of game distribution, but if so, it has certainly lost its function today, for the disparity between the rule and its practice is very great indeed. Few hunters pay any attention to the rule at all, and when they do it is only with respect to larger animals, such as the tapir and the harpy eagle, that are rarely bagged anyway.

In the case of smaller animals, such as coati and monkeys, Holmberg (1950: 33) reports that he 'never saw hunters show any reluctance to eating those that they had killed themselves'.

The tapir and harpy eagle are special because of their large size, which makes it harder to violate the own-kill taboo in their case. If these species now appear to be especially 'tabooed', in other words, this is only a residue of what was once a much wider rule of exchange applying to all game indiscriminately:

Embuta, one of my older informants, told me that when he was a boy he never used to eat any of the game that he killed, but that nowadays the custom had changed and that it was no longer possible to expect meat from someone else who hunted.

Property Relations and the 'Own-kill' Taboo

It has long been known that in most hunting traditions, fixed rules exist to define unambiguously to whom a killed animal 'belongs'. The rules vary widely from culture to culture but it seems to matter little, as one writer has put it (Ingold 1980: 158), 'whether a slain animal belongs to the man who first sighted it, chased it, killed it or butchered it, or whether it passes to a recognised leader, a kinsman or affine, or to some passive bystander'. Conflicts at the kill site or distribution point can be avoided 'so long as *some rule exists*, capable of more or less unambiguous application'. What matters is that the issue is decided not just as an outcome of interpersonal interaction but through the application of unalterable 'rule' or 'law'.

Europeans once persistently concluded that such rules of 'ownership' proved the importance of private property among hunters and gatherers. We now know, however, that such rules 'concern only the establishment of prior claims to the kill' (Ingold 1980: 158), often considerably before the consumption phase begins. In other words, 'possession of a kill in a hunting society confers not the right to its consumption, but the privilege of performing its distribution' (Ingold 1980: 158, citing Dowling 1968: 505). Quite often, the 'property rule' seems unmistakably analogous to incest avoidance, in that the hunter cannot enjoy his own produce at all.

Statements on the Hunter's Own-kill Rule in North America

(a) General

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

It is the custom among the Delawares that if a hunter shoots down a deer when another person is present, or even accidentally comes by before the

skin is taken off, he presents it to him, saying 'Friend, skin your deer', and immediately walks off. (Heckewelder 1876: 311; Delaware)

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

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

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

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

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

(b) California

Statements on California are of special interest within North America because they cover rules which were unusually strict. Hugo Reid (1939: 238) wrote in general terms of the Indians of Los Angeles County that hunters – particularly the younger ones – 'had their peculiar superstitions': 'During a hunt they never tasted food; nor on their return did they partake of what they themselves killed, from an idea that whoever eat of his own game hurt his hunting abilities.' This rule was frequently noted in the region. Among the Juaneno in the south, the regulation that a hunter must not partake of his own game or fish was adhered to tenaciously. 'Infraction brought failure of luck and perhaps sickness' (Kroeber 1925: 643). These Indians in fact used a special verb, *pi'xwaq*, meaning 'to get sick from eating one's own killing' (Harrington 1933: 179), emphasising once again both the *existence* of the rule and the fact that it was by no means always strictly *obeyed*.

The Franciscan missionary, Boscana (1846: 297–8) at an early stage condemned such beliefs as 'ridiculous', commenting that 'the deer hunters could never partake of venison which they, themselves, procured, and only of such as was taken by others, for the reason, that if they did, they would not get any more'. Fishermen possessed the same idea with regard to their fish. 'More singular, however, than this', continued Boscana,

was the custom among the young men, when starting for the woods in search of rabbits, squirrels, rats or other animals. They were obliged to

take a companion for the reason, that he who killed the game, could not eat thereof – if he did, in a few days he complained of pains in his limbs, and gradually became emaciated. On this account, two went together, in order to exchange with each other the result of their excursion.

Of the Southern Californian Luiseño, Kroeber (1908: 184) writes that when a man killed a deer, or rabbits, he brought them to the camp:

Then the people ate the meat, but he did not partake of it. If he should eat of the meat of animals he himself had killed, even only very little, he would not be able to kill others. However, if he confessed to the people that he had taken some of the meat, he would again be able to hunt successfully.

Among the Shasta (Northern California), the strict own-kill rule apparently applied only to the younger hunters: 'For a year after he began to hunt a boy never ate any game of his own killing for fear of his luck leaving him permanently. From his very first quarry his entire family refrained' (Kroeber 1925: 295). Alfred Robinson (1846: 233) inferred that own kill prohibitions characterised the Indians of Upper California as a whole, and Bancroft (1875: 1, 418) generalised similarly for the whole state of California, seeing the rule in terms of native 'superstition', fears of 'eclipses' and beliefs in 'all sorts of omens and auguries'.

The Own-kill Rule in Australia

Australian myths often centre upon the misfortunes befalling those foolish enough to violate the own-kill taboo. Very often it is the 'spirit' of the abused animal species – sometimes an ancestral kinsperson connected in some way with the Rainbow – which inflicts the well-deserved punishment.

Berndt and Berndt (1970: 44) report a story from the Gunwinggu of North Australia in which 'one man in a group travelling south near Nimbuwa killed a small rock wallaby and ate it secretly by himself, but its sizzling attracted the Rainbow, who swallowed him and his companions as well'. In a myth of another Arnhem Land tribe, the Birrikilli (Robinson 1966: 117–20), a man and his son keep killing and eating turtles, cooking the flesh on a fire of their own on the beach. However, the spirit of Garun the Turtle awaits revenge. The myth ends with the cooking of the two men as the Great Mother of Turtles tells them: 'You came here to kill my spirit. My spirit has killed you now.' An equally appropriate punishment features in a myth of the Kuppapoingo, who tell the story of a man called Kunji, who used to eat his own fish. His punishment was to be speared from behind, the spear-tip running through his body and protruding from his mouth, transforming him through death into a jabiroo bird with a long bill, enabling him to spear and eat fish to his heart's content (Robinson 1966: 162–3). Often, a man who eats his own kills is regarded as incapable of self-

control – and, in particular, as having an uncontrollable and ridiculous penis. In an Aranda myth (Róheim 1974: 233–4) a man uses his penis to spear rats for him, which he then eats himself. One day his penis is searching for meat in a hole in the ground when it is mortally bitten by snakes.

An early Australian report (Taplin 1879: 52) stated that when the Narrinyeri cook an emu 'they recite incantations, and perform a variety of genuflections over it.' Among the Wongaibon (Mathews 1904: 358; cited in Blows 1975: 31–2), young men could kill emus but were prohibited from eating any of the flesh themselves, although they could eat some if presented a piece by an old man or if they had been released from the taboo by singing a special song for the bird.

Among the Wuradjeri (Berndt 1947: 353) a man who ate his own emu flesh was made ill 'by the emu feathers and nails, said to have entered the eater with the meat'. In this region, the emu was kin – identified with the ancestral All-mother, Kurikuta (Berndt 1947: 77). Beckett (cited in Blows 1975: 42n) 'reports the tradition that if someone griddled emu in the bush instead of bringing it back to camp to be roasted, Kurikuta would come down in a thunder cloud to punish him'.

In South West Victoria there were 'strict rules' regulating the distribution of food:

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

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

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

To 'show the strict observance of it, and the punishment for its infringement', continues Dawson (1881: 22–3),

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

There follows a lengthy account of the killing of Wirtpa Mit, who ate his own kangaroos until, appropriately, he was himself caught in a kangaroo trap.

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

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

Crow is forced to regurgitate the meat as Eaglehawk tickles his throat. It is worth noting that 'Eaglehawk and Crow' myths, hundreds of which have been recorded, cannot be understood without knowing that, to the Aborigines, ravens or crows are distinguished by the fact that they follow eagles, mob them and take their kills, a kind of 'forced exchange' of game between the two birds being the result (Blows 1975: 26-7).

Turning now from ritual and mythology to everyday life, Fison and Howitt (1880: 261-3) long ago summarised the rules according to which Kurnai hunters had to distribute their catch:

Kangaroo. The only parts which the hunter and his companions may cook and eat on the spot are the entrails. If the hunter has nothing to eat, he may keep a little, or receive some back from his wife's parents the following day.

Black Wallaby. The hunter keeps nothing.

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

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

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

'In all cases', as Fison and Howitt (1880: 261-3) remark, 'the largest and the best of the food is sent to the wife's parents'.

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

The bones of the animal or bird are painted with red ocher. If a boy kills a turkey or other large bird, he does not pick it up but leaves it, returns to the camp and tells some old man. . . . If a young man finds a porcupine

(echidna), he will not kill it but goes to tell an old man of his find. If it is killed, he cannot eat it.

Among the Tiwi, it is 'against custom for the hunter to cook what he has obtained; he must give it to another'. In this way, 'the very act of cooking distributes the food to others beside the hunter and his or her spouse'. When an animal is caught, the first to call out must always cook the food. The second to call claims the head, the third, a leg. 'This order is invariable.' Even this, however, is only a preliminary distribution. Once each man has gained his piece, he still cannot just eat it. He must share it with a series of persons in an invariant order defined by their relationships within the kinship system (Goodale 1959: 122-3).

To turn to some more recent reports, Myers (1986: 75) writes of the Pintupi that 'a hunter gives the kangaroo he kills to others for preparation', keeping only the head for himself. In the eastern Western Desert, 'the preparation and distribution of game is wholly collective. The hunter never cooks and distributes what he has caught' (Hamilton 1980: 10). Gould (1981: 435), likewise, writing in general of the Western Desert Aborigines, notes that 'food-sharing relationships are too important to be left to whim or sentiment'. When a group hunts a kangaroo or other large animal, the man who kills it is the last to share, sometimes receiving only the innards. Gould (1969: 17) comments that although at first glance 'this system of sharing seems unfair to the hunter', such unfairness is illusory. The hunter is recompensed (a) by the prestige which his gift-giving creates and (b) by his own obtaining of meat 'when, according to the same set of rules, he takes *his* share from someone else's catch'.

There is a strongly socialist, redistributive, logic in all this. Yengoyan (1972: 91) writes of the Pitjandjara that the least productive individuals – old men, old women, nursing mothers, pregnant females, young children – 'always have access to the full range of foods', whilst it is the most able hunters who are cut out:

Thus, for example, when a male gets a kangaroo and brings it in, the animal, after it has been cooked is divided out to all according to kinship ties, and the oldest males get the best parts, etc. What you commonly find is that the hunter gets virtually nothing.

Similar rules enforcing redistribution were, in fact, almost certainly universal in Australia up until European contact. Alain Testart (1988: 10) concludes that 'the principle of intelligibility' of Australian society as a whole is a single, all-embracing law stating that 'one may not dispose of what is one's own'. One's initial 'closeness' to any valuable precludes keeping it for oneself: 'Contiguity (between hunter and game, between totemist and totemic species, between brother and sister) always translates as an advantage for others.'

In this light, exogamy, totemism and the own-kill rule appear as so many differing expressions of one and the same fundamental principle of exchange.

Australian Totemism as Exchange

Prominent in the classical literature on Australia is a form of totemism which explicitly centres on exchange. The exchange occurs between ritually defined collective partners, one group refusing to eat certain edible species so that another may enjoy them more plentifully, this group reciprocally 'producing' species for consumption by others. Lévi-Strauss refers to exchanges of this kind in *The Savage Mind* (1966 [1962]: 226), referring particularly to the *Intichiuma* ceremonies of the Aranda and other Central Australians. The ceremonies, in his view, are a 'game' in which human groups and natural species arrange themselves in complementary pairs, 'species nourishing the men who do not "produce" them, and men producing the species which are forbidden to eat'.

In *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* – Lévi-Strauss' main source – Spencer and Gillen (1899) show how, among the Aranda, witchetty grubs are gathered (as they come into season) by men who do *not* belong to the witchetty grub totemic group. The collected grubs are then ceremonially presented to an assembly of witchetty grub men. These grind up the food and taste just a little, as if to assert their peculiar rights in it. They then make a point of renouncing the bulk of the grubs, handing them to men of other totems to eat (p. 204). A similar ritual is played out in relation to the *Idnimata* (grub of a large beetle) totem. In the case of the Bandicoot, men *not* of this totem kill a bandicoot. They then put fat from the animal into the mouths of men of the totem, who may then eat the animal sparingly (pp. 205–6).

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

What ensures this exchange is the separation of *killing* rights from rights to *eat*. With regard to any one species, the two kinds of rights are vested in opposed 'kinds' of men: (a) members of the totem and (b) non-members.

This binarism is not limited to the Aranda, but was widespread in Central Australia. A Warramunga man, for example, 'will not hesitate, under

certain conditions, to kill his totem animal, but he hands it over to men who do not belong to the same totemic group, and will not think of eating it himself'. Or to take the case of the Urabunna, no member of any totemic group eats the totem animal or plant, 'but there is no objection to his killing it and handing it over to be eaten by men who do not belong to the totemic group'. 'The fundamental idea', as Spencer and Gillen (1904: 327) summarise matters,

is that men of any totemic group are responsible for the maintenance of the supply of the animal or plant which gives its name to the group. . . . If I am a kangaroo man, then I provide kangaroo flesh for emu men, and in return I expect them to provide me with a supply of emu flesh and eggs, and so on right through all of the totems.

The Own-kill Rule in Papua New Guinea

Turning to Papua New Guinea, among the Mundugumor 'A hunter may not eat his own kill or it will spoil his magic' (Mead 1947: 218n). The Gnau refuse their kills because each hunter automatically projects 'his own blood' into the meat, a basic rule being that people 'should never eat their own blood' (Lewis 1980: 174). The Umeda hunter 'cannot eat any part of the animal he has killed – a kind of incest taboo on meat' (Gell 1975: 109). Gell (1975: 117) gives a good story highlighting woman's role in enforcing this rule:

The myth . . . concerns a man who hunts in the forest killing a pig, but instead of taking it home to his wife, he eats it by himself in the forest (hubris). The wife finds out her husband's crime and turns herself and her children into pigs (by donning pig tusk nose ornaments) and eventually gores her husband to death (nemesis).

The abused pig-flesh, then, takes vengeance in the form of the hunter's own wife. Among the Siane, the idea of eating one's own pig 'is treated with the same distaste and horror as is expressed at the idea of cannibalism' (Salisbury 1962: 65). In the Tor Territory, the hunter who has killed a boar 'must divide it amongst the villagers, but he is not allowed to eat any of it' (Rubel and Rosman 1978: 13, citing Oosterwal 1961: 65). In the case of the Iatmul: 'One cannot eat one's own pig, or cassowary and wild pig caught in the bush' (Rubel and Rosman 1978: 45). The same applies to the Northern Abelam (Rubel and Rosman 1978: 61).

The rule about pigs also applies to the Wogeo, Keraki, Banaro and many other groups. Rubel and Rosman (1978: 287) make the 'own produce' rule central to their analysis of social structure in the area. They argue persuasively that 'own sister' and 'own pig' rules in Papua New Guinea represent merely two aspects of a unitary principle of give-and-take whose institutional

outcome is 'a dual organization in which like is exchanged for like'.

