

Van Gennep and Virgin Birth: An Improbable Chapter in the History of Anthropology

Frederico Delgado Rosa

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“If we look back to the fabulous ages of the world, when everything was aggrandized by poetic ornament, we read of many ancient ladies, got with child by such impossible methods that I believe they must have owed their pregnancy to what I have been describing, and I hope all commentators and mythologists will for the future fall in with my explication.”

Abraham Johnson (John Hill), *Lucina sine concubitu*, 1750

“In any case, the beliefs concerning the possibility of a *lucina sine concubitu* are of general interest. They are not only teratological cases, so to speak, and deserve more than an amused curiosity.”

Arnold Van Gennep, “*Lucina sine concubitu*”, 1904

At the beginning of the 20th century, French anthropologist and folklorist Arnold Van Gennep (1873–1957) complained about the scarcity and lack of detail in ethnographic descriptions of “the acts and concepts relating to sexual life” of the so-called primitive or savage peoples – whom he preferred to call “semi-civilised”. This kind of study presented special difficulties, all the more so because the viewpoint of European observers was culturally marked by prudishness or, in Van Gennep’s words, by a “false prudishness” that prevented them from writing clearly about genitalia and copulation. As a connoisseur of the vast ethnographic literature of his time, Van Gennep deplored the “silence of the explorers” in matters of this kind, and praised those among the Australian ethnographers who had recently made revelations beyond all taboos (Van Gennep [1904]: 21; 1905: xlvi; 1907: 23). It was

surely no coincidence that one was a physician and the other a biologist, respectively Walter Edmund Roth (1861–1923) and Walter Baldwin Spencer (1860–1929), not to mention his inseparable Francis Gillen (1855–1912), whose duties as sub-protector of Aborigines had undoubtedly contributed to creating close links with the Arunta/Aranda – spelled Arrernte today [1] – and other central Australian groups. [2]

Neither Van Gennep nor probably any anthropologist of his time was aware of the utterly invasive, unethical dimensions of “ethno-pornography”, as W. E. Roth labelled it (1897). And apart from that, those three great ethnographers were key players in one of the most contested empirical findings in the history of ethnography, i.e., the alleged ignorance of sexual reproduction among Australian Aborigines before European influence. Throughout the 20th century, this parallel but related question became one of the most bitter polemics in Western anthropology, and it has never received a definitive or consensual answer. Moreover, from a postcolonial standpoint, the “virgin birth” debate is the epitome of a surpassed anthropology with past-oriented views on Australian peoples. Regardless of their contrasting arguments on Aboriginal nescience, participants in the debate were mostly inattentive to contemporary issues affecting living communities and individuals, except that some anthropologists invoked colonial influences to explain Aboriginal knowledge of human sexual reproduction (see Austin-Broos, 2009; Hiatt, 1996; Ashley-Montagu, 1974 [1937]). There are some risks, however, in discarding the whole debate as sterile if not unethical anthropology and all views on Aboriginal nescience as an exoticizing exercise with evolutionary undertones.

Van Gennep, an active participant in this international forum, is a case in point. [3] He fully trusted Spencer and Gillen – or, for that matter, Roth – when they asserted the actual ignorance of certain Aboriginal groups, particularly the Arunta, regarding the relationship between copulation and pregnancy. “Time after time”, wrote Spencer and Gillen in 1899 about the Arunta and related tribes, “we have questioned them on this point, and always received the reply that the child was not the direct result of intercourse (...)” (Spencer, Gillen, 1899: 265). And Van Gennep concluded: “Voilà qui est net [That’s clear-cut].” (1905: xlviii). Nevertheless, Van Gennep occupies a special place in disciplinary history because of his eclectic, independent views, related to various currents yet distinct from any particular school of thought. His writings on the subject are a reminder that old-fashioned dossiers are sometimes pervaded with unexpected subtleties and vast amounts of erudition, which challenge us to reconnect with them beyond decoloniality.

To start with, he criticized no less than Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) for not freeing himself “from the bias of Western education on the mechanism of generation”, and for applying to Australians “Semitic beliefs about blood”. [4] To capture “Australian thought”, one had to dispel Western ideas derived from scientific education or a Judeo-Christian upbringing (Van Gennep, 1905: xlv, lviii). Indeed, it was a recurrent strategy among those who argued Aboriginal nescience to expose the white man’s difficulty in imagining it (See e.g. Hartland, 1909–1910, I: 274). And yet, for Van Gennep, it was certainly not to be expected that scholars –

whether Christian, Jewish or atheist – were faithful representatives of the white man. Simply put, positive ideas about sexual reproduction were *not* dominant in the European universe. Despite the specificity of Arunta-type ideas, which required suspension of Western preconceptions bordering on cultural relativism, Van Gennep, like so many other anthropologists of his generation, considered that Australian materials could and should be compared on a universal scale that concerned Europe to the highest degree.

In “Virgin Birth” (1966), Edmund Leach (1910–1989) wrote: “(...) [T]he time has come to take another look at this almost legendary controversy”. According to Leach, those who took the Australians’ claims at their face value were conditioned by their own fantasies about savagery: “In anthropological writing, ignorance is a term of abuse. To say that a native is ignorant amounts to saying that he is childish, stupid, superstitious. Ignorance is the opposite of logical rationality; it is the quality which distinguishes the savage from the anthropologist”. Physiological ignorance was ultimately an anthropological illusion that had nothing to do with Aboriginal reality. [5] Leach dealt the death blow to the enduring respectability of Sir James George Frazer (1854–1941) in particular: “That a distinguished anthropologist should once have thought otherwise displays the oddity of anthropologists rather than the oddity of the aborigines”. [6] (Leach 1966: 39, 41, 47) In a word, Frazer was a racist with ill-concealed contempt for the Other. And the same verdict potentially applied to those – notably Melford Spiro (1920–2014), Leach’s adversary on this topic (see Spiro, 1967) – who believed in the ignorance of Australians in matters of sexual reproduction.

This is not the place to discuss James Frazer’s racism. But did Van Gennep commit the alleged sins of his British counterpart? Is reassessing his writings on supernatural birth in the 21st century a purely historicist, backward-looking exercise, or can we learn something else from it? I suggest that Van Gennep remains an original voice, and that the analysis of his scattered texts on the subject may contribute to a less cavalier attitude towards disciplinary past than Leach’s.

Colonialism’s Sexual Vertigo

How did Arunta women get pregnant? What was a foetus for the Aborigines of Central Australia? These were questions that fascinated Van Gennep and his generation, particularly since the publication of *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899) by Walter Baldwin Spencer (1860–1929) and Francis James Gillen (1855–1912). Following their account’s basic tenets, conception was caused by the entry of a spirit into the woman’s body, which took place, not at the physiological onset of pregnancy as recognized by science, but a few months later, when the mother first felt a sense of movement in her womb. This phenomenon was then associated with the most recent walks of the woman in question, as she must have approached a place haunted by spirits who were just waiting for the opportunity to be reincarnated. These sacred places, *oknanikilla*, [7] were related to the travels of totemic ancestors during primeval mythological times, *Alcheringa*, [8] which Spencer and Gillen translated as the Dreamtime. Anthropozoomorphic or anthropophytomorphic creatures, the

ancestors wandered in homogeneous groups or companies, such as the company of kangaroo men or the company of opossum men. In some places still recognisable in the present, the *oknanikilla*, they entered the ground, leaving behind a spiritual part associated with stone or wooden objects, the *churinga*. Every child was the reincarnation of a mythical ancestor who determined its totemic identity. For some time after the death of an individual, the spirit he or she had reincarnated frequented the place of burial of the corpse, but after all the rites had been performed, it returned to the *oknanikilla* to await a new reincarnation.

