# 1 Introduction

In his novel *Before Adam*, Jack London presents recollections in the 'racial memory' of his narrator:

> We had no conjugation. One judged the tense by the context. We talked only concrete things, because we thought only concrete things. Also we depended on pantomime. The simplest abstraction was practically beyond our thinking; and when one did happen to think one, he was hard put to communicate it to his fellows. There were no sounds for it. (London 1908: 34–5)

Whether gesture or speech came first is open to debate, though the prevailing view seems to favour gesture, that is, gestural language rather than literally pantomime, even if the former stems in part from pantomime (see Corballis 2002, Arbib 2005). But what did early *Homo sapiens* do with gesture or speech? Assuming speech had evolved by the time of early *H. sapiens*, what did people say to each other? And above all, when did they start communicating in more intricate ways, with difficult sentences, concrete details and abstract thoughts? Is this the origin of art, of religion, of thinking beyond the self, of thinking beyond immediate needs? We all know that living hunter-gatherers spend less time in work-related activities than we food-producing peoples do (see Sahlins 1974: 1–39). Was the same not true of their, and our, *H. sapiens* ancestors?

This first chapter concerns some philosophical, linguistic and anthropological questions that may serve as background to our bigger problem: the genesis of symbolic thought. Later chapters will refine these and touch on data from social anthropology and from many other disciplines, and especially on some recent findings from archaeology and genetics. The time span of my earlier book *Social anthropology and human origins* (Barnard 2011) was roughly from the purported common

ancestor of humans and chimpanzees, *Sahelanthropus tchadensis* (from about 7,400,000 BP) to the early days of symbolic culture. When these 'early days' might be is in dispute, but it is according to most who hazard a guess within the last 200,000 years. This book picks up where that book left off. It tells the tale of these more recent times in greater detail and brings to the fore what it means to be fully human. And it presents, I hope, a picture of the many facets of human life, particularly the sway of the ethereal over the material, that has occurred since the dawn of *human modernity* in its broadest sense.

## Symbol, mind and human thought

I am very interested in the origins of linguistic complexity and in the origins of cultural complexity. These, it seems to me, are related. But what is cultural complexity? For some anthropologists, thoughts of cultural complexity might conjure images of social complexity or even political complexity. That is *not* of particular concern to me, at least not in this book. Every linguist knows that a hunter-gatherer living a 'primitive communistic' existence may well speak a language as rich and complex as that of an astronaut or a nuclear physicist. Every anthropologist should know that a hunter-gatherer may have just the same facility for cultural expression as an astronaut or nuclear physicist. What it means to be human is something embedded at least as much in hunter-gatherer social life as it is in the age of iron, steam or electronics. Perhaps even more so. Hunter-gatherers may today number only a very small percentage of the earth's population, but hunting and gathering are the 'natural' means of subsistence of our species, and were at the time of the genesis of symbolic thought too. I do not regard *Homo sapiens sapiens* hunter-gatherer existence as in any way less sophisticated than my own, but rather as an expression of the human condition that is more real to me than today among many of my fellow non-hunter-gatherers. Richard Lee and Irven DeVore (1968a: ix) recognized this in their famous statement: 'We cannot avoid the suspicion that many of us were led to live and work among hunters because of a feeling that the human condition was likely to be more clearly drawn here than among other kinds of society.'

Neither Lévi-Straussian 'untamed thinking' nor even Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's notion of 'mystical thought' impose any restriction on the quality or richness of cultural expression, and neither is confined to 'primitive peoples' in any sense. On the contrary, these anthropological abstractions are broadly characteristic of humanity in general. In the words of the much maligned French philosophical anthropologist, 'mystical thought ... is present in every human mind' (Lévy-Bruhl 1975 [1949]: 101). This book is an attempt to look back to the origins of that form of thought, and to the beginnings of communication (with nature, with the spirit world and among humans) through symbols. Many species communicate, but only humans have language, and only humans communicate through symbols. To use symbolism is to be human. It follows that to think in symbols is to be human too. However chimps might 'think', however australopithecines and early *Homo* might have 'thought', even however creative they might have been, they do not or did not possess the capacity for the making of metaphor, symbolism or art that can communicate. Nor can they conjure mystical ideas that can be pondered or shared. These things differentiate not only chimpanzees from humans, but also early humans, like *Homo erectus*, from ourselves. I would even go one tiny step further: in some ways, we humans who grow grain and keep livestock, who live in towns and write things down, in other words, who are Neolithic or post-Neolithic, have lost some of our 'humanity'. Hunter-gatherers, in general, can and often do retain more symbolic aspects of humanity: these are the things which make us truly human.