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

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

For a man even to eat game which he had *seen* alive would be to risk losing his hunting luck (Mead 1941: 449). Nor must one 'eat the animal for whose capture or growth one knows the magic' (1941: 412).

In Arapesh culture, '*the taboo upon eating one's own kill is equated with incest*' (1941: 352; my emphasis). Own kin and own produce are equally for others to enjoy. 'The native line of thought', as Mead (1935: 83–4) explains, 'is that you teach people how to behave about yams and pigs by referring to the way that they know they behave about their female relatives'. And these *relations with female relatives* are explicitly thought to express the spirit of gift-giving and exchange:

To questions about incest I did not receive the answer that I had received in all other native societies in which I had worked, violent condemnation of the practice combined with scandalous revelations of a case of incest in a neighbouring village. Instead both the emphatic condemnation and the accusations were lacking. 'No, we don't sleep with our sisters. We give our sisters to other men and other men give us their sisters'. Obviously. It was as simple as that. Why did I press the point? (Mead 1935: 84)

The Own-kill Rule in Africa

Young San (southern African) hunters say that their elders 'do not allow us to take hold of springbok's meat with our hands, because our hands, with which we held the bow and the arrow, are those with which we are taking hold of the thing's flesh . . . ' (Bleek and Lloyd 1911: 274–5). The man who has killed an animal is not allowed to carry it; he must also sit at a distance during the butchery 'because he fears lest he should smell the scent of the springbok's viscera . . . '.

Still in southern Africa, a Khoekhoe hunter could not eat his own kill of an elephant, rhinoceros, or hippopotamus: if he wanted meat following a killing, it had to be that of a sheep or goat (Schapera 1930: 306). The Heikum hunter was permitted a few strictly specified parts of the animal he shot with a poison arrow, but the rest was tabooed on pain of his losing his luck (Schapera 1930: 98–9). Comparable rules are reported of the !Kung, whose society 'seems to want to extinguish in every way possible the concept

of the meat belonging to the hunter' (Marshall 1961: 238). Strict 'own-kill' rules apply, however, only to big game animals which the !Kung deliberately hunt in organised parties. A man who picks up a small animal may keep it for himself and his immediate family (Marshall 1961: 236–7).

To select a few interesting statements from elsewhere in the continent, Evans-Pritchard (1974: 58) cites a Central African (Azande) anecdote concerning a furious woman who complains of her husband: 'That man, that man, he is not a human being, he behaves just like a dog . . . – he goes and kills a beast and keeps it entirely for himself'. Among the Zambian Ndembu, a hunter who eats his kills is likened to a cannibal, suspected of incest and believed to be quite capable of killing his own human kin by sorcery to consume their 'meat' or 'flesh' (Turner 1957: 141, 252). Finally, among the West African Ashanti, many game animals had a dangerous *sasa* or soul; a 'hunter who kills a *sasa* animal may not himself eat its meat' (Rattray 1927: 184). The Ashanti material additionally suggests a native conceptual link between the own-kill rule and the local rule of matrilineal clan exogamy – defined as the prohibition against 'the eating up of one's own blood' (Rattray 1929: 303).

The Own-kill Rule in South America

The 'custom of the hunter's not eating the game he kills' prevailed in eastern and southern Brazil in several tribes 'with a typical hunter culture' (Baldus 1952). In seeking an explanation, Baldus (1952: 197) notes the Kraho belief in a supernatural relationship between the hunter and his prey. The 'strength' of the hunter is said to be transmitted through the arrow or spear

like his 'blood' entering the animal. This would cause such weakness in a young person that the spirit of the animal could easily take possession of the spirit of the hunter and destroy it if the abstention from eating the meat and ritualistic treatment were not applied to the killer.

Eating one's own kill, then, would in effect involve eating one's own 'blood'.

The Guayaki of eastern Paraguay, writes Clastres (1972: 168–70), are 'hunters par excellence'. They observe 'a food taboo which dictates that a hunter cannot eat his own take from the hunt. Neither he nor his parents are allowed to eat the meat he brings into camp . . .'. If a hunter were to eat his own kill, his luck would leave him, a condition known as *pané*. Because women reject husbands or lovers who lack hunting luck, loss of *pané* amounts to sexual impotence. The fear in this context 'is a veritable anguish', writes Clastres, and every man scrupulously avoids taking any risk that might cause it. As if to ward off the always possible evil, each gives away as much meat as he can, and unceasingly dwells on his hunting exploits and good hunting luck. Every young boy aspires to become a great hunter, a virile lover – a

man of good luck. The taboo against eating one's own kill is therefore powerfully motivated, and is indeed the most important rule on which the whole culture is based. The social life of the Guayaki, as Clastres puts it, 'is organized around this taboo. . . . ' In a conclusion clearly modelled on Lévi-Strauss's (1969a) treatment of the incest taboo, Clastres concludes his discussion by describing the rule as the 'fundamental law' of Guayaki society.

The own-kill norm in South America is in fact widespread, indicating its universality as a point of departure from which varying totemic and other traditions have been derived.

We may begin a more general survey in the Amazonian rain forest, with the Yanomami. Here, generosity is an essential prerequisite of hunting success:

Hunters do not eat the meat of game they have killed themselves, for any man who does so will, the Yanomami believe, be deserted by the hawk spirit which must enter him if he is to thrive in the chase. (Hanbury-Tenison 1982: 95)

If hunting with other men, the killer will not even carry his catch back to the communal house, but surrenders everything at once. At home, the recipient will then distribute the meat to his own network of relatives. The original hunter will not go hungry, however, 'for the man to whom he gave his kill will generally reciprocate by offering in return his own bag' (Hanbury-Tenison 1982: 95).

In the case of the Bororo of central Brazil:

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

Lévi-Strauss (1977, 1: 109) notes that before a large animal could be eaten, the Bororo shaman had to consecrate it with a special ritual of biting and shrieking lasting several hours. Should anyone touch unconsecrated meat, he and his entire tribe would perish. A connection between the Bororo own-kill rule and matrilineal moiety exogamy is suggested by Crocker (1985: 166), who comments that the meat transactions which follow from a collective hunt may be regarded 'as an elaborate metaphoric parallel to the exchange of feminine sexuality between the moieties'.

Among the Urubu (at the south-eastern limit of the Amazonian basin), 'the man who kills an animal leaves the cutting up to one of his companions . . . '. He keeps for himself only the head and spine. The best pieces

he gives to relatives such as his brothers-in-law, whilst if there is anything left over the others in the village get it (Huxley 1957: 78, 85–6). The man who kills a deer may not bring it into the village himself. He lays down the meat at the edge of the clearing 'and sends his wife to get it or, if he has no wife, another woman, or even a man who has not been hunting that day'. A hunter who brought his own game into the village would be punished with a terrible fever and become *kaú*, crazy (Huxley 1957: 83–4).

Rules of this kind – taboos preventing a man from fetching his kills beyond a certain point – illustrate how sexual boundaries mapped out spatially can function in support of the own-kill norm. The Desana (of the Columbian North-west Amazon) provide a further example:

When returning from the forest, the hunter deposits the dead animal near the entrance of the maloca, and it is then taken in by the women; if the hunt took place in a site accessible only by river, he leaves the dead animal in his canoe at the landing and goes to the maloca to tell the women.

In no circumstances should the man carry the animal into the maloca, whether this is represented by the door of the dwelling or the canoe at the landing: both form a threshold, a limit between two spheres of activities, that must be very strictly observed: 'To this point, but no further, can the hunter act; once this threshold is crossed, the prey enters the feminine sphere where it will be transformed into food' (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1968: 231).

The Desana explicitly link incest/exogamy with hunting taboos. 'It can be said', according to Reichel-Dolmatoff (1968: 67), 'that the law of exogamy refers not only to society but also to its symbolic complement, the animals'.

Among the Trio of northern Brazil and southern Surinam a married man does not keep the game he brings home but gives it to his wife who, in turn, hands it over to her kin. 'Normally, at a communal meal, a man does not eat meat which he himself has killed.' The initial transfer of meat is almost always between affines (Rivière 1969: 214, 214n, 220). In the case of the Waiwai, along the frontiers of Guiana and Brazil, an informant told Fock (1963: 121) that when he was a young man he never ate any meat (apart from tapir flesh) that he himself had killed, believing 'that he would lose his aim if he consumed his own bag'. Finally, we can end our brief world survey of assorted statements with a note on the Kraho of the eastern highlands of Brazil. Here, the mythical culture hero Kenkunan teaches respect for the taboos on which a successful hunt depends:

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

'Totemism' and Anthropology

We have glimpsed 'totemism' as something inseparable from that 'spirit of the gift' which animates economic life in all hunter-gatherer and other pre-'civilised' cultural traditions (Mauss 1954). Unfortunately, in the classical literature, totemism was not looked upon in such terms. It was not seen as the cognitive and social outcome of a very practical principle of *ritualised gift-giving and exchange*. Instead, assumptions about private property were made, whilst hunters' rules of 'respect' or 'avoidance' were interpreted in terms of western concepts of religious 'worship' or 'spirituality', eventually to become dissolved into Lévi-Strauss' mystical concept of an anonymous and impersonal universal human 'mind'.

Totemism was put on the scientific map for the first time when J. F. McLellan (1869) published two short articles entitled 'The worship of animals and plants'. McLellan proposed that primitive peoples believe in the sanctity and mystical powers of animals and plants, and that 'there is no race of men that has not come through this primitive stage of speculative belief' (1869: 423). Over the next few decades, this view came to dominate most European and American social anthropology, and was developed into an elaborate scheme linking (a) mythological beliefs, (b) food prohibitions, (c) exogamy and (d) 'the matriarchal stage of culture' (Haddon 1902: 7n). One of the most ambitious and influential works in this spirit was Durkheim's (1965 [1912]) *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* which treated totemism as humanity's most primitive form of religion.

Modern studies of totemism, however, date from an article in the *Journal of American Folklore* by Boas' student, Goldenweiser (1910). This author concluded that 'the group of phenomena which in various areas have been termed "totemic"' are in fact 'conglomerates of essentially independent features' (p. 266). The exogamy rule had no necessary connection with seemingly associated food taboos. On the one hand, 'taboos, whether totemic or not, permit of a great variety of origins' (p. 258), while on the other, the 'conditions under which exogamy may develop are practically innumerable' (p. 265). Instead of an integral totemic logic operating on different levels at once, Goldenweiser saw only isolated fragments thrown together by history and chance. The essay caught the mood of the times. Lévi-Strauss (1969b: 73) points out that 'in the end Goldenweiser's 110 pages were to exercise a more lasting theoretical influence than the 2,000 pages in Frazer's four volumes' on totemism which were published in the same year.

Defining an Illusion

Lévi-Strauss' *Totemism* (English edition, 1969b) was published in France in 1962, as was *The Savage Mind* (English edition, 1966). The two books were essentially two volumes of a single work, their joint purpose being – on the surface, at least – to endorse Goldenweiser's findings and deliver the *coup de*

grâce to 'totemism' as a subject of study. It can be seen, however, that what Lévi-Strauss really set out to achieve was a more subtle victory. His aim was to justify his own reluctance to develop a theoretical framework specifically to analyse the ritual domain.

In the two volumes, Lévi-Strauss does two things. Firstly, he describes totemism as an arbitrary category invented by nineteenth-century thinkers – 'an artificial unity, existing solely in the mind of the anthropologist, to which nothing specifically corresponds in reality' (1969b: 79). Secondly, treating totemism as cognition or thought, he defines it as a mode of classification, qualifying this immediately by terming it 'not even a mode of classification, but an aspect or moment of it' (1966: 218).

In relation to this second point, he claims that totemic classifications are really no different from other forms of classification (1966: 162–3). All human beings classify things in essentially similar ways, conceptualising similarities and differences in binary terms and by reference to familiar categories drawn from various spheres of experience (1966: 135). When people in traditional cultures identify hunted animals as 'kin' – or (to put this another way) identify their clans or exogamous groups with various species of animals – they are doing no more than that. They have simply found a convenient way of using the differences between animal species as a way of conceptualising the distinctions between human social groups. From totemism we can learn nothing about the past of humankind, for even to the extent that totemism is real, 'there is nothing archaic or remote about it' (1969b: 177). We are all using totemic modes of thought all the time – or, alternatively, it could be said that to define thought as 'totemic' means nothing at all. Lévi-Strauss in this way dissolves into thin air the study of most of the ritual distinctions, taboos and observances previously linked together as 'totemic'. As Edmund Leach (1965: 24) put it,

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

Now, if Lévi-Strauss were simply suggesting a helpful redefinition of 'totemism' as a category – restricting it henceforward to the mental activity of allocating names to social groups – the usefulness or otherwise of this new definition could perhaps profitably be debated. Unfortunately, Lévi-Strauss never tells us that he is simply redefining 'totemism' as a term. Following Goldenweiser, he argues instead that 'the facts' themselves indicate the lack of any internal connection between the previously linked phenomena.

Most importantly, Lévi-Strauss insists that in the ethnographic record itself there is no sign of any intrinsic connection between kinship-linked

'naming systems' and 'food taboos'. Naming systems (he asserts) are 'mental': in them, animal species are chosen, not because they are 'good to eat' or 'good to prohibit' but because they are 'good to think', the differences between one species and another providing the human intellect with a useful model through which to conceptualise distinctions between human categories of kin. Entirely separate are 'food taboos', which revolve around the natural and/or cultural edibility of different species of animals and plants. It was a profound mistake of earlier generations of anthropologists, alleges Lévi-Strauss, to have confused the two.

In arguing this point, *Totemism* begins with a discussion of the Ojibwa Indians, as most treatises on 'totemism' do (*ototeman* being an Ojibwa word). We are told almost immediately that 'all the food tabus reported from the Ojibway derive from the *manido* system', which is 'entirely distinct from the system of totemic names' (1969b: 90). In other words, the fact that a man belongs, say, to the Bear 'totem' need in no way make him feel guilty about hunting and eating bears. Although this statement is directly contradicted by Long (1791: 86), whose account of Chippewa and Ojibwa 'superstition' first brought the expression 'totemism' into print, Lévi-Strauss disposes of this problem without difficulty. Long was obviously 'confused' (Lévi-Strauss 1969b: 92).

Turning to Tikopia, the author enumerates a list of food taboos which most previous writers had been content to label 'totemic'. But Lévi-Strauss will not allow food prohibitions to be in any way 'confused' with totemic naming systems. He states – as if this were a matter of simple fact, rather than of definition – that the prohibitions are 'not . . . of a totemic character'.

As evidence, he offers the fact that among the Tikopia the food prohibitions seem to give expression to a principle of exchange. For example, when a dolphin is stranded on the beach, members of its affiliated lineage make it a *putu* or 'offering on the grave of a person recently deceased'. The meat is then cooked and everyone joins in eating it, 'with the exception of the kin group in question, for which it is *tapu* because the dolphin is the preferred form of incarnation of their *atua* [spirit]' (1969b: 97).

This presents a problem for Lévi-Strauss. A totemic kinship identification or affiliation is here indisputably *linked with a food taboo*. Those who avoid eating dolphin flesh do so *because* they identify, in kinship terms, with the dolphin. People are not willing to eat what is, in some sense, 'their own flesh'.