Spencer and Gillen's account of reincarnation among the Arunta was challenged a few years later by German missionary-ethnographer Carl von Strehlow (1871–1922), the author of seven small monographic volumes on the Arunta and their Luritcha neighbours. [9] He pointed out that it was not the spirit of an ancestor that entered the woman's body, but rather a miniature child or germ called *ratappa*, associated with a tree, a rock or another natural object (Strehlow, 1908: 51-56; 1913: 7). He thus opposed the assimilation of *ratappa* to ancestors. [10] Spencer and Gillen had asserted that a second kind of spirit haunted the tree or rock marking the precise spot where the ancestors descended underground; however, in 1899 they stated that it was not these *arumburinga* that entered the wombs of women, but the spirit part associated with the *churinga*. 'The *arumburinga* is changeless and lives forever; the spirit part of the *Alcheringa* individual also lives forever, but from time to time it undergoes reincarnation' (Spencer, Gillen, 1899: 515). In any case, they added that one was a kind of double of the other.

It seems likely that Spencer and Gillen – or, for that matter, Strehlow – came across local variants of the system at different times during their fieldwork. In addition, they tended to present their data in a straightforward way that did not necessarily reflect vernacular polysemy. [11] What is of interest here is that for Van Gennep, as for many of his contemporaries, the Arunta attributed conception to causes other than the real one. What then was the purpose of copulation? How was sexuality perceived and experienced in Australia? According to him, these questions were a necessary complement to the virgin birth issue. The suspicion of ignorance on the basis of totemic beliefs had to give way to a positive step of sexual ethnography. In *Mythes et légendes d'Australie* (1905), a careful analysis of the literature of his time enabled him to compile the "opinions of the Australians on the function and nature of the sexual organs", and to conclude that they placed them "on the same footing as all the other organs, and do not recognize them as having any more direct connection with procreation" (Van Gennep, 1905: lv-lvii). For example, the Arunta believed the penis to be the seat of violent feelings, such as the desire for revenge, and not a conductor of fertilizing seed.

Van Gennep never implied that Australians were less intelligent or less perceptive than other populations. In fact, it was the rationality, not the irrationality of the so-called "primitives" that was the order of the day. "The savage is, of course, a most logical person", wrote Baldwin Spencer (in Marett, Penniman, 1932: 158). Ethnographers emphasized the extent to which Aborigines scrutinized every detail of the environment from an early age: "(...) when the

white child is learning to read books, they [Australian children] are busy, all unconscious to themselves, reading the book of nature” (Spencer, Gillen, 1912: 190). Van Gennep then highlighted the fact that the association between pregnancy and coitus was not empirically self-evident, quite the contrary. The time lag between causality and symptoms, or the common infertility of the human species, was enough to account for that. [12] And in the case of Australian societies, it was necessary to consider certain particularities of sexual life.

Out of my deep respect for both contemporary and past Aboriginal people, I must apologize for any unintended harm resulting from my praxis as historian of anthropology, namely the analysis of texts produced by anthropologists and ethnographers working in historical settings with ethical codes that contrast with those in vigour today. Aboriginal individuals reading this paper should be aware that it contains potentially disturbing references to nineteenth-century Aboriginal communities, in relation to anthropological views and concepts that were acceptable within mainstream Australian and European society in the period in which they were written but may no longer be considered appropriate. No less today than in Van Gennep’s time, Aboriginal sexuality is a delicate subject, but for reasons other than prudishness. The ethnographies on which he drew are deemed suspicious of conveying fanciful Victorian images of savagery in that regard; and to this day, the mere fact of reproducing the passages in question may amount to a continued exercise of colonial violence on the descendants of the communities concerned.

One of the ironies of the “virgin birth” debate is that the unanimous opinion of late nineteenth-century ethnographers was that there were no virgins in Australia. This was not presented as a matter of opinion, but as an ethnographic fact. “There is no such thing as a virgin in Australian tribes when once a girl has reached puberty”, Spencer wrote (in Marett, Penniman, 1931: 158) As soon as they reached puberty, even before, Aboriginal girls were not only likely to copulate, but engaged in sexual precocity associated with marriage to adult men. Walter Edmund Roth pointed out that “as a rule in all these Northern tribes, a little girl may be given to and will live with her spouse as wife long before she reaches the stage of puberty – the relationship of which to fecundity is not recognised (...)” (Roth, 1903: 23). And he added that “the idea of conception not being necessarily due to sexual connection becomes partly intelligible”. [13] Van Gennep added that “sexual enjoyment does not depend on puberty, but is experienced either before or after, depending on the individual; the spasm [i.e. orgasm, both male and female] may even occur several years earlier; so that puberty is of importance only for the power of conception” (Van Gennep 1981 [1909]: 98). In sum, he sustained there was a discrepancy between physiological and social puberty (namely the genital mutilation of girls and the onset of their sexual activity), which was relatable to the dissociation between copulation and pregnancy.

It should also be remembered that in many tribes, particularly in the Northern Territory, the ordinary rules of marriage were set aside during secular festive gatherings, or *corroborees*, that often complemented sacred performances. A number of women were summoned during the evening “and all of the men, except those who are fathers, elder and younger

brothers, and sons, have access to them” (Spencer, Gillen, 1904: 137). Following in the footsteps of leading Australian ethnographers, Van Gennep thus associated ignorance of the basic facts of reproduction with ritual licentiousness, while adding medical arguments that a woman’s fertility was threatened when she had to “undergo several men in succession” (Van Gennep, 1905: lx). [14] All in all, it was natural, according to Van Gennep, “that cases in which sexual intercourse is followed by pregnancy should appear to Australians only as coincidental” – not causal (ibid., lx-lxi).

According to Patrick Wolfe, the late Victorian ethnographies that ignited the virgin birth debate should not allow us to look beyond colonialism in Australia. On the contrary, they find their true meaning within its boundaries. Van Gennep is concerned by this critique because he took at face value narratives that were possibly intertwined with colonial violence. Wolfe draws attention to the idea, attributed by Spencer and Gillen to Central Australian Aborigines, that mixed race individuals were light-skinned because of the white man’s flour eaten by their mothers. At first sight, they did not suspect these children to be the fruit of sexual intercourse with the settlers, which was presented as further confirmation of their state of ignorance of the reproductive organs – especially the male organ. Yet the very existence of these children proves, according to Wolfe, that the Arunta and their neighbours were not in a primeval state but in a colonial situation, subject to sexual and other forms of violence. Therefore, they could hardly represent pre-European Australia: “Spencer and Gillen’s Arunta were already not there” (Wolfe, 1994: 192). If ethnographers suggested otherwise, it was to accentuate the anachronism of contemporary savages and deny them a future in modern Australia. With the assistance of evolutionary anthropology, ethnography of virgin birth was thus an illusion at the service of colonial ideology. [15] A common trait of all colonial agents, ethnographers included, was their desire to condemn Aborigines to extinction – as they lived in the present but did not belong to it. Wolfe goes so far as to emphasize the relationship between ethnography and ethnocide. [16]

{}Spencer and Gillen’s second monograph, *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia* (1904), was the result of investigations conducted before the discovery of gold at Altunga triggered an influx of three to four thousand settlers to the central region, which, according to Spencer and Gillen, had an irreversible impact on the ways of life and traditional understandings of a much larger number of Aborigines. (Spencer, Gillen, 1912, I: 189–190) Aware of the historical turning point that colonialism represented in Australia, Van Gennep believed the ethnographers had worked in time to record traditional Australian patterns before European influence changed them forever or destroyed them. He predicted that their books would become historical documents in the same way as the treatises of Tacitus, Strabo or Julius Caesar on the Germans, the Slavs, or the Celts of antiquity. It was necessary to apply the same “critical method” to accounts of the Roman Empire as to ethnographies of the British Empire, but one should not forget that both were based on direct observation of real people. Van Gennep fought against the prejudices of historians and archaeologists who accentuated “the split between the science of what has disappeared and the science of what is living” (Van Gennep, 1909a: 175–176).