I will not belabour that point, but in this book I shall argue that the search for the beginnings of symbolism, and all that goes with it, is possible. It is also fruitful for social anthropology and for a widely conceived four-field anthropology too: social anthropology (cultural anthropology), biological anthropology, prehistoric archaeology and anthropological linguistics. These are the four divisions of the broad-based anthropology practised in most North American departments, if not in most other places, including my own British one. I write from a social anthropological point of view, but it is together with our sister sub-disciplines that social anthropology's contribution comes into its own. I prefer the phrase 'social anthropology' rather than 'cultural

anthropology', but the two are essentially synonymous. Symbolism is our subject matter, that is, the subject matter of social anthropology. So too is the anthropology of art, the anthropology of religion and so on. We must, of course, rely on archaeology, on genetics, on neuroscience, on linguistics, or whatever, to provide data and many understandings: but it is up to social anthropology to complete the picture.

If thinking through symbols is human, consider some of the implications. In *Social anthropology and human origins*, I held back in discussing theory of mind, and beyond that, levels of intentionality. But let me touch briefly on these here. These concepts though are masterfully dealt with by Robin Dunbar (2004: 41–76), and they help us to understand in general why humans are different from other intelligent animals. They also help us to understand child development, for human children acquire a theory of mind only at the age of about four and a half. Symbolic thought is a few stages beyond that, and religion, defined as including collective action based on common belief, possibly even more so (2004: 184–6). A theory of mind is the understanding that someone else thinks differently from oneself. Chimpanzees can have it, and humans at five years old normally have it. But at four years old things are different. Psychologists have several tests for it. For example, the 'Sally-Ann test' involves two dolls, named Sally and Ann, and a ball. The psychologist acts out a scene for the child: the doll called Sally puts the ball under a cushion and then leaves the room. In her absence, the doll called Ann retrieves the ball and places it in a toy box on the other side of the room. Then Sally returns. The four-year-old child is asked: 'Where does Sally think the ball is?' Invariably, the four-year-old will say that Sally thinks the ball is in the toy box. But, of course, Sally could not know this, because she was out of the room when Ann placed the ball there. A five-year-old child, however, will get it right: the five-year-old will know that Sally lacks the knowledge that the psychologist, the child and the doll called Ann all share.

Theory of mind is the second level of intentionality. First-level intentionality is that of believing something, and second-level is believing that someone else believes something. Experiments with chimps show that they have it (e.g., Towner 2010), and Dunbar (2004: 190–2) has used cranial capacity to plot the highest probable levels of intentionality

of fossil hominins. Very simply, australopithecines, like chimps, acquired second-level intentionality; *Homo erectus*, third-level; and what Dunbar prefers to classify as 'archaic' *Homo sapiens* (*Homo heidelbergensis*), about 500,000 years ago, fourth-level. Fifth-level intentionality is confined to 'anatomically modern' humans, and Dunbar suggests it first occurred no more than 200,000 years ago. Third-level intentionality is thinking that someone else thinks something about what a third party thinks or wants. Say, Fred thinks that Jane believes that Jim fancies her. Gradually, at fourth and fifth levels, things get more complicated. For example, Fred thinking that Jane believes Jim fancies her, but that she nevertheless intends to play coy in the hope of Jim fancying her even more.

Symbolic thought entails a consciousness of the aesthetic. It also entails the wish to communicate this, one would imagine, to someone else, with the view to influencing that person's perceptions. Religion entails all that plus the presumption, at least in some religions, of consciousness beyond mortal consciousness. It presumes also, as I have suggested above, a commonality among believers, and a recognition of common belief in a spiritual entity that, itself, recognizes what humans are thinking. Dunbar (2007: 44–5) tells us that in order to have religion a fifth level of intentionality is required, and that anything less than that implies that we have less than a religion. When these layers cease to seem tautologous, then indeed we may have the development of some kind of 'theology'. Whether fifth-level might in fact *require* some kind of religion in order to come into being is an open question. Certainly, we have language at fifth-level, and to my mind this is in fact what *full language* was originally for: the expression of complex thought through myth, or at the very least in narrative that leads ultimately to mythological expression. I will explore this in depth in Chapter 5.

## Genesis and language

Claude Lévi-Strauss (1945: 518) commented that sociology, and by implication social anthropology too, cannot explain the genesis of symbolic thought. His remark appeared in a critique of one of Émile Durkheim's more evolutionist ideas.

