

Chapter 1

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

The nature of Australian aboriginal social systems has been debated for more than a century and widely divergent interpretations have been offered both for particular cases and for Australian societies in general. The controversy centers on certain systems of classification by means of which the people order their social lives. Three interpretations have predominated. One body of opinion has it that in Australia social relations are governed, by and large if not wholly, by considerations of kinship. Proponents of this interpretation, most notably A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, maintain that Australian social categories are, virtually exhaustively, kinship categories - meaning by "kinship" egocentric relations of genealogical connection.¹ Another interpretation is that in Australia social relations are governed, again by and large if not wholly, by considerations of membership of groups such as lineages, clans, moieties, and sections or subsections - the latter two being known also as "marriage classes." Proponents of this inter-

pretation argue that those Australian expressions sometimes described as "kinship terms" are more appropriately described as "relationship terms." The relationships they signify are social and are between groups and individuals as members of groups.² A third interpretation attempts to mediate between these two extremes by arguing that, although some Australian societies may be ordered wholly by kinship, most of them are ordered by both kinship and group relations. Where both are present they may be so well integrated that persons acting in kinship capacities are also fulfilling their rights and duties as members of related social groups.³

The central thesis of this study is that the first interpretation is correct; the other two are fundamentally mistaken. The groups they take as structurally fundamental, or as structurally independent of systems of kin classification, are instead structurally dependent on kin classes and superclasses. This, it seems to me, was Radcliffe-Brown's interpretation, although he has been understood in other ways (cf. Dumont 1966). It must be acknowledged, however, that Radcliffe-Brown did not fully demonstrate the validity of his claims (cf. Meggitt 1972). He was unable to do so because of certain inadequacies in his conception of the structures and the relations among the structures of Australian systems of kin classification (see Chapter 2).

The first step in evaluating Radcliffe-Brown's interpretation of Australian society must be to discover

the structures and the relations among the structures of Australian systems of kin classification. This is the subject of Chapters 3 through 10. Although one aim of this study is to clarify our understanding of the nature of Australian society, in these eight chapters I say very little about social relationships, except insofar as they have to do with marriage, and even then only insofar as marital relationships or potential or prospective marital relationships are demonstrably relevant to designation by a kinship term. The reason is that these chapters are concerned with the structures and the relations among the structures of systems of kin classification, and not with any relationships that may exist between these semantic structures and features of social structure. For reasons given elsewhere (see Scheffler 1972a, 1972b, 1973; Scheffler and Lounsbury 1971) and in Chapter 2 below, I believe it is essential to keep separate social-structural analysis and the structural-semantic analysis of systems of kin classification - and this is the procedure followed here. Therefore, the reader who is interested in social structure rather than in the formal semantic analysis of systems of kin classification may find the next ten chapters not to his or her taste. But if the central thesis of this study is correct, detailed understanding of the structures and the relations among the structures of Australian systems of kin classification is prerequisite to understanding much of anything else about Australian

social structure.

The argument of Chapter 12 is that Australian moiety, section, and subsection systems are structurally derived from the superclasses of certain systems of kin classification. Functionally, these systems have very little to do with marriage but "serve as mechanisms for summarizing [and extending] kinship and the social behavior of which it is the determining factor" (Elkin 1933b: 90; see also Radcliffe-Brown 1930-31: 440). The social relationships they "summarize" are predominantly those of men in relation to the world of the Dreaming.⁴ The argument of Chapter 14 is that the so-called lineages, clans, or patriline of certain societies are simply small aggregates of men related to particular Dreamings (totems) and to one another through patrification (see also Fortes 1969: 115 ff.). The external kinship relations of these sets of patrilineal kin link the sets and their Dreamings to one another in a system of complementary social relationships. Here, as Fortes (1969: 120) put it, we have "an incontestable limiting case of a social structure wholly comprised within a framework of kinship institutions."

The first step must be to demonstrate that the systems of classification analyzed in Chapters 3 through 10 are systems of kin classification, that is, systems wherein individuals are classified by reference to features of the genealogical connections assumed to exist between them and a specified individual (ego or the pro-

positus). Of course, to have such a system, a culture must posit relations of genealogical connection; that is, it must posit the existence of human genitors and genetrices.

Australia, however, is the fabled land whose peoples are "ignorant of the relationship between sexual intercourse and conception" and therefore "of the facts of physical paternity" - or so it is said (cf. Montagu 1974 [1937]). If this were true Australian cultures could have no concepts similar to the Western concepts genitor and father; they could have no concepts of paternal genealogical connection, although they might have concepts of maternal genealogical connection. And lacking concepts of paternal genealogical connection, their languages could have no words that could be glossed as 'father', 'father's sister', and so on, although again they might have words that could be glossed as 'mother', 'mother's brother', and so on. Even so, Spencer and Gillen (1899: 58) insisted that Australian languages "have no words equivalent to our English words father, mother, brother, etc."; that is, Australian languages do not include kinship terms. This claim is not difficult to refute.