For Van Gennep, the ethnographic fieldwork conducted by Spencer and Gillen at the beginning of the 20th century confirmed their “discoveries” in the 1890s. It should be noted that Gillen died in 1912, but his name appeared in later volumes by Spencer as a posthumous tribute. In these works, mostly based on their earlier joint materials, Spencer now made it clear in footnotes that descriptions related to conception no longer corresponded to the present-day reality. Before the discovery of gold, the Arunta child in the womb, called a *ratappa*, did not enter through the vulva, but through the waist, in the form of a *kuruna*, a very small, round, red stone, still without arms, legs or head. “On this point the natives are emphatic”, Spencer wrote in a later version (Spencer, Gillen, 1927: 363). Each child was the reincarnation of a totemic ancestor because each *kuruna* was a spiritual emanation of it. Before entering a woman’s womb as a pebble, this spiritual entity haunted the *oknanikilla*. “It must, of course, be remembered that this expresses the primitive belief of the natives before the advent of the white man and half-castes.” (ibid.)

The Banality of the Aberration

At the turn of the 20th century, the camps were clearly divided between the defenders and the critics of ethnographies on Aboriginal nescience. James Frazer quickly became the champion among the former, radicalizing his discourse to say that absolute ignorance of the reproductive organs was only possible if the Arunta had been frozen in time for thousands of years. The evolutionary status accorded to the Arunta as closest to the primitive condition of humanity was inseparable from a romantic halo surrounding the “untouched” heartland of Australia, whose archaism was doomed to collapse under the weight of European civilization. It was, he said, “humanity in the chrysalis stage” (Frazer, 1910 [1899]: 93). Yet the belief that women could become pregnant because of a spiritual entity entering their wombs was not an anthropological novelty. Within Tylorian anthropology, it was sometimes referred to as the belief in the “immaculate conception”, which was in keeping with the provocative comparisons of British cultural evolutionists between the so-called savage and the so-called civilized world. What was allegedly extraordinary about the Arunta was that supernatural birth was not an exception attributed to mythological figures, gods or heroes, nor a magical or religious prescription to overcome situations of infertility of ordinary people, but a universal rule for all women, thus pointing to actual ignorance of the relationship between coitus and pregnancy. Frazer wrote:

“Thus, in the opinion of these savages, every conception is what we are wont to call an immaculate conception, being brought about by the entrance into the mother of a spirit apart from any contact with the other sex. Students of folk-lore have long been familiar with notions of this sort occurring in the stories of the birth of miraculous personages (Many examples are collected by Mr. Sidney Hartland in his learned work, *The Legend of Perseus*) but this is the first case on record of a tribe who believe in immaculate conception as the sole cause of the birth of every human being who comes into the world. A people so ignorant of the most elementary of natural processes may well rank at the very bottom of the savage scale.” (ibid.: 94)

The leading authority on virgin births, Edwin Sidney Hartland (1848–1927), had done more than compile them in *The Legend of Perseus* (1894–1896). Under the pretext of carrying out an anthropological exegesis of the fabulous birth of Perseus, he had brought together legends and magical or religious practices concerning pregnancy. He acknowledged that in myths such as that of Perseus there was no copulation associated with the conception of the hero, whereas the fertilizing remedies of common women were prescribed in addition to their sexual activity. Yet, said Hartland, this did not matter much, since the distinction between the natural and the supernatural did not exist in early stages of civilization. It could be said, therefore, that many of these practices also implied, though not necessarily explicitly, that “the real origin of the child afterwards born is not the semen received in the act of coition, but the drug, or the magical potency of the incantation” (Hartland, 1894, I: 148). The mythological versions concerning exceptional characters were probably later than the practices concerning ordinary individuals, but both series of phenomena were immersed in a primitive, prehistoric mental atmosphere, probably characterized by a lack of knowledge or, in any case, a very defective knowledge of the fertilizing role of the male sexual organ and, consequently, of copulation.

In the British anthropological tradition, in-existent or loose paternity ties in primitive society had been discussed since the 1860s, but they were mostly attributed to sexual promiscuity. According to the well-known theses of John F. McLennan (1827–1881), matrilineal preceded patrilineal descent because the plurality of sexual partners prevented the identification of the true father (1865). This was not ignorance of the mechanisms of procreation, but uncertainty about paternity. Hartland now suggested that the anteriority of matrilineal descent was associated with “an imperfect recognition of the great natural fact of fatherhood” (ibid., 1894, I, 181). In short, he was theoretically ahead of what ethnography would very soon “discover”. Hartland was as struck as Frazer by the Arunta case and insisted on the extraordinary nature of the Central Australian data. In 1900, he wrote:

“Some years ago I ventured to suggest that certain archaic beliefs and practices found almost all over the world were consistent only with, and must have arisen from, imperfect recognition of fatherhood. I hardly expected, however, that a people would be found still existing in that hypothetical condition of ignorance.” (Hartland, 1900: 65; see 1909–1910, II: 279) [17]

In the opposite camp, Andrew Lang (1844–1912) was the most conspicuous spokesman for scepticism. Ignorance of the mechanisms of sexual reproduction among central Australians was not an unprecedented illustration of primitiveness as Frazer claimed, but the complex result of a *sui generis* evolution, which Lang even described as “aberrant”. It would be incongruous to see it as humanity in a chrysalis state. The Arunta were not extraordinary in this sense – they were extraordinary *in every sense* (Lang, 1899: 1016; 1905: 315). In retrospect, Lang may gain the appearance of an enlightened anthropologist for whom the Aborigines were surely not as innocent as they seemed (see Hiatt, 1996: 123); but let us recall that he was then engaged in a neo-degenerationist path to demonstrate that the most primitive

Australian tribes had a dominant creed in a “High God” or “All-father”, i.e. a supreme being with a moral, eternal and demiurgic allure – which was the expression of original monotheism. Now, in Central Australia the decay of this pristine religion was directly related to the growth of animism, understood as the belief in spirits. Lang saw the so-called ignorance of the mechanisms of sexual reproduction as “the corollary” of the extraordinary way in which the Arunta had pushed the development of their animistic system to the extreme (Lang, 1899, 1014; 1906a, 53).

Andrew Lang criticized Hartland for his anthropological rapprochement of extraordinary births in mythology and ordinary ones in society, but Van Gennep got involved and they became fierce opponents. Van Gennep cast the first stone in *Mythes et légendes d’Australie* (1905), where he accused Lang of being “properly hypnotised” by his own theories, which prevented him from admitting that Arunta’s ideas on conception were not isolated or aberrant.