The Tikopia ethnography is rich in examples of this kind. But after discussing some taboos against eating various fish, birds and bats, Lévi-Strauss declares that the solution is simple:

These prohibitions, which may be either general or limited to a clan or lineage, are not, however, of a totemic character: the pigeon, which is closely connected with Taumako clan, is not eaten, but there are no

scruples against killing it, because it plunders the gardens. Moreover, the prohibition is restricted to the first-born. (1969b: 96)

It is difficult to know how to respond to this. We are here introduced, quite without prior warning, to two new rules by means of which food prohibitions can be declared to be 'not . . . of a totemic character'. They are not of a totemic character when people are allowed to kill an animal which they nevertheless will not eat; and the eating taboos are not of a totemic character when they are 'restricted to the first-born'. What possible grounds can there be for such seemingly arbitrary pronouncements?

There is no need to follow Lévi-Strauss as he surveys the world, carefully excluding peoples' food avoidances from what he calls their 'totemism' – and attacking all previous writers who had 'confused' matters by linking food taboos with kinship names and rules. The real question is not whether we should define food taboos or avoidances as 'totemic'. What matters is whether the earlier writers were correct to perceive some unity of principle linking (a) the identification of oneself or one's clan with a natural species which is thought of as 'kin' and (b) the idea that a creature defined as 'kin' – as one's own flesh or substance – is not to be selfishly appropriated or consumed. It is here argued that there is a profound internal logic – as universal in its way as the 'incest rule' – connecting these two. Lévi-Strauss' argument is that we have no reason to suppose any such connection at all.

To speak of someone as 'my own flesh' means, in many languages of the world, that the person concerned is a close relative, usually by 'blood'. The Peruvian Sharanahua say 'my kin, my flesh' (Siskind 1973a: 54). Both in Hebrew and in Arabic, 'flesh' was traditionally synonymous with 'clan' or kindred group; kinship meant 'participation in a common mass of flesh, blood and bones . . . ' (Robertson-Smith 1914: 274). Among the Trobriand Islanders (Malinowski 1922: 191), matrilineal kinship means collective 'identity of flesh'. When Trobriand men learn that a sister has just had a child, they feel that an addition to their own bodies has been made: 'The kinsmen rejoice, for their bodies become stronger when one of their sisters or nieces has plenty of children.' Malinowski (1932: 170) comments that the wording of this statement 'expresses the interesting conception of collective clan unity, of the members being not only of the same flesh, but almost forming one body'.

It is significant that among the Trobrianders, the concept of *bomala*, 'taboo', is likewise identified with the very body or kindred of the person observing the taboo. Writes Malinowski (1932: 388–9; quoted in Fortes 1966: 18):

This noun takes the pronominal suffixes of nearest possession . . . which signifies that a man's taboo, the things which he must not eat or touch or

do, is linguistically bound up with his person; parts of his body, his kindred, and such personal qualities as his mind (*nanala*), his will (*magi'la*) and his inside (*lopoula*). Thus *bomala*, those things from which a man must keep away, is an integral part of his personality, something which enters his moral make-up.

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

Turning to Australia, according to Elkin (1933: 118n), 'the usual word for totem in north-eastern South Australia means flesh'. Among the Wotjobaluk of south-east Australia, Howitt (1904: 145) found that 'the group totem is called by the terms *Mir*, *Ngirabul*, and *Yauruk*, the latter word meaning flesh, frequently expanded into *Yauruk-gologeitch*, that is, "flesh-of-all"'. Among the Buandik, according to the same author (p. 146):

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

Elkin (1933: 136–7) likewise writes of what he terms 'matrilineal social clan totemism', which he identifies in most of Queensland, New South Wales, Western Victoria and eastern South Australia. Over this vast area, one's matrilineal clan relatives 'are one flesh, for all have ultimately received their body, their means of incarnation, from and through the womb of the same matrilineal ancestress'. Further, continues Elkin, because the totem – identified with the matrilineal ancestress – is also one's flesh, in many tribes it is neither injured, killed nor eaten, except on very rare occasions of hunger and after regret and sorrow have been expressed. A person respects the symbol, the 'flesh' of his mother's line. Elkin immediately adds:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Other people's yams that they have piled up,
You may eat.

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

The unity of principle involved here – the equation of own kin with own produce, so that one's own produce 'is' one's kin – is so widespread that it is acknowledged as a virtual universal by Lévi-Strauss himself. He refers to Australia as a place 'where food prohibitions and rules of exogamy reinforce one another' (1966: 111), and treats both kinds of rules as exchange rules with similar functions: 'Both the exchange of women and the exchange of food are means of securing or of displaying the interlocking of social groups with one another' (1966: 109). In a more general context, in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969a: 32–3), he writes that marriage prohibitions represent only a particular application, within a given field, of principles and methods encountered whenever the physical or spiritual existence of the group is at stake. The group controls the distribution not only of women, but of a whole collection of valuables:

Food, the most easily observed of these, is more than just the most vital commodity it really is, for between it and women there is a whole system of real and symbolic relationships, whose true nature is only gradually emerging, but which, when even superficially understood, are enough to establish this connection.

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

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

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

In this passage Lévi-Strauss seems to be unequivocal in stating that food exchanges, unlike marital ones, are unreal. Yet he cannot have been unaware of the fact that in hunter-gatherer cultures at least, the universality of bride-service renders meaningless any attempt to disentangle 'exchanges of women' from economic exchanges such as those of meat or other food.

Lévi-Strauss can give plausibility to his case only by concentrating on the theme of erroneous belief. Hence, for Lévi-Strauss, totemism represents only a 'purported reciprocity' (1966: 125). In rituals such as the Australian *Intichiuma*, each totemic group 'imagines itself to have magical power over a species, but as this illusion has no foundation it is in fact no more than an empty form . . .' (1966: 125). Or, even more caustically:

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

Totemism, according to Lévi-Strauss, may look superficially like a system of economic division of labour, as in a caste system. But the appearance of functional value is purely illusory. Each totemic group in an Aranda *Intichiuma* ceremony claims to make available supplies of its totem species for other groups, just as each caste in a caste system practises 'a distinctive activity, indispensable to the life and well-being of the whole group'. However, 'a caste of potters really makes pots, a caste of launderers really washes clothes, a caste of barbers really shaves people, while the magical

powers of Australian totemic groups are of an imaginary kind' (1966: 122). Lévi-Strauss hangs his case on the fact that, while women really produce babies, groups of men in totemic rituals do not really produce game animals. *Therefore* the only 'true reciprocity' is the sexual and procreative kind. The meat-producing reciprocity is only a 'fake usurpation' *because the magic does not really work*.

By means such as these, Lévi-Strauss manages to destroy altogether the unity of principle underlying the various aspects of Australian totemic and matrimonial exchanges. It is a sleight-of-hand allowing him to dismiss bride-service exchanges, marriage gifts, feasts and so on as related only in a 'metaphorical' way to the 'exchange of women', which alone has 'real substance'. The entire field of human social existence is bisected into 'ways of doing things' and 'ways of saying things'. As far as 'ways of doing things' are concerned, exchange is said to be reducible to the sexual aspects of exogamy, which provide the 'basis' for all other forms of culture and exchange. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, the implication runs, has said in principle everything that needs to be said on that subject. If Lévi-Strauss is to say any more about anything, therefore, he must turn to 'ways of saying things'. And if this is to be done, it is best to leave ritual aside and go straight to the heart of matters. Leaving all his earlier work behind him, Lévi-Strauss turns to myths and the world of the mind.

In effect, this meant the abandonment of Lévi-Strauss' most powerful earlier arguments – those stressing that exchange as such was the essence of human social life. It was a damaging blow to our understanding of culture. Had Lévi-Strauss chosen to link his 'exchange of women' concept in a materialistic way with the realities of economic circulation and exchange, a unified theory might have been produced. So-called 'totemism' could then have been interpreted as an expression of exchange. Once it had been realised that 'incest taboos' could be applied to meat or other food, the logic of treating natural species as 'kin' – the essence of 'totemism' – would no longer have seemed either mysterious or illusory. Kinship, ritual and mythology could all have been treated as expressions of exchange of one and the same kind, albeit manifested on different levels and in different ways according to circumstances. Instead of a complete rupture between the study of kinship and the study of myths – the study of 'life' and the study of 'thought' – there might then have been some real inner unity and coherence to Lévi-Strauss' life's work as a whole.

Why did not Lévi-Strauss follow such a course? The problem is tantalizing because evidently the founder of structuralism appreciated that *The Elementary Structures* had been well received precisely because it promised such unity. It is clear that Lévi-Strauss glimpsed the reality of the 'own-flesh' rule, and glimpsed the possibility of treating this rule, as he had treated the incest rule, as the expression of an exchange principle through which an immense mass of seemingly irrational 'taboos' and 'customs' could be reduced to an

intelligible system. So why did he fail to take advantage of this clue, fail to follow up the logic that he himself had revealed and fail to link his studies of myths with the study of kinship systems that he had already begun? Why did he have to violate so insistently not only the unity of the evidence of ethnology itself but also the conceptual unity at first promised by *The Elementary Structures*?

The answer seems clear, and takes us back to our discussion in the previous chapter. Had this course not been taken, the study of mythological beliefs would have been tied in inextricably with the study of structures of ritual, economic and sexual exchange. The whole of Lévi-Strauss' argument about the existence of a general human 'mind' acting independently and determining, godlike, the structures discernible beneath human beliefs, customs and institutions – this whole argument might have risked seeming unnecessary or even absurd. For once it had been conceded that kinship systems were explicable without recourse to such a 'mind', then any admission that ritual and mythological systems were explicable in similar terms would have posed a threat. If practical, material social life – exchange as something tangible, institutional and real – could be seen to produce structuralism's 'binary oppositions' on all levels, economic as well as sexual, ritual as well as mythological, then what remaining role could have been found for the Lévi-Straussian 'mind'?

The Phoenix 'Totemism'

Goldenweiser's 1910 complaint about 'totemism' was that it was an artificial construct:

On the basis of material furnished by some one area or a number of areas, a definite group of features is called 'totemism'. Another totemic area is discovered where an additional feature is found, or where one of the old ones is missing. Immediately the questions arise (and here we are on historical ground), Is *this* totemism? or Was *that* totemism? or Is *this* true totemism and *that* was *incompletely developed*, totemism *im Werden*? or Was *that* true totemism and *this* is a *later development*? In the light of the foregoing discussion, any definite answer to these questions must needs be arbitrary. (Goldenweiser 1910: 267–8)

If totemism includes, 'roughly speaking, everything' (Goldenweiser continued), is totemism itself anything in particular? Is there anything specific in this phenomenon, or has the name 'totemism' simply been applied to one set of features here, to another set there, and still elsewhere perhaps to both sets combined? (p. 267).

It is easy to appreciate how valuable this scepticism later appeared to Lévi-Strauss when – on the verge of embarking upon his *Mythologiques* – he was

seeking theoretical justification for his decision to avoid analysing (to use Goldenweiser's words) 'roughly speaking, everything' intermediary between kinship systems and myths. If the unity of principle underlying the entire spectrum of 'totemic' phenomena could be declared an illusion, then Lévi-Strauss could feel justified in denying any need to discuss this unity or account for it. He could proceed without further ado from the study of kinship systems to the study of myths. 'Roughly speaking, everything' in between could be equated with 'totemism', and this in turn – thanks to Goldenweiser – could be treated as an illusory phenomenon.

In Lévi-Strauss' work, the attack on totemism is so emotionally charged as to indicate extraordinary depths of feeling on the issue – feelings which the surface problematic of *Totemism* in no way equips the reader to expect. He tells us that totemism is not only a 'fake usurpation'; it is also 'like hysteria', in that it is an invention of bigots aiming to contrast themselves with 'savages' just as late nineteenth-century doctors and psychologists contrasted themselves with the 'insane' (1969b: 69). Such is his hostility that he cautions against even mentioning the subject without due precautions being taken:

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

Such anxieties indicate the real significance of Lévi-Strauss' encounter with the totemic problem. 'Totemism' simply *had* to be eliminated or at least neutralised ('exorcised'). Lévi-Strauss' impending mythological project depended upon it. It was absolutely essential that the unity underlying totemic phenomena was broken into fragments, leaving as a common residue only the fact that all systems of human belief and ritual are in some sense products of one and the same kind of human brain. The demolition job was conducted with energy. Yet the very vigour of this 'exorcism' indicates just how much damage would be done to Lévi-Strauss' entire system if, after all, it could be shown that the unity of principle against which he was struggling had some life and force in it still. If it could be demonstrated that a few simple principles or rules in fact suffice to generate the worldwide totality of possible kinship structures, ritual structures and myth structures alike, then the genuinely bogus 'phantom' in all this might at last have been laid to rest. The illusion of the human mind as an independent, world-governing force, its patterns of motion emanating directly from the arrangement of cells and connections given genetically in the brain – this most bizarre of delusions might no longer seem required.

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

The Nuer, Sacrifice and the Own-kill Rule

In *The Savage Mind*, Lévi-Strauss (1966: 224) goes to great lengths to explain the 'fundamental differences between the system of totemism and that of sacrifice'. He is adamant that 'the two systems are mutually exclusive' (p. 223). He is insistent that while 'totemism' is only an illusion, 'sacrifice' is an 'institution' and perfectly real (p. 223). I now want to show, on the contrary, that rituals of sacrifice constitute not a separate 'system' characteristic of countless cultures and religions but only so many *other* ways of expressing the principle that one's own 'flesh' is for others to consume or enjoy. They constitute only one portion of a continuous spectrum of rituals relating to animal or human 'meat' or 'flesh', other portions of this spectrum corresponding to 'totemism', 'atonement rituals', 'hunters' taboos', 'increase rites', blood avoidances, 'menstrual taboos', cooking rules, 'the couvade', 'male initiation rites' – and so on almost indefinitely. 'Totemism' is not an institution – any more than 'sacrifice' is. Both concepts correspond to realities embodied in almost countless religious and cultural institutions which grade into each other smoothly when properly analysed.

The Nuer of the Sudan abide rigidly by the 'own-flesh' rule. That is, they will not kill cattle in order to eat the meat themselves. Evans-Pritchard writes, in fact, that 'an ox slain simply from desire for meat may *cien*, take ghostly vengeance on, its slayer . . .' (1956: 265). Life is taken only when it is really necessary, and then the reason is explained carefully not only to God but often to the ox itself. The Nuer 'address the ox and tell it why it is being killed – not that they think it understands. They are justifying themselves in taking its life' (p. 266).