In *Incest: the nature and origin of the taboo* (1963 [1898]) and in *The elementary forms of the religious life* (1915 [1912]), Durkheim had argued (especially with reference to Aboriginal Australia) that religion reflects society. His opponent in the original debate was Sir James Frazer, who in *Totemism and exogamy* (1910) held the reverse: the social order is built on religious belief. My argument is that all three are wrong, Durkheim, Frazer and Lévi-Strauss alike. Neither religion nor society came first, nor do we just have 'to take for granted' the genesis of symbolic thought. Symbolic thought emerges along with changes in the brain, in society and in communication. It reflects language, including both its communicative and its non-communicative aspects. By non-communicative aspects, I simply mean those that exist as art forms in their own right, such as mythology and other examples of narrative, and also poetry and song. Of course, these communicate, but they do so in a quite different way than communication of stone tool techniques and where to find game animals or to dig tubers.

Complex or full language is far richer in every aspect of meaning than it has to be for ordinary communication. Complex morphology and syntax came into being long before writing, and long before humans learned to domesticate livestock or till the soil. We know this, not least, because the languages spoken by hunter-gatherers are every bit as complex as those of any others. My own primary language of ethnographic fieldwork, Naro (spoken by hunter-gatherers in Botswana), has at least eighty-six person-gender-number markers, making it among the most complex in the world in this respect, while other languages spoken by San or Bushmen vie for being the most phonologically complex. Probably !Xóõ wins out on that score, with 126 consonant phonemes (Traill 1994: 13), and Ju/'hoan is not far behind. The richness of Inuit grammars and those many Amerindian languages is well known too: the mean number of affixes in an Inuit dialect seems to be around 450 (Dorais 1990: 219).

But why should languages be so complicated? The short answer is that it is in our genes, certainly not merely in 'culture'. On the other hand, there is no reason except the prejudice of the literate, the agricultural and the technologically 'advanced' that might suggest that a Bushman or an Inuit hunter-gatherer might be any less

cultured than a European, Euro-American or Japanese farmer or a computer wizard. Lévi-Strauss (1968: 351) once commented that by 200,000 years ago (more precisely, 'over two or three hundred thousand years ago'), there were people of the intellect of as a Plato or an Einstein, only their specialized knowledge was not in philosophy or physics, but probably in kinship. I would suggest it was also in grammar, and in those forms of human knowledge that require grammar: especially mythology. On the other hand, there are extremes at the other end. Mandarin Chinese is not complicated. And, notoriously, a Native South American language, Pirahã, seems to be the simplest in the world. According to Daniel Everett (2005), who has spent some years studying that language, it has no numbers at all, nor any concept of quantification. It has no colour terms, it has the simplest pronominal system ever recorded and it has no recursion: the embedding of one grammatical form into another. Culturally, Pirahã is said to possess the simplest kinship system ever recorded and one of the simplest living material cultures, and there is an individual memory of only two generations and a complete lack of drawing and no other art. Again, according to Everett (formerly a missionary), it also completely lacks creation myths and has no fiction, and in spite of 200 years of contact with surrounding Amerindian groups who speak much more complicated languages, the Pirahã do not learn them. Yet, by his own admission, in all these things Pirahã is an exception, and the case is utterly extreme – if indeed Everett is correct. In Chapter 5 we will explore the other extreme, the southern San language /Xam, which has one of the richest mythologies ever recorded and some of the most extreme cases of recursion, which in turn implies, both in factual narrative and in fiction, a highly complex mental mechanism of levels of intentionality.

A very great deal has been written about early phases of language. These phases most certainly are related to primate communication. They are also related to grooming (picking nits out of hair) among primates, which is a primary means of communication among them. Grooming of a similar kind occurs among humans too, but in most societies it is confined to close relatives or intimate partners (see

Dunbar 2004: 126–8). There is an overlapping trajectory of evolution here that we might summarize as: from *grooming* (e.g., Dunbar 1996) to *gestural communication* (e.g., Corballis 2002 and 2003) to *music* (e.g., Mithen 2005) to *spoken language*. Of course, grooming has not died out, modern sign language is not directly related to gestural communication and music still communicates. Yet to look for the origins of language only in these things is to miss those relatively recent origins that are found in the relation of language to symbolic thought. I am speaking here not of proto-language or rudimentary language, but of full or true language with its potential for complicated grammars and enormous vocabularies (Barnard 2009). *Homo erectus* certainly communicated, but members of this species did not possess language as we know it.