Van Gennep challenged the ethnographic foundations of Lang’s allegation that other Australian tribes knew “very well what the consequences of sexual intercourse were”. According to the accounts of Spencer and Gillen and Roth, “North and East Australians are at the same point as Central Australians”. At a time when Western Australian ethnographies were still scarce, “this leaves the Southern and South-eastern tribes”, he said. Yet the leading authority on this region, Alfred William Howitt (1830–1908), had barely written on matters of sexuality and conception, suggesting rather laconically that children were procreated by the male parent and owed their mother only their foetal nourishment. (Van Gennep, 1905: lxiv; Howitt, 1904) For Van Gennep, it was “very regrettable that Mr Howitt has not studied more thoroughly the ideas of the Australians on sexual phenomena, to which he makes only very rare allusions”. And he added: “His silence in any case proves nothing...” (Van Gennep, 1905: lxiv-lxvii).

A polemicist par excellence, Lang took Van Gennep’s critique to heart and combined his own defence with that of Howitt – who was, incidentally, his main reference on Aboriginal monotheism. “Speech is not silence!”, he wrote in his review of *Mythes et légendes d’Australie*. How dare Van Gennep speak of Howitt’s ethnographic shortcomings, when the latter had made it clear that south-eastern tribes “never for a moment feel any doubt, according to my experience, that the children originate solely from the male parent” (Howitt cit. in Lang, 1906b: 124). Lang was ready to admit that Howitt’s Aborigines, like most people in the world, including the Highlanders of Scotland with their “Son of the Bones”, could imagine “supranormal conceptions” of characters above the ordinary; but their “marvellous exception” would be “a birth *not* due to the human father” (Lang, 1906b: 124).

In his “Réponse à M. A. Lang”, Van Gennep explained that the word “silence” had been suggested to him in contrast to the abundance of detail found in Roth’s or Spencer’s accounts. [18] “Let us say, to please Mr. Lang, that ‘silence’ must be corrected to ‘relative silence’ (...)” (Van Gennep, 1906c: 148–149). Lang declared himself happy to accept such correction, but he insisted on the empirical correspondence between, on the one hand, the

complexity of a late animistic system that had transformed babies into reincarnations of Alcheringa spirits and, on the other hand, ignorance of the facts of procreation. If one thing was concomitant with the other, Van Gennep could hardly blame Howitt for not investigating what did not exist in his region. “Mr. Howitt was not ‘silent’ on this point, and if he and all other authorities known to me have been ‘silent’ about a south-eastern belief that a birth is the result of the entrance of a spirit into a woman, and about south-eastern nescience of procreation, it seems probable that they are silent because they have nothing to say; because they have not found either the belief or the nescience” (Lang, 1906c: 180). [19]

The two scholars continued to argue fiercely about the meanings of silence, until Van Gennep made clear that, unlike Lang, he was hardly interested in confining sexual ignorance to Australian reincarnationism for the simple reason that it was a universal issue, one of the most exciting and serious matters for the knowledge of humankind and its history (Van Gennep, 1907: 23). “Now this is the important question for me, the Australian cases serving only temporarily as material for a more extensive work”. [20] Even in cases where there was an association between copulation and pregnancy, these could be “multiplication rites” (Van Gennep, 1981 [1909]: 53). Aborigines for whom generation was due only to the father might illustrate this anthropological hypothesis. [21] Like all peoples, Australians had “their biology”, Van Gennep wrote to express the idea that the physiological phenomena of human reproduction were always a matter of imagination. Like in folk medicine, not everything in this “semi-civilised” biology was necessarily antithetical to science, but it was manifested in a magico-religious atmosphere, thus suggesting “pre-scientific theories” (Van Gennep, 1907: 23-24; 1924: 51).

In the historiography of the virgin debate, Van Gennep’s name appears next to Frazer’s, but they differed in a fundamental aspect: instead of accentuating the primitivism of Central Australian Aborigines like Frazer did, Van Gennep trivialized their ignorance in sexual matters. As Lester Richard Hiatt (1931-2008) put it, “Arnold van Gennep, the eminent French folklorist, considered it to be little different from the ignorance of procreative mechanisms still prevailing among the masses of Europe” (1996, 123). This trivialization is indeed the main distinguishing feature of Van Gennep’s contribution to the virgin birth debate. His was a systematic move from the extraordinary to the ordinary, almost a fixation with bringing the apparent aberration back to its proper proportions in universal history. He brought Australian Aborigines closer to the common people, not only the European peasantry, but “uncultivated” city dwellers:

“(…) Mr. Frazer, among others, is surprised that the Australians have not yet recognised the causal link between the sexual act and generation. As if the masses of Europe, to whom the Immaculate Conception does not seem so strange, had managed to do so! In fact, the ignorance of the civilised people themselves in all matters relating to the mechanism of generation is quite astounding, as any doctor will tell you, and is only slightly inferior to that of the semi-civilised. From this point of view the Australians are neither singular nor aberrant” (Van Gennep, 1905: lix-lx).

That copulation and pregnancy were commonly associated did not mean that a causal relationship was established, or that it was understood by the common people as a purely natural phenomenon. Examples could be multiplied at will by consulting the existing collections. Hartland's *The Legend of Perseus* was the best-known, but not the only compilation of folk ideas about fertility. Van Gennep himself collected folklore data of this nature, but he cited *Das Weib in der Natur- und Völkerkunde* (1887), by Hermann Heinrich Ploss (1819–1885), and the work of his friend and publisher Émile Nourry (1870–1935), who published under the pseudonym of Pierre Saintyves. A French example that revealed his point was this: in the region of Collobrières, there was a chestnut tree “on whose roots women who wanted children should rub their bodies”. Now, this tree had, “below a broken main branch, two globular bumps which gave it a phallic appearance” (Saintyves, 1908: 63; see Van Gennep, 1908 [1904]; 1932–1933, 490; 1937, I: 241; II: 552-557, 573-574). In short, to Van Gennep it was beyond the shadow of a doubt that “the general working-class or rural public (...) still holds to theories that are long out of date” (Van Gennep, 1905: lx).

Like Hartland, Van Gennep favoured a historical reading of supernatural births brought about in folktales, which might have been quite ordinary phenomena in the minds of people in earlier times. And the adjuvant remedies of today were probably the only “seminal liquor” of yesteryear, which pointed to an earlier framework of deeper ignorance in sexual matters (Van Gennep, 1908 [1904], 16-20). Patrick Wolfe suggests that Van Gennep, by bringing together different ethnographic and historical contexts, was helping to establish sexual ignorance as a universal stage in cultural evolution:

“(...) when Van Gennep (...) chided Lang for not conceding to Frazer that Arunta nescience was neither isolated nor aberrant, his question was rhetorical: ‘Doesn’t he know Mr. Sidney Hartland’s study of the topic of supernatural births?’ Van Gennep’s question is central to the development of nescience, since it emphasises the generality implicit in Hartland’s hypothesis. As an evolutionary stage through which all must pass, nescience was unlikely to remain an idiosyncrasy of the Arunta (...)” (Wolfe, 1994: 178.)

According to Wolfe, Van Gennep and Frazer took slightly divergent paths to the same end: Frazer was dazzled by the discovery of the first empirical case of absolute nescience, whereas Van Gennep did not even need confirmation of Sidney Hartland’s “prophecy” (ibid.). Whether it was an exception found in Australia as Frazer put it, or a still common occurrence in Europe as Van Gennep insisted, nescience was, for both, a prehistoric atavism in at the turn of the 20th century. This reading does not make enough room to the specificities of Van Gennep’s thinking, but in order to understand them we must certainly be attentive to the intellectual proximity between him and Frazer.