To take life for *oneself* is not a sufficient reason. The life-taking must be for a higher good. When the Nuer are compelled to kill their cattle in times of famine, they make an invocation over the animals asking God that 'the meat may be soft in their stomachs and not bring them sickness'. Evans-Pritchard writes that this is not exactly sacrifice – the people are, after all, killing for the meat – 'but it shows that there is a feeling of guilt about killing animals for food even when hunger compels it' (p. 266). The taboo here is not merely against killing. It is a rule or feeling against killing-and-eating, or killing-to-eat. Killing in itself is perfectly moral, provided it is for the higher good. In fact, life-taking or life exchange is absolutely essential as a means of partaking in this higher good. Cattle are 'reserved for sacrifice' – which means that they are in a special way reserved to be killed – provided only that the killing involves self-sacrifice, renunciation and exchange (pp. 223–4; 266–9). Moreover, there is nothing wrong with eating the meat of the sacrificial victims: 'People show their desire for meat without reserve and it is the festal character of sacrifices which gives them much of their significance in the life of the Nuer.' In an aside indicating once more the reality of the own-flesh rule, Evans-Pritchard immediately adds: 'This is perhaps most noticeable at weddings, when, moreover, those who get the flesh are not those who sacrifice the animal' (p. 263). There is nothing wrong, then, with eating following a killing. The stipulation is simply that an exchange should first occur. The flesh should be consumed only *after* the 'life' of the animal has been received by God, and only on condition that those involved in the killing were acting upon motives transcending mere self-interest or desire for meat.

In the spirit of his times, the theologically motivated Evans-Pritchard goes out of his way to deny significant parallels between Nuer 'sacrifice' (with its apparent resonances in Judaeo-Christian belief) and the all-too-pagan 'totemism' of the same people. For him, Nuer 'sacrifice' is a very definitely demarcated thing, a basic ritual of the Nuer and 'an enactment of their most fundamental religious conceptions' (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 197). Other forms of flesh-giving or renunciation among the Nuer have nothing to do with it.

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

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

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

'The flesh of this animal is as my flesh, and its blood is the same as my blood', says a Shilluk king in making a sacrifice (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 280). In his work on Nuer religion, Evans-Pritchard (1956: 279) notes that there is something universal about this logic: 'All gifts are symbols of inner states, and in this sense one can only give oneself; there is no other kind of giving.' It is a concept, he continues, which has often been expressed:

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

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

The Ojibwa Revisited

As mentioned earlier (see above, p. 106), Lévi-Strauss in his discussions on totemism frequently referred to the original account by James Long (1791: 86–7) in which the term 'totamism' first appeared in print. An Ojibwa Indian whose 'totam' was a Bear (according to Long) 'accidentally' killed a bear while on a hunting trip. He was later (according to the Indian's own account) accosted and scratched by an avenging bear who knocked him down

and demanded an explanation for the crime. The bear accepted the explanation, promising that the Master of Life would not be angry with either the hunter or his tribe. But the Indian himself, on returning home, was filled with remorse and anxiety. He told Long: 'Beaver, my faith is lost, my *totam* is angry, I shall never be able to hunt any more.'

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

Such is Lévi-Strauss' assertion. Yet despite his attack on 'the confusion between the totem and guardian spirit into which Long fell' (1969b: 92), Lévi-Strauss himself lets slip enough information to confirm the substance of Long's position. If we ignore the *emphasis* in the following sentence and simply concentrate on the facts, it can be seen that hunters had to be somewhat careful about killing and eating their totems. Lévi-Strauss (1969b: 89; citing Landes 1937) writes: 'The totem was freely killed and eaten, with certain ritual precautions, viz., that permission had first to be asked of the animal, and apologies to be made to it afterwards.'

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

In a eulogistic introduction to the English edition of Lévi-Strauss' *Totemism*, Roger Poole (1969b: 17–18) once again cites Tylor and Frazer in support of the accusation that Long had made a disastrous analytic blunder. Long had written that 'the Ojibwa refrain from killing their totems, when in fact what he should have said was that they refrained from killing their *manitoo*'. Yet, somewhat inconsistently, he continues:

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

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

Conclusion: Totemism and Sacrifice

I want to turn, finally, to two more frequently cited cases from the classical literature. They are part-totemic, part-sacrificial, part-atonement rite. One case is from the Aino of north-east Asia and Japan, the other from the Australian Aranda.

'The Aino of Saghalien', writes Frazer (1926-36, 5, 2: 188-9; citing Labbe 1903: 227-58), 'rear bear cubs and kill them with . . . ceremonies'. The animal is kept for about two years in a cage, and then killed at a festival which always takes place in winter and at night. The day preceding the sacrifice is devoted to lamentation, old women taking turns in the duty of weeping and groaning in front of the bear's cage. Then in the middle of the night an orator makes a long speech to the beast, reminding him how they have taken care of him, and fed him well, and bathed him in the river, and made him warm and comfortable:

'Now', he proceeds, 'we are holding a great festival in your honour. Be not afraid. We will not hurt you. We will only kill you and send you to the god of the forest who loves you. We are about to offer you a good dinner, the best you have ever eaten among us, and we will all weep for you together. The Aino who will kill you is the best shot among us. There he is, he weeps and asks for your forgiveness; you will feel almost nothing, it will be done so quickly. . . . Remember', he cries, 'remember! I remind you of your whole life and of the services we have rendered you . . . tell the gods to give us riches, that our hunters may return from the forest laden with rare furs and animals good to eat; that our fishers may find troops of seals on the shore and in the sea, and that their nets may crack under the weight of the fish. . . . We have given you food and joy and health; now we kill you in order that you may in return send riches to us and to our children.

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

The same can be said of the Australian Aranda attitude towards the *inarlinga* or spiny anteater. Reserved especially for the pleasure of the old men, it had to be killed considerably: if its nose bled, a short request for forgiveness had to be addressed to it, otherwise its soul 'would tell the stones of the hills to make the hunter's toenail come off and cause him to fall when he next hunted the euro' (Róheim 1974: 43-4). Likewise – to take an

example more clearly 'totemic' in character – an Aranda hunter 'may kill his totem, but in doing so he must proceed humanely: a kangaroo man must not brutally attack the kangaroo "so that the blood gushes out", but is only permitted to hit it on the neck' (Goldenweiser 1910: 196–7). Equally significantly, we are told that having thus killed the animal, the hunter in this situation may eat its head, feet and liver: *the rest he must leave to his friends*. Once again, then, the need for meat-renouncing generosity towards others has become merged with and projected into a kind of 'respect' for the animal itself. Such examples may not be of 'sacrifice' in a strict sense (cf. Maddock 1985). But in all this, a man's 'respect' for his totemic species appears clearly as a self-denying ordinance limiting his right uninhibitedly to *kill and eat*.

It is true, as Lévi-Strauss stresses, that to identify an animal species as 'one's own flesh' is a cognitive act. But in this chapter we have seen that a moral and economic dimension is equally unmistakable. Moreover, in discussing materials of this kind, it seems impossible to decide exactly where 'sacrifice' ends and 'totemism' begins. In every case examined here, there are certain species to which certain rules apply. These rules imply gift-giving. They involve an offering up of 'one's own flesh' – flesh one has made one's own through an intimate act of identification – the gift flowing in some cases to animal souls, in others to the gods, in others to in-laws or other 'respected' social powers. Blessings of one kind or another are expected in return. The common core concept is that you may kill animals of the species concerned (or allow others to kill them), but not greedily, not without a conscience, and not merely to eat the meat yourself. To violate such an ethic is to invite fearsome retribution from the spirits and powers, however these may be conceived.

When Rodney Needham (1974: 42) resoundingly declared 'there is no such thing as kinship; and it follows that there can be no such thing as kinship theory', he was making a statement very like that of Lévi-Strauss in denying the reality of 'totemism'. But kinship studies did not thereupon come to a halt. We were simply invited to question the usefulness or otherwise of the term, 'kinship', along with some other seemingly basic anthropological terms and categories which we habitually and sometimes unthinkingly use. 'Totemism' in this light is only one of a number of partial, inadequate and misleading concepts which were coined by the nineteenth-century founders of anthropology. Like all of these concepts, it corresponds only in the most crude and clumsy way to anything which exists or has ever existed in the real world. In that sense, rather like 'kinship', 'marriage' or 'descent' (Needham 1974: 16, 42–3), totemism is an illusion which once existed and to some extent still exists in our heads. But 'totemism' is by no means the worst of these concepts, or the most misleading. And the fact that it creates certain illusions does not mean that behind and beyond its limitations nothing more

substantial is there. Lévi-Strauss may well be correct in criticising a feature of anthropology's history as a discipline: the nineteenth-century inventors of 'totemism' were indeed – as he alleges – for the most part ethnocentric bigots. These thinkers delighted in presenting examples of the irrationality of the 'uncivilised' mind. They were mistaken – at least if it was implied that 'savages' are any more irrational than ourselves. But this does not mean that the founders of anthropology were mistaken to suspect a unity of principle underlying the various phenomena they took to be 'totemic'. Quite the reverse: the unity of principle underlying 'totemic' phenomena is *more* real, *more* astonishing and *more* significant than even the most ardent champions of totemism in the nineteenth century could ever have known.

'The hunter kills, other people have', say the Siberian Yukaghir, among whom the 'selfish' hunter risks losing his luck by angering the 'spirit-protector of the animals' (Jochelson 1926: 124–5). 'The society seems to want to extinguish in every way possible the concept of the meat belonging to the hunter', writes Marshall (1961: 238) of the !Kung Bushmen. Hayden (1981: 386), Dowling (1968), Sahlins (1974: 149–275), Ingold (1980: 158), Gould (1981: 435), Testart (1988: 10) and many others have likewise commented on the cross-cultural significance of such norms. The 'own-flesh' rule is not just a way of thinking or a magical belief: it points to a way of life pursued by humanity for millennia before the concept of private property was permitted to gain a hold. The unity of principle underlying 'totemism' links sex with food, kinship with economics, ritual with myth and thought with life with a simplicity too stunning to be attributed to chance or the random coming together of separate 'features'. And, when all is said and done, the old-fashioned word, 'totemism', with all the connotations, meanings and ambiguities which have been lent it by literary or anthropological usage over the years, still evokes this unity more tellingly than any other of the traditional expressions we have. The 'phantom' which Lévi-Strauss (1969b: 83) feared his own work might, despite himself, reawaken to life may indeed be impossible to exorcise. Von Brandenstein (1972) likened totemism to 'the old Egyptian Bennu bird which burned itself to death only to emerge from the ashes in the old form but with a new life essence'.

Chapter 4

The Sex Strike

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an interrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.

Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848)

The first class antagonism which appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamian marriage, and the first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male.

Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884)

I now want to address a question which Chapter 3 implicitly posed but left unanswered. Granted that 'totemism', 'sacrifice' and other rituals seem to have emerged through a historical process of transformation of the hunters' 'own-kill' rule – *where did this rule itself ultimately come from?*

Rather than keep my reader guessing, let me anticipate the conclusion and then set out my reasons for arriving at it. My answer is not difficult to state. Since mothers and their offspring must always have been the main beneficiaries of the 'own-kill' taboo, since men probably had no 'natural' (as opposed to cultural) inclination to abide by it, and since men's rewards for compliance appear to have been overwhelmingly marital and sexual – avoiding one's own kill must in some sense have been *motivated and established by women*. I will leave to future chapters the problem of how women could ever have had sufficient motivation or power to do this.

Lévi-Strauss holds men to have created culture. Where conscious, creative action is concerned, he sees not mixed human social groups but groups of men alone. These male groups establish the incest rule through an act of trust and generosity toward one another. Imposing upon themselves a sexual taboo, the men in each group surrender to others 'their own' women (sisters and daughters), hoping and trusting to receive back other women in return.

Lévi-Strauss is at pains to emphasise in this context what he terms 'a universal fact, that the relationship of reciprocity which is the basis of marriage is not established between men and women, but between men by means of women, who are merely the occasion of this relationship' (1969a: 116). Women, in other words, have no active role to play. Lévi-Strauss richly illustrates this model with examples from every continent, and declares it to lie at the basis of all culture.

Lévi-Strauss' 'exchange of women' model of cultural origins inspired a book which remains (despite all the criticisms) the most comprehensive and coherent cross-cultural analysis of kinship systems that social anthropology has achieved. Beginning with the simplest conceivable system of 'restricted exchange' – a system in which two groups of men exchange their sisters and/or daughters between themselves – Lévi-Strauss' *The Elementary Structures* showed how an immense variety of more elaborate systems can be conceptualised as systematic permutations and transformations worked upon this model.

The novelty of Lévi-Strauss' approach was that instead of merely examining the internal structure of descent groups, he visualised streams and currents of precious valuables – above all, women – flowing between groups in often immense cycles. A current of women would flow in one direction whilst, typically, another current of bride-wealth valuables (treated by Lévi-Strauss as less essential or merely symbolic) flowed in reverse. In the more open-ended, 'generalised' structures of sexual exchange, an extraordinary amount of inter-male trust was involved, as men in one group surrendered their most precious sexual and reproductive assets to another or several other groups in an extended chain, knowing or hoping that some time, some day, the system of reciprocity would ensure repayment in kind and the restoration of the temporarily forfeited imbalance. The participants' point of departure was a collective understanding that eventually – after in some cases many generations – the wheel should have turned full circle, with 'wife-givers' and 'wife-takers' having settled accounts. Where the number of male groups linked in each cycle was large, the streams of women functioned as continuous threads binding together into one coherent fabric groups of men dispersed widely over the landscape and stretched across several generations.

I have no wish to survey here the numerous criticisms which have been levelled at Lévi-Strauss' work on kinship. At this point I will simply return to Lévi-Strauss' point of departure – his 'exchange of women' model – and ask some questions posed by our previous discussion.

The 'value of exchange', writes Lévi-Strauss (1969a: 480),

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

It is by means of exchange, then, that the 'natural' bonds of kinship are overridden by the 'artificial' – that is, cultural – bonds of marriage.

A number of features characterise this model. Firstly, it is assumed that links of 'blood' or kinship are 'natural'; it is only marital alliances which establish the realm of culture. Culture is based neither on the biological family, nor on links – however extended – through brothers, sisters or parents and offspring. It arises exclusively out of the 'artificial' marriage links forged between biological units – links which are produced by the incest taboo and consequent need for each male-dominated family to exchange its sisters and daughters.

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

Thirdly, whether a woman is sexually available or non-available is, according to Lévi-Strauss, a matter decided by the application or non-application to her of male-imposed rules of exogamy or incest avoidance. In all this, there is little room for decision-making by women themselves.

How does all this correspond with the evidence of ethnography?

The model fits reasonably well with an image of patrilocal, patrilineal bands or lineages, each organised around a male core of kinsmen who bring in wives from other similar groups. It is less able to cope with alternative arrangements, especially where (as in most hunter-gatherer cultures) residence patterns are flexible and/or 'marriage' is established tenuously with a long period of bride-service and initial uxorilocality. Neither does the model fit at all easily with a matrilineal and/or matrilocal bias, which may be pronounced in some systems and a dimension or component in many others. In Lévi-Strauss' eyes, indeed, a 'matrilineal society, even though patrilocal', has 'peculiar problems to resolve' because of the difficulties of cementing the marital union and incorporating the wife firmly in her husband's group (1969a: 116–17). Yet his account of the development of 'generalised' exchange posits a dynamic in which 'disharmonic' régimes are superseded by 'harmonic' ones, usually patrilineal; in the less integrative mixed systems, either the descent rule was matrilineal or the residence rule matrilocal

(1969a: 265–91, 438–55). Given Lévi-Strauss' point of departure – masculine primacy and the centrality of male marital control – it is unclear how such rules could have come to establish their force. Why should either matrilineal descent or matrilineal residence, both treated by Lévi-Strauss as inconvenient to males, have arisen if men from the beginning had always decided on such matters themselves?