On the basis of the development of the brain and fourth-level intentionality, Dunbar suggests an origin of some kind of 'language' at roughly 500,000 years ago. In this scenario, *Homo antecessor* or *H. heidelbergensis* may have had a primitive sort of language, but I would look further. The full development of complex grammar, in the sense of an ability to learn such grammars, if not to possess one in your own language, is a *H. sapiens sapiens* characteristic. Its relation to the use of complex language in myth and possibly in narrative generally is so strong that I would look for clues on the origins of full language among the earliest users of symbols and of expressive and symbolic communication, and in the development of mythological systems. Obviously, myth requires complex language. Whether complex language requires myth is more difficult to ascertain, but Lévi-Strauss' guess that by 200,000 years ago we find 'Platos' and 'Einsteins' does not seem that far off the mark. If my guess is that it could be slightly more recently, at least we are in the same ballpark.

## Symbol and metaphor

Once humans acquired language, we acquired the ability to communicate over long distances. Of course, this is or was important, not only for humans today, but for our ancestors – both those who stayed in Africa and tamed the continent, and those who migrated out to Asia,

Europe and beyond. But, as I have suggested above, real language is rather more than mere communication. Through complex grammar we can explore meanings within our symbolic systems, including, for example, in mythology. More to the point, complex grammar helps us to construct mythologies and to 'enact' them in the mind. Myth, religious thought and ritual are all related.

But take one step beyond this. Symbols are, in a sense, metaphorical. Like metaphorical words, they enable us to play with meaning, to use analogy, to be creative. This kind of creativity is yet one step beyond that enabled by music or visual art. Music, in particular, may be deeply embedded in our biological makeup. Musical creativity implies social and cultural processes, but it is also a blend of the cognitive with the physiological (Blacking 1976: 7). Creativity through symbolism and through language is a conscious step beyond that. It requires more thinking, as well as requiring perhaps the emotion that may exist in the appreciation of any visual art, and which most certainly exists in music.

Metaphor through words is yet another step beyond symbolism. In their seminal *Metaphors we live by*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) tell us that metaphor is part of everyday language. It is not just for poets. For example, consider that 'ideas are plants'. We have in English, to name but a few expressions of this metaphor: 'He views chemistry as a mere *offshoot* of physics. Mathematics has many *branches*. The *seeds* of his great ideas were *planted* in his youth. She has a *fertile* imagination' (1980: 47). Possibly language itself is always metaphorical? Much the same has been suggested about symbolism, in very different ways by rather different anthropological thinkers, for example the French cognitive anthropologist Dan Sperber (1975) and the American symbolic anthropologist Roy Wagner (1986).

Symbols communicate with reference to other symbols, and not necessarily with direct reference to non-symbolic objects (either physical ones or otherwise). In Saussurian terms, the sign is truly arbitrary. Its meaning exists only within a context of other symbols (see Saussure 1974 [1916]: 65–78; Barnard 2000: 121–4). That radical Saussurian position is not necessarily one that I hold, but it can be a useful way to think of the relations between words and symbols and between symbols and other symbols.

## Theories of society, culture and nature

Tim Ingold (1999) has argued that hunter-gatherers have sociality, but, at least in some sense, *not* society. It is worth remembering, though, the imprecision of these very words, as well as their changing meanings. This is part of Ingold's point, although he emphasizes instead the difference between hunter-gatherers and others in terms of the immediacy of social relations of hunter-gatherers (that is, their lack of long-term commitments), their personal autonomy and their ideology and practice of sharing. For me, even a notion like 'hunter-gatherer sociality', or 'hunter-gatherer society', is not to be taken for granted. Those are fundamentally economic concepts, and therefore could have had little meaning before society was defined economically, as it came to be specifically in eighteenth-century Scottish writings (Barnard 2004). In seventeenth-century England, society was defined not economically but politically. Thus for Thomas Hobbes (e.g., 1991 [1651]), there could be no such thing as hunter-gatherer society or even hunter-gatherer sociality, because: (1) Hobbes had no notion that hunter-gatherers could be anything other than brutes, and (2) society required a social contract, and this he equated with the state. And hunter-gatherers, of course, do not create states.

In the seventeenth century, the word 'sociality' existed, but not in English. It occurred notably in the Latin writings of Samuel Pufendorf (1927 [1682]), in the form *socialitas*. This is almost invariably rendered in English as 'sociability', the ability to be sociable. In contrast, Hobbes does use the English word 'society', but he uses it not as a count noun but as an abstraction – with no indefinite article. In Hobbesian usage, people may live 'in society', but they do not live 'in societies'. In other words, Hobbes' notion of 'society' is at least approximately equivalent to Ingold's or Pufendorf's 'sociality' or *socialitas*. What we call 'societies', Hobbes called 'commonwealths', or, more accurately, 'the commonwealth'. Biologists reinvented the term 'sociality' in the twentieth century, and Ingold's vision of it is derived from that.

For me, hunter-gatherers not only live not only in society, but in societies. To accept that some but not all human groups are 'societies' seems to me a difficult position to maintain. No democratic society