The Parthenogenesis of Science

In 1966, Edmund Leach criticized participants in the old virgin birth debate, including Van Gennep, for inferring the level of physiological knowledge from rites and beliefs. He gave the

example of an English girl whose outward participation in Anglican church formalities could tell us nothing about her “inner psychological state”, i.e., her personal ideas on the reproductive organs. And he added, by way of hypothesis: “Certainly her ignorance of the precise details of the physiology of sex is likely to be quite as profound as that of any Australian aborigine” (Leach, 1966: 40). It is interesting to note that Leach tacitly re-joined Van Gennep in admitting that nescience on such matters also prevailed in Europe. In other words, the English girl’s ignorance should be related to the gap between the educational system and scientific knowledge about fertility. Either by default or because they were embedded in a traditional heritage broader than the Anglican church, all social classes in Britain were affected by general ideas or specific details about sex that were external to science. Van Gennep would not have agreed, though, that this was a matter of inner psychological states; it concerned collective, albeit diffuse ideas dating back centuries.

In the opening of his 1904 article entitled “Lucina sine concubitu”, Van Gennep referred to the case of the Lady of Montléon, who gave birth while her husband was away at war for four years. Accused of adultery in 1517, she managed to convince the judges that her son was the fruit of a dream, an occurrence whose possibility was confirmed by a team of physicians. Independently of the political power of the lady in question, this case involved the circulation of far-fetched ideas about the causes of pregnancy, beyond coitus (Van Gennep, 1908 [1904]: 1). Van Gennep reminded his readers that “our exact knowledge” of fertilization was barely two and a half centuries old:

“It was Swammerdam (died 1685) who first recognised that contact of the male spermatozoon with the female ovum is a necessary condition for conception; since then, some progress has been made, although the mechanism of conception remains, especially from the cellular point of view, obscure even to biologists.” (Van Gennep, 1905: lix-lx)

“Some progress has been made”, said Van Gennep. This formula is more complex than one might think at first sight. The idea of scientific progress was one of his assumptions, but not as an accumulation of purely empirical discoveries, unrelated to religious and other unscientific conceptions dominating the historical context of European naturalists – like Dutch microscopist Jan Swammerdam (1637–1680), who happened to have strong mystical inclinations. (See fig. 1)



Fig. 1

Nineteenth-century fantasy portrait of Jan Swammerdam, based on the face of Hartman Hartmanzoon from Rembrandt's painting, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632). No historical portrait of Swammerdam is known.

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When referring to rudimentary notions of pregnancy, Van Gennep was keen to use a Latin expression dating back to the Enlightenment. The name of the Roman goddess of childbirth, Virgil's 'casta Lucina', sometimes identified with Diana or Juno, had been used as a metonym in an eighteenth-century bestseller entitled *Lucina sine Concubitu* (1750) – childbirth without coitus – in which the Englishman John Hill (1716–1775) humorously announced the means of impregnating a woman without intercourse. In fact, he was hiding under the pseudonym of Abraham Johnson, a physicist and midwife of his own invention. Presented to the British Royal Society in the form of a letter, this work sought to mock the so-called panspermist or germ-nesting theories that were circulating at the time to explain sexual procreation.



Fig. 2

William Wollaston, by John Faber Jr, published by Thomas Bowles Jr, published by John Bowles, after Unknown artist. Mezzotint, published circa 1753-1763. NPG D4860.

© National Portrait Gallery, London

John Hill's target (or scapegoat) was the Anglican priest, naturalist, and obscure historian William Wollaston (1659–1724), whose main work, *Religion of Nature*, was first printed in a limited number of copies for his friends in 1722. (See fig. 2) Seven editions followed, the last one posthumously, as well as a French translation in 1726. [22] Abraham Johnson, the imaginary doctor created by John Hill, traced the inspiration for his revolutionary scientific discovery to a passage in Wollaston which had suddenly struck him and which he could not fail to quote in full:

“If then the Semina out of which Animals are produced, are (as I doubt not) Animalcula already formed, which being distributed about, especially in some opportune Places, are taken in with Aliment, or perhaps the very Air; being separated in the Bodies of Males by Strainers proper to every Kind, and then lodged in their seminal Vessels do there receive some kind of Addition and Influence; and then being transferred into the Wombs of the Females, are there nourished more plentifully, and grow too big to be longer confined: I say that this be the Case (...) I cannot but conclude that there are Animalcula of every Tribe originally formed by the almighty Parent, to be the Seed of all future Generations” (Wollaston *cit. in* Johnson, 1750: 9–10)

Admitting that this was the “whole mystery of generation”, the said Abraham Johnson formulated the following hypothesis: “(...) why might not the Foetus be as compleatly hatched in the seminal vessels of the Woman, as when it passes through the Organs of both Sexes?” (*ibid.*: 10). Through formidable machines, scientific experiments ensued to find the animalcula in the air and to let women beget by themselves these creatures which, seen through the microscope, were only “little Men and Women” (*ibid.*: 16). The success of this pamphlet was long-lasting, including in France in the 19th century, not only for its humorous theme, but also because several scientists were engaged in more serious research into the

parthenogenesis of certain species. This did not concern humans, but the new panspermists were criticized for not warning the lay public against the risks of extrapolation (see Assézat, 1865: xvi). This chapter of the history of natural science gives a context to Van Gennep's favourite expression, *Lucina sine concubitu*, [23] and what is also of interest is that he created his own parody on this biological theme following the example of John Hill in the 18th century.

In *Les demi-savants* (The semischolars, 1911), Van Gennep was ahead of Ruth Benedict (1887–1948) in asserting the existence of a certain type of madmen who “live in society without arousing suspicion”, namely scientists with a “pathological logic”. They were not necessarily sick, but they followed pseudo-scientific paths that the collective opinion of their time was not able to denounce. In the chapter entitled “La Parthénogénèse humaine ou le hasard de l'expérience” (Human Parthenogenesis or the Chance of the Experiment), Van Gennep created an imaginary character, Charles-Auguste Petitpoids, who repeated experiments until exhaustion “to make human ovules grow in a bath of distilled water supersaturated with potassium chloride”. One day, “overcome with spite” by successive failures, “he spat in the basin and went outside to get some fresh air”. But when he returned to “get rid of the runt and try human parthenogenesis once more”, the miracle had happened. The child born of this experiment, adopted by its creator and christened Caesar-Napoleon, would only be the first of a series. The experiment was then repeated in every detail, except that all the foetuses died at the same second. “Without a word, he left. No one has seen him since. Charles-Auguste Petitpoids had forgotten to note that at 3.45 a.m. he had spat into the basin” (Van Gennep, 1911: 65-81).

Van Gennep was aware that science itself was not the fruit of a virgin birth, but that it had, like the human being, “two parents”. In other words, it was embedded in the history of ideas and could not be isolated from a wider context than the laboratory. Scientific parthenogenesis was thus a myth in a double sense, concerning both sexual reproduction and the production of knowledge. For Van Gennep, the point was not to question the scientific progress of humankind, mostly associated with modern Europe, but to understand that the backdrop to this progress was the connection of science history to magico-religious or pre-scientific notions.