A further technical difficulty is that the model gives enormous prominence to incest/exogamy rules as the basic factors constraining women's sexual availability, whilst very little is said about other kinds of sexual taboos. In particular, *periodic* taboos – on sex during menstruation, before and after childbirth, whilst meat is cooking, while preparing a trap, making hunting nets or organising a collective hunting expedition – these and comparable restrictions are not accounted for by the theory. Indeed, given an underlying assumption that sexual availability is a married woman's normal and permanent state, such things inevitably appear as anomalies.

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

it is because political authority, or simply social authority, always belongs to men, and because this masculine priority appears constant, that it adapts itself to a bilineal or matrilineal form of descent in most primitive societies, or imposes its model on all aspects of social life, as is the case in more developed groups. (1969a: 177)

In this context, the model's emphasis on the absolute cultural primacy of marital alliance would make factors such as female-initiated separation or divorce appear anomalous in the extreme. The implication is that marriage is final and permanent. Women with their kin can have no say in restricting or terminating sexual access to a spouse *after* marriage.

We have seen that in Lévi-Strauss' model there is no room for women who can indicate 'yes' or 'no' in sexual terms themselves. Women are spoken for in this respect by men. While this may to an extent reflect what happens in numerous male-dominated societies, as a model of the 'norm' – against which to measure elements of female autonomy as 'deviations' or 'anomalies' – it simply does not work. Simplicity in a model may be a virtue, and Lévi-Strauss' model of culture's 'initial situation' certainly excels in this respect. But the advantages are lost if the outcome is that a vast range of 'anomalous' findings remain unaccounted for, leading to the need for various additional models and theories which may serve their own purposes but meanwhile complicate the field. In this connection, we need only mention that Lévi-Strauss' model of incest avoidance attributes the taboo's origin not in part to mothers and sisters but exclusively to the altruistic self-denial of fathers and

brothers; it is men in positions of responsibility, not humans of both sexes, who are attributed with the power to say 'no'. The extraordinary cross-cultural strength of the mother-son incest taboo as compared with the notoriously poor record of older or 'responsible' males in keeping away from their daughters/younger sisters (Herman 1981) seems in this light anomalous; it is not discussed by Lévi-Strauss.

Finally, although it claims to present an image of the origins of human culture as such, Lévi-Strauss' model is in fact much more restricted. Despite the wider claims of structuralism generally, the 'exchange of women' has implications only for kinship studies in a somewhat narrowly defined sense. Culture is many things besides formal kinship, and a theory of its origins ought therefore to be testable in the light of cross-cultural economic, ritual, political, ideological and mythological findings – in addition to the kinship evidence on which Lévi-Strauss in *The Elementary Structures* relies. Lévi-Strauss of course turned to some of these other topics in his later works, but by this time – as we noted in Chapters 2 and 3 – he had lost his earlier thread, and was no longer focusing on the incest rule or upon material processes of exchange.

If we take as our starting point, not 'the exchange of women' but gender solidarity and an exchange of services *between* women and men, a model can be produced which enables us to overcome most of these problems. We can retain Lévi-Strauss' insight that in the process of cultural origins a vital step must have been the establishment of sexual taboos. But in this and the following chapters, we will take it that women themselves had a role to play in determining whether they were sexually available or not. A model will be presented within which the 'incest taboo' arises as an aspect of a more basic reality: the capacity of the evolving protohuman female to say 'yes' – and her equal capacity to give a firm 'no'.

Human culture is based on solidarity. What precisely is involved in this will become clearer as we proceed, but at the outset it may safely be supposed that without some capacity for community-wide collective agreement, there could be no language, no rules, no sexual or other morality – and indeed, no 'society' at all. Lévi-Strauss is only one among many to have emphasised this point, even though in his case what is envisaged is exclusively solidarity between men (1969a).

We may accept another aspect of Lévi-Strauss' thesis without difficulty. Human cultural solidarity in its earliest stages must have found a way of surviving in the face of what must have been its most difficult test – sex. In primate societies, coalitions do emerge and play an important role, but the ever-present threat of sexual conflict places severe limitations on what such coalitions can achieve. Outbreaks of sexually motivated inter-male fighting are the stuff of politics among monkeys and apes, as are female sexual

rivalries. Where collectively sanctioned sexual and other regulations and taboos are unknown, the disruptive effects of sex can be enormous. Somehow, in the course of human evolution, this problem must have been overcome. As Marshall Sahlins (1960: 80) some years ago put it, writing of human cultural origins: 'Among subhuman primates sex had organized society; the customs of hunters and gatherers testify eloquently that now society was to organize sex . . . '.

But while accepting all this, this book is based on a third assumption which takes us beyond Lévi-Strauss' frame of reference. The forms of human solidarity underpinning the transition to culture must have had sexual dimensions, and could not have been all-male. In fact, I will show that had not females been involved in asserting their own forms of sexual solidarity at crucial moments, our ancestors could not have achieved the profound sexual changes necessary if they were to transcend the limitations of primate sexuality and sociability.

The remainder of this chapter will focus not on solidarity in the abstract but on *gender solidarity*, which will be viewed, using Marxist concepts, as the outcome of various forms of struggle between the sexes – a struggle transcending the boundaries between nature and culture. I will examine gender solidarity (1) among primates and (2) among members of non-western – and particularly hunter-gatherer – societies.

PRIMATES

Primate Politics

Modern primatology is explicitly concerned with the *politics* of ape and monkey social life (de Waal 1983; Dunbar 1988). Whereas twenty years ago, the term 'politics' would not have been used, nowadays this and other terms derived from lay language are increasingly being drawn upon by primatologists, some of whom allow themselves to empathise with the animals almost as if they were human subjects. Supposedly 'clinical' terms such as 'agonistic interaction' – meaning an argument or fight – are going out of fashion. Primates are extremely intelligent animals whose actions cannot be understood in purely mechanistic, behavioural terms. What the animals are *trying* to do, it is now realised, is essential to grasp if what they *actually* do is to be understood (Dunbar 1988: 324).

It is now recognised that chimpanzees, gorillas, gelada baboons and other primates are rational beings able to set themselves goals, work out long-term strategies, memorise the essentials of complex social relationships over periods of time, display distinctive personalities, co-operate, argue amongst themselves, engage in deception, exploit subordinates, organise political alliances, overthrow their 'rulers' – and indeed, on a certain level and in a limited way, do most of the things which we humans do in our localised, small-scale interactions with one another.

Robin Dunbar (1988) is a rigorous materialist and an inventor of ingenious tests for selecting between rival primatological theories. In his published writings he takes great pains to prevent subjective impressions from distorting his findings. Yet he confidently describes his subjects as displaying 'trust', 'opportunism', 'psychological cunning' and similar characteristics, and as 'reneging' on joint understandings, 'retaliating' against those who renege – and even 'voting' on issues of communal concern.

Likewise, the Dutch primatologist de Waal (1983) has described chimpanzee 'power politics' in almost human terms, writing of 'political ambition', 'collective leadership', 'conspiracy' and so on, and portraying the individual personalities of his chimpanzee subjects in Arnhem Zoo with a novelist's attention to detail.

Provided it is constrained by the use of proven techniques of sampling, statistical analysis and the rigorous testing of hypotheses, all this can be validated as good scientific methodology. It is now realised that the esoteric, impoverished and cumbersome clinical terminology of the earlier functionalist and behaviourist studies – studies which avoided the rich resources of lay language for fear of lapsing into 'anthropomorphism' – actually obstructed our understanding of primates, these most intelligent of creatures whose mental capacities so obviously approximate to our own.

Dunbar spent many years studying wild gelada baboons in Ethiopia, and has done as much as anyone to synthesise modern primatological knowledge into a comprehensive overall picture. He argues that the components of primate social systems 'are essentially alliances of a political nature aimed at enabling the animals concerned to achieve more effective solutions to particular problems of survival and reproduction' (Dunbar 1988: 14). Primate societies are in essence 'multi-layered sets of coalitions' (p. 106). Although physical fights are the ultimate tests of status and the basic means of deciding contentious issues, the social mobilisation of allies in such conflicts often decides matters and requires other than purely physical skills.

Instead of simply relying on their own physical powers, individuals pursue their social objectives by attempting to find allies against social rivals and competitors. For example, when two male chimpanzees are aggressively confronting one another – in a quarrel over a female, perhaps, or over food – one of them may hold out his hand and beckon, trying to draw a nearby onlooker into the conflict on his own side. If the onlooker is influential and sympathetic, that may decide the outcome. De Waal (1983: 36) describes the 'aggressive alliance' or 'coalition' among chimpanzees as 'the political instrument par excellence'.

The manipulation and use of coalitions demands sophisticated intelligence. It is even possible (although unusual) for a relatively poor fighter to dominate more muscular rivals if he or she is better able to mobilise popular support. The factor militating against this is that most individuals want to be on the winning side, so a good fighter is also likely to be popular as a focus

of successful coalitions, whereas a consistent loser may be shunned by the strong and the weak alike.

In any event, brawn without brain is inadequate, and it is now thought that the considerable brain-power displayed by most of the higher primates functions not only to ensure the individual's survival in a direct relationship with the physical environment but more importantly to aid success in the many 'political' calculations which have to be made within society itself (Chance and Mead 1953; Jolly 1966; Kummer 1967, 1982; Humphrey 1976; Cheney and Seyfarth 1985; Dunbar 1988; Byrne and Whiten 1988). Applying this to human evolution, most authoritative statements have stressed that it was not foraging or tool use as such that generated human levels of intelligence but rather the associated social, behavioural and cultural processes required to direct and organise such activities (Reynolds 1976; Lovejoy 1981; Holloway 1981; Wynn 1988).

Elements of Female Solidarity Within Primate Societies

In the 1950s and 1960s, when field studies of primates were just beginning, specialists tended to think of each species of primate as having its own characteristic form of social organisation, regardless of immediate geographical or ecological conditions.

Moreover, investigators focused almost entirely upon primate males. Hamadryas baboons in Ethiopia seemed to be organised in markedly male-dominated social systems. The males were 'the active sex', fighting among themselves for females, the victors organising their seized or kidnapped females into compact harems which could be efficiently supervised and controlled from above. A straying, wayward female would be brought back into line by means of a bite on the neck – a bite so hard that it sometimes lifted the female off the ground (Kummer 1968: 36–7). The female would follow her overlord closely from then on. There were no successful female rebellions or revolutions. For primatologists, there seemed to be little point in concentrating attention upon what the females were feeling or trying to achieve.

This picture was not decisively modified when, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, attention began to be redirected from baboons to wild chimpanzees. Although chimpanzees seemed to be more easygoing, the males being sexually more tolerant of each other, it was still found that males were the dominant sex. Many accounts concentrated on the degree to which male chimps were prepared to tolerate other males within their ranges and to 'share' their female sexual partners – a pattern which was contrasted with the hamadryas baboon norm of pronounced inter-male sexual intolerance (Reynolds 1966, Sugiyama 1972).

The contrast between baboons and chimpanzees became deeply embedded in almost all primatological thinking. Primate 'family' units were divided between two contrasting categories – 'one-male units' on the one hand,

'multi-male units' on the other. Intolerant ('hamadryas-like') males produced the first kind of unit; more tolerant ('chimpanzee-like') males formed the second kind. No one referred to 'one-female units' or 'multi-female units'. The presence of females with their offspring was taken for granted, the only question being whether a group of females attached itself sexually to one adult male or to several.

Inseparable from all this was what is now called a 'priority of access' model of sexual relations. Females were thought of as passive creatures waiting to be kidnapped, snatched, stolen or conquered by males. The males were seen to fight one another for priority of access to the females, and, basically, the possible outcomes were these: either (a) an individual victorious male exclusively controlled a whole 'harem' of females-with-young or (b) a group of two or more successful males chose to compromise with one another, collectively defending and sharing access to a group of females. The first outcome was popularly conceptualised as a 'Cyclopean' system more or less corresponding to Freud's 'Primal Horde'; the second was seen, at least by some writers, as a form of 'group-marriage' (Fox 1975b: 12, 16).

In either case, the object of a male sexual fight was simply to defeat one's opponent(s) and seize or win over his (or their) females. Noting the mental demands placed upon males, one of the great founders of modern primatology, M. R. A. Chance (1962: 31), hypothesised that the human brain may have become enlarged in the course of evolution precisely to deal with such taxing and risk-laden situations. The protohuman male, in other words, was thought to have needed a large brain in order to work out when to attack, when to ingratiate himself with a more dominant rival, when to run away, when to bluff – and also when and how to express his emotions so as to convey signals to his own advantage. In developing this theme, Robin Fox (1966; 1967a) argued that the 'whole process of enlarging the neo-cortex to take-off point' was based on 'a competition between the dominant and sub-dominant males', those surviving being 'those best able to control and inhibit, and hence time, their responses'. He concluded: 'Here then are the beginnings of deferred gratification, conscience and guilt, spontaneous inhibition of drives, and many other features of a truly human state.'

Chance himself (1962: 32) cautioned that all this need only have been 'a phase in man's development', antedating the period of maximum cortical expansion. Nonetheless, his support for the view that male brain-power evolved in the context of sexual fighting gave new respectability to a widespread popular origins myth (see Chapter 1).

But how and why did hominid females develop their brains along with males? And how might our protohuman female ancestors have responded to the males supposedly fighting around them all the time? Such questions were not usually thought to be an issue. Until the impact of sociobiology became felt, an influential view among primatologists was that female behaviour did not really matter, because it had little bearing on overall social structure. As

one specialist put it: 'the number of adult males and their reciprocal relationships determine the social structure of the group as well as the group behavior as a whole' (Vogel 1973: 363).

It is now widely recognised that all this presented a distorted picture of reality. The defects can be discussed under several headings.

Female Dominance in Primates

Firstly, it is in part coincidental that male dominance came to be assumed to be the 'natural' or 'default' condition for primates. Had primatologists begun their field studies among lemurs in Madagascar instead of among baboons in the Sudan or Ethiopia, a very different picture might have become fixed in the popular mind.

Prosimians are sometimes thought of as the most 'primitive' of living primates (Hrdy 1981: 60). They exhibit pronounced 'matriarchal' tendencies. Ring-tailed lemurs, brown lemurs, white sifakas, ruffed lemurs, black lemurs, diademed sifakas, indris – these and many other Madagascan species are characterised by female dominance as the norm. Alison Jolly (1972: 185) studied ring-tailed lemurs in southern Madagascar and reported that despite male swaggering 'females were dominant over males, both in threats and in priority for food. Females at times bounced up to the dominant male and snatched a tamarind pod from his hand, cuffing him over the ear in the process.'

Admittedly, the prosimians represent only one suborder within the general order of primates. Most primate species *are* male-dominated, in the sense that a dominant male will displace any female from her position if he wants to. But this says nothing at all about 'natural' or 'original' states. As Hrdy (1981: 59) points out, by focusing on baboons, langurs and orang-utans, one can 'demonstrate' that male dominance is the natural condition for primates. By concentrating on prosimians, one can argue that female dominance is the primitive and basic condition, for among all the social lemurs ever studied, this is so.