AUSTRALIAN THEORIES OF PROCREATION

Received anthropological opinion (until recently) has been that the typical Australian theory of procreation is that a woman conceives (becomes pregnant) when

she is entered by a "spirit-child" associated with a totemic site or spirit center. Although it is acknowledged that in some areas a relationship between sexual intercourse and pregnancy is "recognized," in these instances the alleged function of sexual intercourse is only somehow to prepare the woman for the entry of the spirit-child. Thus, it is alleged (cf. Montagu 1974) the "standard" Australian theory of procreation does not allow for the existence of physical fathers or genitors, and in the view of many anthropologists we may speak of "fathers" in Australian society only in a "social" sense (meaning mothers' husbands but not genitors).⁵

There is, however, considerable evidence to the contrary. In recent years it has become apparent that many anthropologists have seriously misunderstood and misrepresented theories about how human beings come to instantiate totemic beings as theories about human reproduction. Too often, also, a preoccupation with what Australians "do not know" has been allowed to obscure investigation, reporting, and discussion of what they "do know," that is, of the "facts" and relations among the "facts" that they themselves posit. The epistemological bias that turns such "facts" into magic and superstition (cf. Montagu 1974: 164; Spiro 1968: 247) has been exposed by Schneider (1965), Leach (1967), Horton (1967), Barnes (1973), and others, and need not be discussed here.⁶

If we allow for the moment that some reports of an exclusively spiritual theory of conception may be correct - and do not succumb to the temptation to argue that this is the orthodox, standard, and only genuinely Australian theory of conception (cf. Montagu 1974: 163) - it may be said that three sorts of theories of human reproduction are reported in the ethnographic literature. First there is the theory noted above. The second theory is that repeated sexual intercourse is essential to the process of conception; semen mixing with blood in the uterus gradually forms a fetus that blocks the flow of menstrual blood and interrupts the menses (see, for example, Thomson 1936). One variation on this theory is that the substance of the fetus is derived solely from the genitor's semen; the genetrix contributes no substance but only nourishment to the growing fetus (Howitt 1904). The third theory builds on the second and holds that, once the fetus has been formed, it is entered by a "spirit-child." According to some peoples this entry occurs intrauterine at the time of the quickening (during the fourth month of pregnancy), but others say it occurs at or shortly after the time of birth (Warner 1958 [1937]; Meggitt 1962, 1972; Peterson 1969, 1972; Hiatt 1965; Goodale 1971; T. Strehlow 1964, 1965, 1971a).

Some ethnographic accounts make it clear that theories of the third kind are really two theories, a strictly physical-sexual account of human reproduction,

and an account of how each individual acquires an inalienable identity within a totemic cosmological system. We might, following Leach (1967), describe this latter theory as a kind of "religious dogma," but we must recognize also that both theories are equally social dogmas or doctrines,⁷ and that the two theories are complementary rather than opposed. They are not mutually contradictory doctrines about the same thing. One is a doctrine about human reproduction, the other a doctrine about "immortal souls." Therefore, this latter theory or doctrine is not at all comparable to the virgin birth dogma of Christianity (cf. Leach 1967; Spiro 1968: 249). It is, however, quite comparable to the Christian doctrine that all men have souls that are given to them at conception by God - although in the Australian theory the "soul" or totemic identity is not acquired at conception but some months later, at the time of the quickening or at the time of birth.

It seems probable that most if not all reports of theories of the first kind (purely spiritual conception) are nothing more than incomplete accounts of theories of the third kind. We can be quite certain that this is true in many instances, for example, the case of the so-called Tully River Blacks or Dyirbal and the case of the Aranda.

Dixon (1968) has shown that Roth's (1903) account of the Dyirbal theory is at best incomplete and that the Dyirbal are not now, and were not in Roth's time, "ig-

norant" of physical paternity - except of course insofar as they do not posit as matters of fact things that are knowable only with the aid of microscopes and through controlled, clinical experimentation. The Dyirbal language features the verb bulmbinyu 'to be the male progenitor of', and according to Dixon it "has clear reference to the particular act of copulation that induced a conception." Presumably Dixon finds no reasons to suppose that this expression was coined to signify a new concept introduced into the culture after Roth made his cursory observations. Dixon accounts for the incompleteness of Roth's account by suggesting that there are "two levels of belief concerning human conception," a "basic level" and a "mystical level," and he says "the mystical level of belief may well be the only level normally explicitly acknowledged, the basic level being more implicit."⁸ It seems clear, however, that what we have here are not "two levels of belief" about the same thing, each accounting for the same fact or facts (conception per se), but instead two complementary theories, one about conception per se and the other about the instantiation of totemic beings in individual human beings.

The case of the Aranda is similar. Spencer and Gillen's (1927) report that the Aranda are ignorant of physical paternity was denied by C. Strehlow (1913), Pink (1936), and Roheim (1938). Montagu (1974: Chapter 3) attempted to explain away their objections. But T.

Strehlow has recently (1964, 1971a) provided a full, reliable, and philosophically sophisticated account of the Aranda theory of human reproduction that confirms and extends C. Strehlow's, Pink's, and Roheim's accounts. The Aranda say that each person has two "lives" or "souls," one animal and mortal, the other spiritual and immortal. The first is created through sexual intercourse; the second is part of the "life" of one of the immortal supernatural ancestors (one of the totemic beings) and it enters the already formed fetus. This second soul "decided the personality of the child after birth; the totem of each individual and his personal links with the world of Eternity were determined by the soul that took up residence in him." Also, the individual acquired "the physical characteristics and the whole personality" of this totemic ancestor, so that "all Aranda men, women, and children were believed to have been completely recreated in the images of those totemic ancestors who had become reincarnated in them" (T. Strehlow 1964: 730). Strehlow further states: "The embryo or fetus that had been begotten by its father was regarded in exactly the same way as the young plant that had burst forth from the seed cast by the wind upon a sacred site. It was only after the embryo or the young plant had come into being that a second 'spirit' or 'soul' was able to enter into these mortal forms. This second 'spirit' or 'soul' was in both cases the all-important one; for the second 'spir-