At first sight, this view contrasted with Frazer's three-stage theory of magic-religion-science, but the fact is that Frazer – like other representatives of the Tylorian school, including Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917) himself – did *not* consider the 19th century to be a pure age of science, quite the contrary. Frazer's metaphor for the intellectual evolution of humanity was “a web woven of three different threads—the black thread of magic, the red thread of religion, and the white thread of science, if under science we may include those simple truths, drawn from observation of nature, of which men in all ages have possessed a store”. It was uncertain what colour would prevail in the future:

“To keep up our parable, what will be the colour of the web which the Fates are now weaving on the humming loom of time? Will it be white or

red? We cannot tell. A faint glimmering light illumines the backward portion of the web. Clouds and thick darkness hide the other end” (Frazer, 1923: 713-714)

Resorting to another metaphor, [24] Frazer wrote that underneath an appearance of positivism, “we seem to move on a thin crust which may at any moment be rent by the subterranean forces slumbering below” (1900, I: 74). [25] His epigone Ernest Crawley (1867–1924) pointed out that “mankind remains fundamentally primitive, and it is not easy even for those most favoured by descent to rise above these primitive ideas, precisely because these ideas ‘spring eternally’ from permanent functional causes” (1902: 4). And Andrew Lang also expressed the spirit of the age with his eloquent phrase: “Man can never be sure that he has expelled the savage from his temples and from his heart” (1887, I: 338). As to Sidney Hartland, he wrote that “the consequences (...) of the long reign of ignorance have not disappeared, and it is probable that some of them are destined to last as long as the human race” (1909–1910, II: 285). This *Weltanschauung* was not at all foreign to Van Gennep, except that he further emphasized the idea that sexual ignorance was part of Western society in the 19th and 20th centuries, and that everyone was concerned, from peasants to scientists. A follower of the innovative concept of magico-religious, propagated in Britain by Robert R. Marett (1866–1943), Van Gennep was in fact sharpening a perspective that was at least implicit within Tylorian anthropology.

But what was the place of Christianity in Van Gennep’s anthropology? To what extent did his universalist statements concern the Virgin Mary? When Van Gennep wrote that one had to undo the effects of a Judaeo-Christian upbringing in order to understand Australian ideas, this was a reminder that Christianity was about recognizing the fertilizing role of the father. The conception of Jesus was the divine exception that only accentuated the ordinariness of pregnancy by copulation. One might expect Van Gennep to leave Christian dogmas out of the picture, but this was not the case.

The Virgin Mary and the Victory of Anonymous Ideas

Edmund Leach accused “the Frazer-Hartland generation of anthropologists” of not dealing with Christianity. “If *we* believe such things, we are devout; if *others* do so they are idiots”, he wrote as a critique of evolutionary assumptions (Leach, 1966: 40, 48). Yet, subtle suggestions about Christianity might have had a stronger impact at the time, namely in Britain, than straightforward demonstration of its primitive components. It is clear that a book like *The Golden Bough*, with hundreds of pages on killing human gods, had a subliminal message that was fully understood by the public and which justified its meteoric success. The same goes for *The Legend of Perseus*. Hartland wrote that he did not intend to deal with the supernatural birth of Jesus, but he did it all the same in crucial passages full of innuendos, and his readers enjoyed the forbidden fruit. Leach’s accusation is particularly unfair regarding Van Gennep, who complained that Christianity was the religious system “least taken into account” by the scholarly community:

“In reality, there are few works in which the facts are presented with complete independence; at some point, there is always a personal tendency on the part of the author to interpret the facts in accordance with the orthodoxy of his own church, or in such a way as not to shock the beliefs of his contemporaries. (...) Facts are borrowed from everywhere except from the religion which by the very fact that we are immersed in it is more directly intelligible to us.” (Van Gennep, 1909b: 122–123)

Moreover, Van Gennep considered that scholars accustomed to the study of non-Christian religions were more likely to have adequate methods and the necessary “impartiality of mind” to address Christianity. “Frameworks are then obtained in which the Christian facts come to be classified by themselves, as it were automatically” (ibid., 124). Perhaps Leach forgot that the France of President Emile Loubet was not the England of Edward VII. The pragmatic, sometimes dubious cohabitations between agnosticism and Anglicanism, symbolized by the burial of Charles Darwin (1809–1882) in Westminster Cathedral, had no correspondence on the Catholic side of the Channel. Van Gennep’s comments on the Virgin Mary were no mere innuendos, but quite radical reflections based on the work of a historian of Christianity who had been persecuted for years by the Catholic Church.

I am referring to the rationalist and free-thinking priest Joseph Turmel (1859–1943), who since 1892 had hidden his identity under various pseudonyms and who was finally exposed and excommunicated in 1930. (See fig. 3) In 1908, as Guillaume Herzog, he published *La Sainte Vierge dans l’Histoire* (The Holy Virgin in History), a work considered exemplary by Van Gennep for its courage and for the strictly scientific, “non-confessional” attitude with which it dealt with “the transformations, in the course of the centuries, of the opinions concerning the prerogatives” of the mother of Jesus (ibid.: 126). Shortly after its publication, Van Gennep made a close analysis of this book in a 1909 text entitled “L’Action individuelle et l’action collective dans la formation du culte de la Sainte Vierge” (Individual and collective action in the formation of the cult of the Blessed Virgin). He aimed at redirecting Turmel’s conclusions to the anthropological science of religions. Universal comparatism would end up mixing Christian and “semi-civilised” contexts in one way or another.



Fig. 3.

Joseph Turmel.

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In the evolution of Mary's virginity, Van Gennep sought to grasp a fundamental principle of all religions as dynamic and contradictory phenomena made up of individuals who took hold of their own heritage in different ways. Even though religion was imposed as a tradition, conservatism did not exist without innovation, nor innovation without conservatism. This historical play of forces was also marked by the interference of foreign conceptions. His deeply diachronic perspective refused the reification of society and accentuated the flow of ideas as a crucial process connecting different cultural settings. He thus began the summary of Turmel's book:

“At the beginning, there is no mention of Jesus' birth or of his mother's virginity. Jesus was above all the expected Messiah, son of David. And it is on his genealogy that the first Christian generation insists; Jesus descends from David through Joseph. (...) [The virginal conception] was repugnant to the Hebrew spirit and the Judeo-Christian church did not accept it. It is the product of the Hellenic spirit. For Christians of Greek origin, the messianic idea was incomprehensible, whereas the idea of a Son of God, of a divine birth of the Saviour, was natural: 'sons of God' abounded in the mythologies of Asia Minor and the Greco-Roman world.” (ibid.)

In other words, the Gospels after Matthew and Luke were written not only in a later period, but under the influence of Greek and Eastern conceptions of the miraculous birth of divine or heroic figures. According to Turmel, the idea of parthenogenesis was thus grafted a posteriori onto Christianity, although it was, Van Gennep added, “much older, in any case much more widespread, and consequently more powerful” (ibid.). This was like a victory of paganism, not in the sense of it being perpetuated, but in the sense of it leaving its mark on the new religion in order to better help its diffusion, to better proselytize among minds accustomed to the old pantheons of their childhood. [26] This was “the replacement of a collective belief by another collective belief”, not mechanically, but through a more or less deliberate individual effort to blend the two traditions. This was the work of Matthew and

Luke – of the authors of their gospels in any case. Apart from reworking the human genealogy of Jesus and Joseph's place in the gospel, the reconciliation was achieved above all through the association of the Messiah's birth with Old Testament prophecies, in particular Matthew's quotation of the verse from Isaiah: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isaiah VII, 14). Joseph Turmel insisted that Christians of Hellenic origin "read Isaiah in the Septuagint version", in which the Hebrew word for young woman, *almah*, had been translated as *parthenos*. The Greek word also had the meaning of maiden, but the new Christians now deliberately used it to mean virgin (Herzog, 1908: 9). [27] "The virginity of the Virgin", wrote Van Gennepe, "was thus founded on a text, and on a misunderstanding" (1909b: 128).