Female Determinance of Social Structure

More interesting than this, however, is the modern sociobiologically inspired finding that among primates generally it is the strategies pursued by the female sex which ultimately determine the overall social structure.

Females and males have different priorities. To a large extent, this stems from the basic fact that, in all mammals, a male can in principle father an almost limitless number of offspring, whereas there are strict limits to the number a female can produce.

Male primates (with some exceptions) are not equipped to do much to ensure the survival of their offspring once these have been conceived. Except

for a few functions such as defence against predators, offspring can gain little benefit from their 'fathers', who are in no primate species inclined or able to provide their partners or young with food. In perpetuating their genes, therefore, it usually makes better sense for males to abandon their mates soon after conception and attempt to inseminate more females (a general fact of mammalian biology which may help to explain why only about 4 per cent of mammal species are monogamous – Hrdy 1981: 35). By contrast, once they are pregnant or are nurturing offspring, female primates, like most mammals, have little to gain (in terms of the replication of their genes) by getting inseminated again and again. What matters is that their existing offspring survive. This means feeding them, and this in turn means that females tend to be more interested in 'economics' than sex – or in any event, tend to prioritise this aspect more than do males.

These differences have spatial correlates and consequences. Female primates, who are burdened with the task of producing and provisioning their offspring, distribute themselves in space according to their needs and preferences for shelter, comfort, safety and – most importantly – for particular types of food. Instead of endlessly searching for males, they prioritise such on-going, day-to-day 'economic' concerns. Males, on the other hand, are primarily interested in securing access to oestrus females. Foraging activities are subordinated to this overriding sexual quest. The result is that while females distribute themselves according to their own foraging and nurturing requirements, males note how the females have arranged themselves in space and then decide how to map themselves on to this pattern so as to maximise their mating opportunities.

The extent to which the males fight or co-operate, form large or small groups, define 'closed' or 'open' systems – all this depends on what the females have set about doing in the first instance. The extent to which the males are 'tolerant' or 'intolerant' depends not just on genes but on the immediate social situation, and this is at root female-defined. It is in this sense that the female pattern is 'basic' (Wrangham 1979; Hrdy 1981: 123–4; Rodman 1984). In Marxist terms, one might say that the female distribution pattern is to the male sexual-political pattern as 'economic infrastructure' is to 'political superstructure'. To change the whole system in any fundamental sense, the underlying 'economic' pattern of female ecological relationships would have to be changed first.

How the females arrange themselves in space depends (a) upon immediate geographical and ecological conditions and (b) upon the females' genetically determined preferences and abilities to make use of what the environment has to offer. For example, chimpanzees have digestive systems rendering them dependent on ripe fruit, which require much travelling and searching to find. Quite different are gorillas, which can munch almost anything, including leaves, and so can usually feed on what is immediately to hand without moving much at all. Most monkeys fall somewhere between these

two extremes, combining leaf-eating with a preference for ripe fruit when these are available (Hrdy 1981: 123–4).

Where food is hard to find and widely spaced, females may have to travel fast and far in order to eat; if food is available almost everywhere, little movement may be required. If the food is scarce – in the form, for example, of an occasional small bush or tree transiently laden with fruit – the females may not want to be accompanied by others but would prefer to be alone so as to monopolise what they have found for themselves. If the food is abundant, and/or if there are other considerations – such as defence against predators – making group life advantageous, they may prefer to cluster in groups. The variations and permutations are numerous, but the basic result is that females arrange themselves across the landscape in characteristic patterns – grouped or isolated, fast-moving or slow, in trees or on the ground – and the males in pursuing their sexual goals adopt strategies which take account of the situation which the females have defined.

How do the males 'map' themselves on to the pre-existent female distribution pattern? It all depends on the circumstances. If the females are clustered in manageable or defensible groups, a male may realistically attempt to monopolise a whole harem all to himself. If the females are very isolated and scattered, however, any one male may only be capable of monopolising one female at a time. If the females are clustered quite closely, but move too independently, are too assertive or are in groups too large to be fenced off and defended by single males, those patrolling or defending their ranges may find it best to collaborate, particularly if they are close kin, the result being what Robin Fox (1975b: 16) calls 'group marriage' – a pattern in which two or more brother-males collectively defend the joint ranges of several females. This happens among chimpanzees (for a theoretical explanation see Rodman 1984).

The situation can be summed up by saying that in all cases, the basic pattern is that primates, male and female, compete for resource-filled space. Sleeping or nesting space, feeding space, grooming space – the whole of life is, in a real sense, about space and the competition to monopolise portions of it for certain periods. But whereas females in the first instance compete among themselves for foraging space, which may well be 'uninhabited' at the outset, what males compete for is *space already occupied by the opposite sex, the females themselves being the main 'valuables' within it*. It is true that subsequently – once males have established their domain – females may compete among themselves in order to get closest to the dominant male, who may confer various competitive 'privileges' upon his temporary or permanent 'favourites'. For example, when many geladas in a group arrive simultaneously at the same waterhole, the male and dominant females drink first and perhaps wallow in the water; subordinate animals wait their turn – and may even miss their turn altogether if the dominant animals move on whilst jostling around the water remains intense (Hrdy 1981: 106). It makes sense, then,

for females to compete for privileged space close to the dominant males. But the male arrangement that ultimately emerges depends fundamentally on the nature of the female-defined space for which males initially compete among themselves.

Female 'Voting' to Confirm or Repudiate Male Status

Most primate systems are male-dominated. That is, once a male has gained control over a space with one or more females ranging within it, he may from time to time choose to displace a particular female from her feeding position in order to eat the food which she has found. If she cannot use her sexual attractions to alter his intentions she may try to resist, in which case the male may use physical force. The literature is replete with examples of dominant males casually stealing food from 'their' females or offspring – in the case of some macaques species, even to the point of nonchalantly raiding the inside of females' mouths (Hrdy 1981: 114–15). Whether in such extreme forms or in milder ones, this kind of thing is really what 'dominance' – the basic organising principle of all primate societies – is about.

But this does not mean that the females are always passive or inactive. On the contrary, they can often determine which male is to be their 'overlord', or which males collectively are to patrol over their ranges.

For example, when a male gelada sets out to attack a previously dominant rival so as to take over his harem, the females concerned may insist on their own say in the outcome. At various stages during the fighting, the females may 'vote' among themselves on whether to accept the provisional outcome. There may be real internal arguments, with some females wanting to restore the old overlord whilst others welcome the newcomer. As Dunbar (1988: 166) in his fascinating account puts it: 'During the process of this "voting" procedure, the females are involved in a great deal of fighting amongst themselves as those who do not want to change males attempt to prevent those that do from interacting with the new male.' The traditionalists, in this account, are clearly attempting to impose a collective sexual boycott upon the unwanted newcomer male. These females are likely to be those who had held a satisfactory status within the harem under the old order. The more 'radical' females – those wanting a change – are likely to be those who were previously discriminated against within the harem; their hope is for a better deal under new management. Voting is simple – 'no' is signalled by refusing to groom the newcomer; 'yes' is signalled by going up to him and grooming him.

Dunbar (personal communication) adds that the females do not make their decisions as such until some time into the fighting. It is as if they were waiting to see how the two males initially shape up before beginning to decide one way or the other. Although the females continue to bicker amongst themselves long after the males have stopped fighting, the struggle effectively ends once a majority of females have 'voted' for or against

the new male. Dunbar (1988: 166, 167, 243) writes that the ultimate outcome of an inter-male 'sexual fight' always depends in this way on the female 'votes', although he does not infer that there is any very accurate electoral 'count'!

In some higher primate species, such as hamadryas baboons and gorillas, there is little sisterly solidarity, as a result of which 'females are abjectly subordinate to a male leader' (Hrdy 1981: 162). In the case of geladas, however – despite a rather precarious and superficial male 'dominance' – female solidarity within the harem may confer considerable power. Hrdy (1981: 104) cites an incident in which an overlord male rushed aggressively towards a 'straying' female. Had she been a hamadryas, no sister would have supported her: she would have cringed, received her punishment and got back into line. But the gelada female did no such thing. She snarled and lunged back, whereupon three other females from her own harem joined her and stood their ground beside her until the male, who was supposed to be their 'leader', was chased off!

Among hanuman langurs, when a new male overlord from an external troop wins a harem, his first concern is to bite and kill the young infants so that their mothers stop lactating and so come back into oestrus more quickly, conceiving and bearing offspring by the new male (Hrdy 1981: 82). It is unclear why the females in this species have not evolved counter-measures to resist this. However logical the behaviour may be in terms of the male's calculations of genetic benefit, such wastage of maternal investment is certainly not in the mothers' own reproductive interests (Hrdy 1981: 92). Among savanna baboons and squirrel monkeys, it is quite common to see a group of females collectively 'mobbing' a male who had attempted to molest an infant (Hrdy 1981: 96). However, it must be admitted that successful infanticide is fairly common among primates, including chimpanzees, and that although males may be the worst offenders, rival females are also sometimes guilty (Goodall 1977: 259–82). There is an obvious contrast here with human hunter-gatherer societies, which never tolerate infanticide for these kinds of reason.

In the case of many primate species, if a new male overlord makes a serious political 'mistake' – killing, eating or threatening an infant might be an example – he may antagonise the females so much that they collectively make it impossible for him to maintain his position (Dunbar 1988: 165, 243–4, 261). For one reason or another, his unpopularity may be such as to provoke a 'sex strike' – in the sense that a group of females may simply refuse to turn their attentions to a particular male, even when he has supposedly or provisionally 'won' them in a fight (Dunbar 1988: 165, 167, citing Herbert 1968, Michael *et al.* 1978).

Finally, among chimpanzees, an intriguing phenomenon is what de Waal (1983: 38) calls 'confiscation'. A ferocious adult male may be 'displaying' aggressively towards a rival, his hair all erect, his body swaying from side to

side – and brandishing a stone in one hand. An adult female ‘calmly walks up to the displaying male, loosens his fingers from around the stone and walks away with it’. De Waal writes that the male may try to pick up another weapon – only for the female to take away that one too. On one occasion, a female confiscated no fewer than six objects in a row!

This female confiscation sequence was a recurrent pattern among de Waal’s chimpanzees. ‘In such a situation’, writes de Waal, ‘the male has never been known to react aggressively towards the female’. After millennia during which evolving hominids may have been tempted to fight each other using hand-axes – lethal conflicts probably occurring from time to time (Chapter 8) – comparable female-inspired disarmament may eventually have played an important violence-transcending, culture-creating role.

Matrilineages

A further fascinating finding is that although the females of many species enter into fewer relationships than do males, the bonds they do forge tend to be more enduring and play a much bigger role in determining the overall kinship structure.

This is not a new finding. As J. H. Crook (1972: 89) put it, females form the more cohesive elements of primate groups and, as a consequence of their solidarity, tend to play a considerable role in determining who emerges as their ‘overlord’ or ‘control’: ‘Males by contrast . . . are the more mobile animals, transferring themselves, as recent research shows, quite frequently from one group to another.’ Males, being often bigger and stronger than females, seem to need their relationships less; they are more likely to rely on their own muscular strength, to wander off on their own, or to visit other groups. Moreover, in negotiating their way through the political landscape within any particular group, they tend to switch allegiances more often, prompted by immediate calculations of transient self-interest.

Except in the case of a few species, such as the monogamous gibbons, it is the males, therefore, who are the more exploratory sex, tending to establish quite extensive ranges, each overlapping the smaller ranges of several females. Females, by contrast, choose their partners and their localities carefully and invest in them more heavily – for each needs to prepare a long-term protective ecological and social niche for herself and her offspring.

Since males move around and change their relationships, while females tend to retain theirs throughout life, the result is something like a matrilineal descent system. A concise and emphatic statement on this point was made by a pioneering authority on hamadryas baboons in 1971: ‘Nonhuman primates’, he wrote, ‘recognise only matrilineal kinship’ (Kummer 1971: 34).

Although it would seem to be a theoretically possible arrangement, in no known case do females live together in a territory, occasionally receiving visits from a transient male, whom they drive away once impregnated.

Females always appear to appreciate a degree of continuing male commitment to them and to their offspring, particularly in the form of protection against predators or stranger males. Although non-monogamous male primates may not show any particular long-term commitment to any one female within their domain, their commitment to the defence of this domain as such – and hence to the defence of their own genetic offspring within it – is strong and of value to the mothers. Genetic calculations suggest that a father should risk his life for the defence of his own offspring more readily even than should a mother's sister (Hrdy 1981: 56).

Nevertheless, within their male-patrolled ranges, primate females of all species tend to choose other females, not males, as their immediate foraging companions (Dunbar 1988: 138). Why this is so is not quite clear, but many intriguing suggestions have been made. It may be simply because of the differences in priorities mentioned earlier. To any female, her male partner is likely to be somewhat unreliable – likely to abandon her for some other female should a good mating opportunity arise. For a mother interested in feeding herself and her offspring, a male constantly on the look out for new mating opportunities could be quite a nuisance: he would keep trying to steer the family in directions quite irrelevant to its search for food. Moreover, even when a female had found food, her dominant male partner would be quite likely to displace her should he feel hungry – and eat the food himself (Ghiglieri 1984: 189). On the other hand, among many species, males and females have somewhat different diets, and so would choose to go in different directions in search of food (Dunbar 1988: 138). Another factor may be the reluctance of females to become involved in inter-male sexual fights; much better to let the males get on with their fighting at safe distance, so that the offspring do not get hurt! More positively, females may appreciate the presence of nearby sisters or non-dominant companions to lighten the load of caring for offspring, or to enable the young of several mothers to benefit from playing among themselves (Ghiglieri 1984: 188–9).

The fact that related females bond with each other, often more enduringly than males, in some cases leads to the formation of 'matrilineages'. Japanese and Indian macaques are an example. They arrange themselves into matrilineal extended lineages or 'clans'. Certain whole clans are dominant over others within a troop, and individuals are ranked within each clan. At the top of each matrilineal hierarchy is the founding female. Clusters of these clans form troops, each associated with a group of males who may not be related, and these males may outrank the top-ranking matriarch of each clan. But despite this male dominance, each male's rank still depends on female support, and derives in large measure from the rank held by his mother from the moment he was born. A high-ranking mother will have high-ranking daughters and sons, while a low-ranking mother's offspring will inherit her lowly status. This is a kind of matrilineal 'feudalism', in the sense that 'individuals inherit unequal lifetime benefits according to the happenstances

of birth' (Hrdy 1981: 112). Low-ranking individuals are harassed by others, eat less well, sleep less well and produce fewer surviving offspring (Hrdy 1981: 114–22).

In the case of these macaques, while dominant males associated with a lineage come and go, each male's relationship to the troop being transient, female power is much more enduring. Among Japanese macaques, males move out of their natal troop when they are only two or three years old, and eventually establish sexual relations with other females who remain with their kin. Females remain in the same troop for a lifetime, whereas males transfer out after a few years. This, then, is a kind of 'matrilineal' and 'matrilocal' system (although I hasten to add that what primatologists mean by 'matrilineal' and what social anthropologists mean are rather different things!).