We cannot follow here all the ancient, medieval, and later discussions on Mary's virginity, including *post partum* and *in partu*. Suffice it to say that, for Van Gennepe, the battle of exegeses that Turmel dissected was not only theological but had to count on the collective acceptance or favour of certain ideas at the expense of others. Referring to Turmel's work, he wrote:

"What is interesting is that the history of the Virgin over the centuries provides an excellent subject for the study of the interaction of individual and collective opinions; sometimes the one, sometimes the other, has the upper hand; sometimes they advance in parallel, sometimes they agree, sometimes they diverge, only to meet again." (ibid.: 127)

As far as the mother of Jesus was concerned, realistic figurations of the virginal conception were destined to prevail long after the disappearance of Greek or Eastern parthenogenesis. "The popular tendency demanded the miracle" associated with the birth of the Son of God and determined in advance the outcome of the elites' intellectual struggles (ibid.: 134). Individual thought and collective sanction inevitably came together at some point. It was a "movement of the masses" that seemed almost inexplicable:

"The Fathers follow the Fathers, the Doctors follow the Doctors, they dissect or truncate the texts, they quibble, they support or contradict each other. However, the great Christian communities feel, cry, pray and accept, or reject, it is not clear why, the arguments and reasoning of the 'intellectuals'. And always the anonymous sensibility remains victorious. It has its own logic, which is not theological. It imposes itself. Theologians, after the fact, justify it and popes sanctify it." (ibid.: 136)

On this point, Van Gennepe referred to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, proclaimed on 8 December 1854 by Pope Pius IX, with the support of all his cardinals. Although the impeccability of Mary's pregnancy had long been consolidated, "she still had to be delivered from original sin". Van Gennepe wrote: "This 'progress' has, as we know, only been achieved recently (...). Suffice it to say that this dogma was contrary to the opinions of the Doctors, especially St. Thomas, and that the Papacy only admitted it after two centuries of resistance to popular pressure" (ibid., 135–136). What popular pressure did Van Gennepe have in mind? That the dogma of Mary's immaculate conception, by its history rather than by

its actual wording, concerned the body, the womb, the sexual life of her mother. Certainly, the idea that Mary could have been conceived by the intervention of the Holy Spirit, without coitus or in addition to the coitus of her parents, was not part of the new dogma, which was marked by the theological sophistication of the Vatican. The official texts stated that “(...) the Blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her conception, by a singular privilege and grace of the Omnipotent God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of mankind, was preserved immaculate from all stain of original sin (...)” (*Official Documents...*, 1855, 95). It is not a question here of supernatural birth, but of God’s intervention at the moment of Mary’s conception. Without entering the exegesis of Catholic dogma, the important thing remains that, for Van Gennep, this long historical process was affected by popular ideas. [28] The tendency to mythologize the mother of Jesus also affected his maternal grandmother, whose twenty-year marriage to Joachim was rendered sterile in collective imagination until the miraculous birth of Mary. Absent from the Bible, the mother of Mary made her way through the medieval circuits until the apogee of the Marian trinity, which Leonardo da Vinci made immortal and the popes fought in vain. In 1584, Gregory XIII officially sanctioned the cult of Saint Anne.

The curious thing about the official documents of the 1854 dogma is that the Pope himself recognized the interaction over the centuries between the Church Fathers and the people. He referred to all his predecessors who had interpreted and promoted this movement, both scholarly and popular. All that remained was to transform into dogma what had been felt for so long by Catholic Christianity. Pius IX had written to all the prelates, asking them to inform him by letter, not only of their own beliefs concerning the immaculate conception of Mary, but of the faith of the humble faithful in the matter. While pleading for divine help, he now asked what the feelings of his cardinals were. In short, the historical oscillations of which Van Gennep and Turmel spoke were understood by the papacy as a purely cumulative tendency to perfect a divine revelation which, despite its diverse manifestations, had always been the same:

“(...) this doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Most Blessed Virgin, everyday more and more so splendidly explained and confirmed by the highest authority (...), always existed in the Church as received from our ancestors, and stamped with the character of a Divine revelation. For the Church of Christ, careful guardian and defender of the dogmas deposited with her, changes nothing in them, diminishes nothing, adds nothing, but, with all industry, by faithfully and wisely treating ancient things, so studies to limit and perfect their expression, that these ancient dogmas of heavenly faith may receive evidence, light, distinction, but may still retain their fullness, integrity, and propriety, and may increase only in their own kind, that is, in the same sense and the same belief.” (*Official Documents...*, 1855: 76-77) [29]

It is time to return to Van Gennep’s writings on Aboriginal Australia.

Male Genital Mutilation and The Dynamics of Precolonial Time

Van Gennep's chosen ethnographers, Baldwin Spencer, Francis Gillen and Walter Edmund Roth, explicitly asserted Aboriginal nescience to contradict common views about male genital mutilation. The subject was a delicate one, since it involved an observation of the penises of Aboriginal individuals initiated in the second degree as adults ready for marriage. Unlike circumcision, which had its Judeo-Christian parallel, subincision [spelt sub-incision at the time] – i.e., the opening of the urethra, which all young males subjected to traditional ways had to undergo in a large part of the Australian continent – had the potential to arouse Freudian fears, morbid curiosity and dread within colonial circles dominated by a surplus of males at the bottom of the social ladder. The idea of ejaculating through an artificially opened mucous membrane in the lower part of the penis, which remained liable to bleed, was an inescapable topic of conversation, the prevailing views consisting in affirming that subincision was a deliberate measure of birth control. According to the colonial narrative, genital mutilation was done so that sperm would in most cases slip out of the vagina or fall to the ground during ejaculation, rather than fertilizing the woman. This was believed to be a matter of survival, as the Aborigines could not afford to bear many children. One can say that this narrative was related, conscious or unconsciously, to the prognosis or even the desire of Aboriginal extinction; but in this case ethnocide was on the side of the settlers without any proper ethnographic knowledge, not on the side of ethnographers like Spencer and Gillen, who evoked Aboriginal nescience to refute the colonial thesis:

“The Arunta natives have no idea as to the origin of the practice, and it seems almost useless to speculate upon it. (...) One thing is clear, and that is that at the present day, and as far back as their traditions go, the Arunta natives at least have no idea of [sub-incision] having been instituted with the idea of its preventing or even checking procreation. In the first place it does not do this. Every man without exception throughout the Central area, in all tribes in which the rite is practised, is sub-incised. (...) Added to this we have amongst the Arunta, Luritcha, and Ilpirra tribes, and probably also amongst others such as the Warramunga, the idea firmly held that the child is not the direct result of intercourse, that it may come without this, which merely, as it were, prepares the mother for the reception and birth also of an already-formed spirit child who inhabits one of the local totem centres. Time after time we have questioned them on this point, and always received the reply that the child was not the direct result of intercourse; so that in these tribes, equally with those dealt with by Mr. Roth, the practice of sub-incision cannot be attributed to the desire to check procreation by this means.” (1899: 263-265; see also Stirling, 1894, 34)