Although the 'matrilineages' may not always be so extended or so stable, it is a fact that most primates have some such system. That is – in contrast with Lévi-Strauss' model of human origins – it is usually the males who are 'exchanged' between groups, not the females. Among macaques, baboons, geladas and vervet monkeys, this is certainly the case. Wherever it is the females who stay in their natal group whilst males transfer out, 'matrilineages' tend to evolve as the basic embodiments of solidarity. Only in a few exceptional cases – forest-dwelling chimpanzees being the main example – do primate males remain in their natal groups while females emigrate. Among gorillas and red colobus monkeys, both sexes change groups with more or less equal frequency (Dunbar 1988: 80–1).

Perhaps most interesting of all is the suggestion that life in the more open and exposed, relatively impoverished environments seems to produce 'matrilineal/matrilocal' systems. This has obvious potential relevance to human social evolution and will be returned to later (Chapter 6).

According to Dunbar (1988: 81), where danger from predators is severe, females tend not to leave their own natal group but stay with their kin. Among primates, danger from predators tends to increase with distance from the safety of trees to climb up into, and Dunbar's finding is that among primates in general, there is in fact a good correlation between medium to large group size, low female migration rates, long-term kin-based female coalitions and a terrestrial or semi-terrestrial way of life (1988: 297–305).

In explaining this finding, Dunbar suggests a dialectical sequence of reciprocal causes and effects spurring the formation of extended 'matrilineal' coalitions as groups are compelled to forgo the relative safety afforded by trees. In this view, movement into more open territory increases the risk from external predators, motivating the females to be particularly cautious and compelling the animals generally to seek safety in numbers. However, this aggregation creates a new problem of its own. As large numbers of animals forage together in compact groups, internal conflicts over food, space and sexual partners tend to intensify. Females of low status tend to be harassed by other females and displaced from the best feeding spots and may

also find themselves marginalised within their harems and relatively ignored by their male overlords. Such females might have low prospects of reproducing and passing on their genes.

The only way out is for the oppressed females to seek coalition partners – sometimes males who can afford protection, sometimes other females. Dunbar argues that the rather extensive female coalitions and matrilineal kinship networks of the more terrestrial primates evolve through some such logic. Related females support one another to avoid being harassed and marginalised. This then has further consequences. Once a female has become part of a coalition, it becomes very difficult for her to 'emigrate' or move between groups, since any female intruding into a new group would place herself in conflict with the resident females and would have no sisters on whom to rely for support. The upshot is that whereas predation risks as such would only necessitate temporary external aggregations – 'safety in numbers' – the social consequences of crowding combine to bring about a new form of matrilineal internal cohesion, with considerable endurance and internal stability.

Dunbar suggests that if chimpanzees – or protohumans – were to venture right out into the open savanna, this logic would prevail. The females, that is, would form cohesive groups with their own internal solidarity. Dunbar argues that this would initially lead towards a system in which dominant males, faced with relatively coherent female groups, would attempt to monopolise whole harems of females for themselves. These related females, however, would have their own strength derived from solidarity. 'This clearly has implications', Dunbar (1988: 319–20) concludes, 'for the evolution of hominid social systems'.

HUMANS

Female Sexual Solidarity in Cultural Contexts

This chapter began with a discussion of Lévi-Strauss' views on male gender solidarity as the point of departure for human culture. It was then seen that primate studies provide evidence of a struggle between the sexes, males and females having different priorities and forming distinctive patterns of solidarity according to material circumstances. Before turning to consider how human culture might have arisen, we may conclude this discussion by re-examining Lévi-Strauss' views in the light of some evidence for comparably complex patterns in traditional human cultures.

The existence of female power in male-dominated societies has been documented in numerous studies of gender relations (Holy 1985: 186). Such power as women have may be the embodiment of a definite strategy to subvert patriarchal relationships; alternatively, the forms of female solidarity may constitute less conscious defence reflexes against male dominance (see Cronin 1977; Ullrich 1977). In particular, women's refusal to cook or to

cohabit sexually with their husbands has been described as 'a usual strategy to which women resort to gain their way in the face of men's dominance or as a sanction against men's actions or conduct which they consider inappropriate' (Holy 1985: 186, citing Paulme 1963; Cohen 1971; Strathern 1972: 27, 45–6; Rosaldo 1974: 37; Lamphere 1974: 99). Holy (1985: 186) writes that in the case of the Berti (Northern Darfur Province, Sudan), 'The woman's favourite stratagem in the case of a dispute with her husband or when she feels that she has been maltreated by him is to refuse him sexual access and to refuse to cook for him.'

In a more full-blooded way, Amadiume (1987: 66–7) describes the Inyom Nnobi (the 'Women of Nnobi') – a traditional all-female council among one group of the Nigerian Igbo. A kind of women's trade union, it was headed by the Agba Ekwe, 'the favoured one of the goddess Idemili and her earthly manifestation'. She carried her staff of authority and had the final word in public gatherings and assemblies. Central among her tasks was to ensure men's strict observance of woman-protective taboos – for example, the two-year ban on sexual intercourse with a nursing mother. She was equally alert to reports of sexual harassment of young girls when travelling along bush-paths. In this rather male-dominated society, the community of women were aware of their strong communications network, and took full advantage of it. 'What the men feared most', the ethnographer adds (p. 67), 'was the Council's power of strike action':

The strongest weapon the Council had and used against the men was the right to order mass strikes and demonstrations by all women. When ordered to strike, women refused to perform their expected duties and roles, including all domestic, sexual and maternal services. They would leave the town *en masse*, carrying only suckling babies. If angry enough, they were known to attack any men they met.

Idemili, the goddess in whose name such action was always taken, was a 'water-spirit' who sometimes appeared in dreams as a python (Amadiume 1987: 100, 102). Some decades ago, when a male Christian convert deliberately killed a python – totemic symbol of Idemili's worshippers – the women from all around marched half-naked to the provincial headquarters to besiege the resident's office with their complaints. Gaining no satisfaction, they returned to their own locality, went straight to the Christian offender's house and razed it to the ground – a particularly severe method of withdrawing domestic services (Amadiume 1987: 122)! Deprived of his home, the man reportedly died two weeks later. In Chapter 13 we will examine the symbolic logic by virtue of which, on a worldwide basis, female punitive 'class action' of this fearsome kind is traditionally associated with an immense 'All-mother' or goddess-like 'snake'.

The ethnographic record provides a mixed picture of relations between the sexes. Although male dominance may be universal or nearly so, it is offset by numerous factors in different cultures to a greater or lesser extent. Lévi-Strauss' 'exchange of women' models notwithstanding, women after marriage are not necessarily detached in any permanent sense from their own kin, fully incorporated into their husband's group, totally lacking in autonomy or deprived collectively of a sphere of power of their own. Where decisions on sexual availability are concerned – to take only one aspect of decision-making – they often have some say themselves (Amadiume 1987). Within the intimate sphere of marital relations, this is surely no less 'normal' (on any definition) than the situation in which a wife must always be sexually ready for her husband.

But it is not only private intimacies which are at issue. Where – as in most hunter-gatherer societies – a man's marriage for many years gives him no absolute or unconditional sexual rights in his spouse, a woman can draw on the support of her mother, sister, brothers or other kin as a lever to secure advantages for herself within the relationship. Whereas 'a man whose marriage is secure need obey no other' (Collier and Rosaldo 1981: 317), an element of marital insecurity obliges a man to listen to his wife and her kin. An unsatisfactory husband or lover (particularly if he is not well established or is a lazy, inept or selfish hunter) may be unceremoniously told to go.

Landes (1938: 131) writes of the Ojibwa of Western Ontario:

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

Sex and economics are here intertwined – no meat means, in effect, no sex and, eventually, complete annulment of the man's marital status. 'If a man does not hunt', writes Richard Lee (1988: 266) of the !Kung San of the Kalahari, 'his wife will make pointed comments about his sexual prowess. And vice versa: if he is no good in bed, he cannot hunt.'

In fairy-tales throughout the world, the theme of suitors' trials refers to the same basic relationship, storytellers often delighting in depicting the hero as overcoming the most extraordinary obstacles to win the hand of his chosen bride. Although reality may be less romantic, prospective bridegrooms often have to prove their worth in difficult trials. Lowie (1920: 22–3) writes that in South America, among the Arawak Indians of Guiana, 'the prospective husband was obliged to prove his marksmanship by, among other tests, shooting an arrow into a woodpecker's nest from a moving boat'. Similar motifs occur 'as a constant refrain in the utterances of North

American Indians, where the skilful hunter figures as the ideal son-in-law' (Lowie 1920: 22–3). Among hunter-gatherers generally, some such pattern was certainly the norm rather than the exception (Collier and Rosaldo 1981).

Among most hunters and gatherers, a man's wife was never simply 'won'. She was not suddenly transferred, in a single, once-for-all transaction called 'marriage'. She had to be earned over a period of years or even decades, in a process known as 'bride-service'.

Phyllis Kaberry (1939) encountered this pattern among the Aborigines of Western Australia, describing the passage of gifts from a man to his wife's kin as 'a constant drain on a man's resources throughout his lifetime'. All this investment and effort, she went on, constituted 'a definite recognition of the value of the woman as his sexual and economic partner'. Here as in other cultures, the man's gifts were mainly of meat which he had hunted himself. The reader will recall similar Australian and other instances from the previous chapter, in which men's constant yielding of meat to their wives' kin was discussed in connection with the 'own-kill' rule.

One interpretation might be that the bride herself in such situations was a mere pawn, used by her kin to extract labour-service from the in-marrying husband. But would such a verdict be fair?

It seems probable that in most cultures the authority figures most feared or 'respected' by the bridegroom were indeed the bride's mother, father, brothers or other older relatives, rather than the young woman herself. Nevertheless, usually, the effect was to secure meat for the wife. In Australia, among the Walbiri Aborigines, a man's wife's brothers or other kin may

upbraid and sometimes attack him physically if he refuses to give meat to his wife. Other members of the community approve as legitimate their attempts to force him to adhere to the law. Moreover, the meat should come from game he has hunted himself. . . . (Meggitt 1965: 252)

Among the Siberian Yukaghir, the picture we are given is that of a young man taken into his in-laws' house where he must 'serve' for his wife for 'as long as any members of the family older than herself are alive'. His position is strictly subordinate:

He must neither look at nor speak to the parents and older relatives of his wife. He must obey all the orders given by these relatives. The products of his hunting and fishing are under the control of his mother-in-law. (Jochelson 1926: 91)

In these and countless other cases, it is the wife's older kin who most clearly impress the husband as powers to be reckoned with.

However, the evidence is that women who remained with their kin and

received visits from their spouses in the early years of marriage – the norm among hunter-gatherers almost throughout the world (Collier and Rosaldo 1981) – were not just 'used' by their kin groups. They positively welcomed the support and protection afforded by their kin, and were involved with them in upholding the value which their sexuality represented for their kin group as a whole.

A Californian myth tells of Seven Sisters who used their collective sexual solidarity as a weapon against husbands who refused to provide them with game. The myth was recorded in Los Angeles County early in the nineteenth century:

The Seven Sisters

There were seven brothers married to seven sisters, who lived in a large hut together. The men went daily to hunt rabbits and the women to gather roots of flags for food. The husbands invariably reported 'bad luck' in their hunt, with the exception of the youngest, who, without fail, handed his wife a rabbit.

This continued every day until the females held a conference and became convinced that they were being cheated by their partners. They agreed that the youngest sister should remain at home the next day, under pretext of having a pain in her jaw, and so watch the return of the party. Next day the men as usual took their bows and arrows and set forth. The six sisters then departed, leaving the other concealed among the flags and rushes at the back of the hut in a position from which she could see all that happened inside.

Several hours before sunset the hunting party returned laden with rabbits which they commenced roasting and eating, except one which the youngest set apart. The others called him a fool and bade him eat the remaining one, which he refused to do, saying he still had some affection for his wife and always intended to reserve one for her. More fool you, said the others; we care more for ourselves than for these root-diggers. When they had finished, they carefully hid all the evidence of their feast.

When all this was later reported to the sisters, they cried a great deal and talked over what they should do. Let us turn into water, said the eldest. That would never do, responded the rest, for in that case our husbands would drink us. The second proposed being turned into stones, which was rejected on the ground of being trodden upon by the fraternity. The third wanted them to turn themselves into trees, which was not accepted because they would be used for firewood. Everything proposed was put aside until it came to the turn of the youngest. Her proposition to change themselves into stars was objected to on account of being seen, but overruled as they would be out of reach.

They proceeded to the lagoon, where they daily collected flag roots and constructed a machine (impossible to describe) out of reeds, and ascended to heaven and located themselves at the *Pleiades*. These seven stars still retain the names of the originals. (Reid 1939: 246–8; slightly adapted and abridged)

With its emphasis on the sisters' not wanting their husbands to use or enjoy them – to 'drink', 'tread on' or 'burn' them – this myth suggests that 'becoming stars', tantalisingly visible but out of reach in the sky, is a metaphor for collective sexual withdrawal. The reader who follows this book to the end will link this in turn with actual or pretended menstruation as a pretext for seclusion in 'another world'. This would make the 'machine' which is 'impossible to describe', and which is associated with female collectivity around a 'lagoon', a code term for female synchronised menstruation (see Chapters 11–14).

In real life, in most of the world, it may have been unusual for sisters as such, without support from their mothers or from male kin, to rely solely on one another in the manner portrayed in this myth. Yet the story encapsulates an important aspect of the logic widely at work. In their own economic interests vis-à-vis their spouses, women relied on one another to uphold their security and sexual status, retaining at all times the ultimate right to withdraw.

Throughout the world, married women have appreciated the availability of female kin on whom to rely in time of need. By the same token, husbands almost everywhere – at least until very recently – have known that a wife is someone with her own independent support system. The following extract from a case-study exemplifies this point:

wives could not rely upon their husbands to stand by them while they reared their children. . . . So the wife had to cling to the family into which she was born, and in particular to her mother, as the only other means of ensuring herself against isolation. One or other member of her family would, if need be, relieve her distress . . . or share to some degree in the responsibility for her children. The extended family was her trade union, organised in the main by women and for women, its solidarity her protection against being alone.

The notion of such an all-women's 'trade union' will be encountered frequently in later chapters of this book. Although in the above passage they were writing of the traditional extended family in London's East End, Willmott and Young (1957: 189) were conscious of describing a widespread cross-cultural logic. 'It is, to judge by anthropology', as they put it (p. 189), 'almost a universal rule that when married life is insecure, the wife turns for support to her family of origin, so that a weak marriage tie produces a strong

blood tie'. As feminists are well aware, this can be put the other way around: if sisterhood is to be prioritised, marriage bonds must be kept relatively weak.

The Mother-In-Law

A woman's 'trade union' would be of little use if her husband could ignore or abuse her mother. This relative's authority has always been, indeed, the minimum condition for a wife's relative autonomy within marriage. Certainly, a wife in most cultures would tend to seek contact with her mother more frequently during married life than any other authority figure amongst her kin. This may help to explain why, in so many traditional cultures, the figure of the mother-in-law was invested – in husbands' eyes – with awesome supernatural power. Although male relatives were also involved, it was to an important extent she who had 'given' her daughter, and she who – if offended – could take her back. Moreover, unlike male in-laws, the mother-in-law was particularly in need of ritual defences against the merest hint of sexual oppression or abuse. No mother could defend her daughter within marriage unless her own sexual non-availability and social dominance had been established beyond question in her son-in-law's eyes.

Sometimes a man was not allowed even to see his mother-in-law, let alone act disrespectfully towards her, and had to run or hide when she came near. The 'commonest sounds' to be heard in a camp of Navaho Indians, according to an early authority (Stephen 1893: 358), 'are the friendly shouts, warning these relatives apart'. So tabooed was a man's mother-in-law, and so fearsome in his eyes, that in some cases at least this figure seems to have succumbed to the temptation to 'abuse' her own power! Róheim (1974: 29) writes of a case among the Aranda Aborigines of Central Australia: 'I was told of one old woman who would often appear suddenly when her son-in-law was eating. When he ran away, she would sit down and eat the food he had left.'

But the status of the mother-in-law cannot be understood in isolation. It is only one aspect of the fact that in almost all human cultures, no matter how male-dominated, elements of blood solidarity are to be found as a check on husbands' rights in their wives, this being a feature absolutely central to social structure. In this context, whether a wife calls for support upon her mother, upon some other female relative or upon male kin is less important than the fact that she is not alone.

Sex for Meat

Among the Australian Yir-Yiront Aborigines of Cape York Peninsula (Sharp 1933: 418), a man feels constantly in debt to his in-laws. He says: 'I get my wife from that mother's brother's group; I avoid them, give them presents, and take care of them when they are old.' Here as elsewhere, it is quite clear that the husband is repaying his wife's kin for the privilege of being allowed

sexual access to her. In the case of this particular community, moreover – and again the pattern is not unusual – a man may have several wives who will all be related to one another as real or classificatory 'sisters'. It might be supposed that these women would all be divided among themselves, but not so. In fact (reminding us, perhaps, of the Seven Sisters in the Californian myth discussed earlier), solidarity in the form of a 'sex strike' is a weapon which the women can fall back upon if need be:

the solidarity between the wives of a polygynous family gives them considerable influence over the husband. In cases of extreme mistreatment of one of them by the husband, they may institute a *Lysistrata régime*, an economic and sexual boycott in which they may enlist their other sisters in the community. Since a man normally will not have sexual relations outside the conventional limits of those he calls wife, such a programme may prove extremely effective. (Sharp 1933: 430)

All over the world, wherever hunting was part of the traditional way of life, women treated marriage as an economic-and-sexual relationship, claiming for themselves the meat which their spouses obtained. Indeed, contrary to the views of Lévi-Strauss, this was everywhere what marital alliances were largely about. They were not just means to enable male in-laws to form social relationships among themselves. They had an *economic* content which was absolutely central. Marital relations (in contradistinction to mere 'sexual relations') were the means by which women, supported by their kin, achieved something that no primate females ever achieved. They were the means by which they secured for themselves and their offspring the continuous *economic* services of the opposite sex.

Among the Brazilian Shavante Indians, women receive an unsuccessful hunter 'with a marked coldness', while a successful hunter 'flings down his game for the women to prepare' and basks in the resulting glory (Maybury-Lewis 1967: 36). In the case of the Mundurucu, again in Brazil, 'The man brings his kill to his wife . . . and she and her housemates butcher it. They send pieces to other houses, but they determine who gets which parts' (Murphy and Murphy 1974: 132).

Among the Ache, hunter-gatherers of eastern Paraguay, 'men consume very little meat from game items that they themselves killed'. All game caught each morning is taken to the women's group, so that the hunters can continue unencumbered; the meat is shared not just within small family units but throughout the foraging band. Game caught at other times is also distributed widely throughout the band – always by a man other than the hunter himself. Nonetheless, in each case, people know very well who hunted the animal whose meat they receive. There is a strong suggestion that women are sexually attracted to good hunters; certainly, the more successful and generous hunters are most often cited by women as lovers in extra-

marital relationships (Hill and Kaplan 1988: 277–89).

Among the Peruvian Sharanahua, to whom we will turn in the next section:

Both the pleasures and the pains of hunting are related not only to the actual activity but to the implication that a good hunter is a virile man

Virility implies a positive response from women. Further, the culturally structured idea that a successful hunter is a virile man carries a sting: the unsuccessful hunter is by social definition not virile. (Siskind 1973b: 232)

Almost universally, similar ideas prevailed, women feeling sexual desire not in isolation but in a situation-dependent way, according to whether their menfolk were proving themselves or not. 'Women expect meat from lovers', as Collier and Rosaldo (1981: 314) put it, referring to 'bride-service societies' throughout the world. Far from being unusual, men's need to ply their wives and/or in-laws with meat as the test of their virility and the condition of the marital tie may indeed be regarded as the norm – certainly among hunters and gatherers and probably much more widely.

A Case Study: the Sharanahua

We will now turn in greater detail to a particular example of this whole complex. We will examine a society in which women themselves, autonomously and as a gender group, use collective control over their sexuality as a means to induce their menfolk to hunt for them. It is worth dwelling on this case at some length, since it will be argued later in this book that a comparable logic of sexual and economic exchange must have been central to the origins of human culture.

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

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

'reluctant and unenthusiastic', since the relative privacy makes it difficult for even a good hunter to gain the widespread female acclaim and sexual prestige for which every man yearns. 'At times', however, when there has been no meat in the village for three or four days, the women decide to send the men on a special hunt. They talk together and complain that there is no meat and the men are lazy (Siskind 1973a: 96). In contrast to the first pattern, during a 'special hunt' (the second pattern) the young men go hunting as a group:

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

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

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

The men walk solemnly up from the port, and silently each man drops the game he has shot on the ground before the waiting women and walks to his own house. Each woman picks up the animal that her partner has dropped and takes it to her own house and begins to prepare it. (1973a: 96-8)

The meat is skinned, cut up and put to boil by the women, and then eaten in a general process of feasting and reciprocal visiting. Siskind continues:

Everyone has barely finished eating when the young women burst into action with stalks of *nawawakusi* in their hands, trying to corner a young man. The men laugh, but they run, staying out of reach, hiding behind a

house, until they are caught. Then they stand still, letting the girls triumphantly rub their chests, necks, and arms with the stinging nettle, which is said to give strength. The men finally seize some *nawawakusi* from the women and the chase becomes two sided with small groups of men and women in pursuit and retreat, laughing and shouting. (1973a: 98–100)

It is clear that in this society sex is one of the economic forces of production – it is the major factor motivating men to hunt. It is equally clear that the solidarity of the women – expressed in their periodic teasing of the men, their sexual inducements and their implied collective sexual threat – is not a mere superstructural feature, but is central to the economic infrastructure of society. If this underpinning of the social order were to change, the whole economic, social and sexual system would turn on its axis.

For Sharanahua men, the threat of female ridicule and withdrawal is very real. A woman wants to 'eat' a man; but she finds male flesh unaccompanied by the requisite animal flesh simply unexciting:

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

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

The special hunt usually results in more meat in the village than a normal day's hunt. The social pressure of the special hunt, the line of women painted and waiting, makes young men try hard to succeed.

And this kind of hunt breaks across any tendency of society to fragment into isolated, self-interested, monogamous 'family' groups – a tendency which would be very risky given the chancy nature of hunting. Referring to hunting generally, Siskind (1973a: 88) writes that a system involving many men, and in which meat is widely shared, 'provides some insurance against the bad luck, illness, or lack of skill of a single hunter providing for a single family' (1973a: 88).

Meat from a special hunt is not just brought by a hunter to his wife,

mother-in-law or other relative within the household but to a variety of households depending on the choice of partner on each occasion. The women in each household, receiving meat from their chosen lovers, then issue invitations to eat to their sisters and cousins in addition to many others. And since a basic requirement of the special hunt is female solidarity against men, in which as far as possible none of the women allows marriage or a lover to come between them, the result is an extended network of relationships and households. As Siskind (1973a: 109) puts it, the 'combination of same sex solidarity and antagonism to the other sex prevents the households from becoming tightly closed units'.

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

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

Put at its crudest, comments Siskind,

the special hunt symbolizes an economic structure in which meat is exchanged for sex. This is neither a 'natural' nor 'rational' exchange since women produce at least as much of the food supply at Marcos, and a rational exchange would consist of viewing the economy as an exchange of women's production for men's. Certainly there is no evidence that women are naturally less interested in sex or more interested in meat than men are. This is a culturally produced socio-economic system in which sex is the incentive for hunting, and a man who is known to be a good hunter has a better chance of gaining wives or mistresses. . . . The special hunt gives an opportunity for men to demonstrate their hunting skill to women other than their wives. It is a dramatic portrayal of the exchange between the sexes, which structures daily interactions between men and women. (1973a: 103-4)

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

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

Finally, it is worth adding that Siskind sees a connection between gardening among the Sharanahua and the development of more stable marital relation-

ships. Agriculture, she writes (1973a: 116–17), demands a synchronisation of the work of men and women. In addition, agricultural work is an investment of time and effort; a man will not work hard for two months clearing land without the security of knowing that women will harvest and prepare the food:

The sexual incentive for hunting is logical since hunting is a brief but recurring task as sex is a brief but recurring need. The ease with which marriages are established and broken at Marcos fits well with the basic economy, but a more stable relationship is essential for the responsibilities of agriculture.

Relatively weak marital ties – if this interpretation had wider validity – would then be an intrinsic feature of ‘the hunter-gatherer mode of production’, contrasting with the more tightly secured marriages required when this way of life begins to break down.

Unconditional Marriage as Anomaly

It was noted earlier that Lévi-Strauss’ ‘exchange of women’ model, resting as it does on the absolute primacy of marriage, produces some serious theoretical problems. It precludes female solidarity and fails to explain the patterns actually found in traditionally organised – particularly hunter-gatherer – cultures.

Culture’s ‘initial situation’ cannot be dogmatically asserted, but we can be fairly certain that it bore little relation to Lévi-Strauss’ picture of women as ever-available, passive pawns in the political schemes of men. It would seem more likely that women, in the course of cultural origins, could give themselves sexually because they had something to give – their bodies were not completely owned or spoken for by the other sex in advance.

Viewing the same feature in the context of the development of hunting and gathering, we may take it that although women did not usually hunt, they could use a measure of control over their own sexual availability to induce men to hunt for them. An implication is that women (supported by kin) had the capacity to withdraw themselves sexually. In effect – like some female primates but in much more conscious and organised ways – they could go ‘on strike’.

Naturally, this does not imply that women did not enjoy sex or that sex seldom happened. It simply means that when sex occurred, it took place as a release from the basic cultural constraints – not in obedience to them. In this sense, no matter how joyfully celebrated and woven into the meanings and symbols of all cultural life, sexual gratification from culture’s very beginnings has been delayed, sublimated and harnessed to economic and other ends, its actual consummation always taking place just beyond, behind and in a sense ‘in spite of’ culture. The bonding involved in love-making, as something tending to undermine wider forms of solidarity, has always been

for the public cultural domain something of an embarrassment – in a sense, it 'should not' occur. This, of course, has always been an aspect of the excitement of sex, for lovers can relish their rebellion against rules of behaviour which can be shed like clothes for the occasion – constraints which, for the moment, seem to belong to some other, duller, world. When sexual intercourse is actually taking place, the public, collective assembly either dissolves temporarily and happily for the occasion, or – if it remains in session throughout – it turns to one side, allowing the couple their privacy, as if pretending not to know.

Of course, there is all the difference in the world between sexually relaxed cultures and more repressive ones in these respects, but in no human social context are people simply uninhibited or unembarrassed in public in the manner of monkeys and apes. In any event, the prioritising of sex has never been allowed to last for long or to threaten society's fundamental economic goals.

In what follows, inverting the usual assumptions, the situation in which a man's marriage gives him absolute rights of access to his wife will be treated as anomalous. It may occur, but it has nothing to do with the initial situation for human culture as such. Many of the staple topics of ethnography – features such as menstrual and postpartum taboos, in-law avoidances, taboos on sex prior to hunting, the separation of spouses at meals, 'totemism', the 'ritualisation of male solidarity in antagonism to female solidarity' (Siskind 1973a: 109) etc. etc. – will now appear in a new light. They will present themselves no longer as peculiar anomalies to be explained, but as residual expressions of a common underlying norm according to which wives are as a matter of course set apart ritually and in other ways from their husbands, simply because they belong in the opposite gender camp.

In later chapters, as we follow through the implications of this model, it will be seen that women's normative state of relative autonomy, in limiting men's rights in their wives, simultaneously and by the same token limits hunters' rights in their kills. In western South Australia, 'the man's gift (or obligation) of meat to his wife's parents (tabu to him) is taken by the woman herself. She then passes it on to her mother, who is particularly to be avoided by the hunter (Berndt and Berndt 1945: 224). In Central Australia, among the Aranda, a hunter was (a) obliged to surrender his kills to his wife's relatives and (b) was prohibited from eating with these people himself. If a man were to be seen by his wife's kin eating with them 'the food would disagree with him, and he would sicken and suffer severely' (Spencer and Gillen 1899: 469–71). To the Wik-Mungkan Aborigines of Cape York Peninsula, any meat 'stepped over' by a man's mother-in-law becomes 'ngaintja' (tabooed) to him, the blood in the meat becoming powerfully dangerous in a manner suggestive of menstrual blood (McKnight 1975: 77, 85).

In contexts such as these, the forces which 'supernaturally' protect women and those which impose taboos on meat food are seen to converge. Sexual respect rules and food avoidances turn out to be the same thing. The logic, the mechanisms and even the symbolic conceptualisations are at a deep level identical. Backed by each other and by their kin, women periodically reassert sufficient control over their own sexuality to clarify that men cannot take their availability for granted. In this way they make it clear that men as hunters must 'earn their keep' by regularly surrendering their kills.

This is the basic argument of this book. Women, from the beginning, have held the future in their hands. Their responsibilities for offspring have often compelled them to resist men's advances, subordinating short-term sexual to longer-term economic goals. Thanks mainly to female insistence, backed by the imperatives of reproductive survival, culture from its earliest stages held male sexual dominance in check – not always completely annihilating it, but at least preventing it from holding undisputed sway. As the process of 'becoming human' (Tanner 1981) proceeded, women (usually with some backing from their male offspring and kin) resisted and even repressed the raw expression of primate male sexuality, eventually replacing it with something more acceptable. 'The development of culture', as Marshall Sahlins writes,

did not simply give expression to man's primate nature, it replaced that nature as the direct determinant of social behaviour, and in so doing, channeled it – at times repressed it completely. The most significant transformation effected by cultural society was the subordination of the search for mates – the primary determinant of subhuman primate sociability – to the search for food. In the process also, economic cooperation replaced competition, and kinship replaced conflict as the principal mechanism of organization. (1972: 14)

We begin, then, not with the supposed sudden emergence of male sexual generosity and self-restraint – as in the origins models of Freud (1965 [1913]) and Lévi-Strauss (1969a) – but with something rather more believable. We begin with *female* child-rearing and economic priorities, *female* ultimate determination of social structure and *female* sexual self-restraint in women's own direct material interests. From this, the incest taboo, food taboos and the other basic features of the human cultural configuration will be derived.