Van Gennep always sought information on matters relating to the sexual organs and sexual activities, not only by exploring obscure passages in the ethnographic literature, but also through “detailed treatises on sexual physiology and psychology”, which he recommended to his readers (Van Gennep, 1981 [1909]: 109). It is no coincidence that he was the translator of sexologist Havelock Ellis (1859–1939). It was difficult to reach solid conclusions about the ejaculation of a subincised man, but Van Gennep was convinced that subincision, while

affecting the rigidity of the erection somewhat, did not jeopardize the mechanics of copulation. Even more than Spencer and Gillen, it was Roth who attempted a careful observation of this delicate phenomena. Van Gennep, for whom Roth's publications were "to be placed above all others" (Van Gennep, 1905: x), applauded his bold sexual ethnography, namely the section entitled "Ethno-pornography" of his 1897 monograph *Ethnological Studies among the North-West-Central Queensland Aborigines*, which was preceded by a warning: "The following chapter is not suitable for perusal by the general lay reader" (Roth, 1897: 169). A similar warning applies to the following quotes (and fig. 4), albeit for current ethical reasons already referred to (see above). Roth studied the physiology of the subincised penis and the process of its penetrating the vagina. Complemented by explicit drawings, he described the mutilated sexual organs and the usual way in which Queensland Aborigines copulated:

"(...) the peculiar method of copulation in vogue throughout all these tribes does not prevent fertilisation, notwithstanding the mutilation of the male. The female lies on her back on the ground, while the male with open thighs sits on his heels close in front: he now pulls her towards him, and raising her buttocks drags them into the inner aspects of his own thighs, her legs clutching him round the flanks (Fig. 433), while he arranges with his hands the toilette of her perineum and the insertion of his penis. In this position the vaginal orifice, already enlarged by the general laceration at initiation, is actually immediately beneath and in close contact with the basal portion of the penis, and it is certainly therefore a matter of impossibility to conceive the semen as being discharged for the most part anywhere but into its proper quarter" (Roth, 1897: 179). [See "433" in fig. 4.]

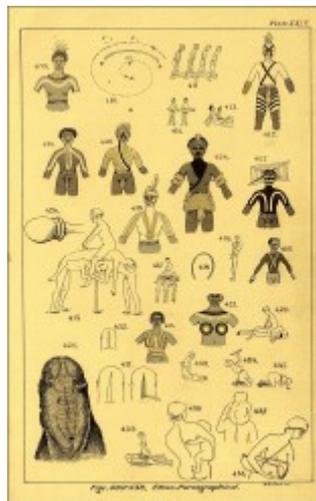


Fig. 4

"Ethno-pornographical", in W. E. Roth, *Ethnological Studies about the North-West-Central Queensland Aborigines*, 1897.

Following in the footsteps of the Australian ethnographers who refuted common ideas on subincision while confessing their inability to grasp the rationale for the "terrible rite", Van Gennep emphasized the independence of genital mutilation from procreation and even sexuality. In his famous magnum opus *Rites de passage* (1909), he wrote that it was purely an

irreversible marking of the body, for the aggregation of the individual to the adult males of his group. “[T]he human body has been treated as a simple piece of wood that has been carved and arranged according to one’s ideas”. Admittedly, the Australians had done this with “a real debauchery of imagination”, but their penises were mutilated in the same way as, for example, the nose or the ear. It was simply an organ which, by its histological constitution, could “undergo all kinds of treatment without damage to life or individual activity” (Van Gennep, 1981 [1909]: 108–109; my translation). The rite of passage associated with subincision was also a matter, Van Gennep added, of “breaking the link between the boy and his mother abruptly”, before moving on to the “positive part”, i.e., the transmission of the totemic legacy (*ibid.*: 112).

In 1912, Spencer and Gillen described the grief of the elders at the breakdown of their influence and predicted that all the sacred knowledge of the tribe would be lost as a result (Spencer, Gillen, 1912, I: 186–187; see Roth, 1897: 177–178). The colonial context was undermining traditional authority, but these transformations on an unprecedented scale, including the suppression of subincision, only accentuated the conservatism of the pre-colonial order in Central Australia, associated with, in Spencer’s phrasing, the “supreme power” of the old men (*in* Marett, Penniman, 1932: 92). [30] This vision of conservatism, itself deemed conservative, seems at first sight to Frazerian evolutionary excesses on the essential, deep time immobilism as a justification for nescience.

Van Gennep was clearly opposed to the idea that the Arunta, or any other Aboriginal group in the 19th century, were so frozen in time by the successive and unaltered reproduction of their own heritage as to allow a clear-cut access to a remote prehistory. And yet he firmly believed in the weight of tradition among Aborigines. This apparent contradiction reveals the originality of his anthropological thinking, in relation to Spencer and Gillen’s data. On the one hand, he admitted that generation after generation of young people were effectively under the yoke of the older men and could do no more than respect the customs of the group. On the other hand, he sustained that transformations occurred frequently, even today, under the eyes of the ethnographers. The mechanism of change in such a conservative environment was obviously the individual. Not the individual who wanted to flee from tradition or contradict it, but the one who evoked it to perfect it, to introduce nuances or new formulas. In a word, to change it. Van Gennep reproached Durkheim for explaining social changes by the “needs of society”, whereas the processes of ideation, just like the sanctioning of individual proposals, were properly historical, not purely sociological facts. “In reality, just as with us”, he wrote, “in the Australian tribes it is the individual who invents and proposes modifications, some of which are accepted after discussion, sometimes after trial, by the communities” (Van Gennep, 1905, xxv; Cf. Spencer, Gillen, 1899: 12). New ideas were always related to old ones, to the authority of pre-existing representations, which facilitated their acceptability and possible adoption. A careful analysis of the ethnographic literature enabled him to observe the surprising fact that initiation ceremonies, whose aim was precisely to preserve and transmit tradition, gave rise to discussions of this kind among participants who had already been initiated. By calculating the number of times these ceremonies could take

place over the course of a century, it was possible to admit that the instituted order, by dint of modifications here and there, could have “changed completely” in a more recent period of time than was imagined. (Van Gennep, 1905: xxxix) In short, conservatism in Australia was the very condition and natural context for change.

Conclusion

Despite their proximity on the issue of virgin birth, Van Gennep and Frazer had different positions on a crucial point. They both believed in Aboriginal ignorance of sexual reproduction, but they diverged on considering it particularly pristine. In a clarifying passage, Van Gennep wrote: “Mr. Frazer, having noticed that the Arunta are ignorant of the effects of sexual intercourse, thinks that ‘so astounding an ignorance of natural causation cannot but date from a past immeasurably remote’. (...) I cannot attribute to this ignorance, which is not so astounding, such an ancient date (1905: lxiii).” Van Gennep asserted the importance of anthropologists “determining as rigorously as possible within what limits documents of folk origin were scientifically usable (...)” (Van Gennep, 1909a: 184). With methodological caution, he never fell into the temptation of attributing too great an antiquity to ethnographic data and tried instead to introduce criteria for “assessing the duration of memory among the semi-civilised” (Van Gennep, 1909a: 183). He suggested a maximum of six generations or an average of 150 years for Australian societies (Van Gennep, 1905: xcv).

Moreover, Van Gennep knew only too well that the boundaries between Australian tribes were never rigid, either geographically or culturally. Contact and travel was part of their traditional way of life, so that Aboriginal individuals with new ideas might be foreigners or distant relatives (Van Gennep, 1905: xxxix-xl). Pre-colonial Aboriginal Australia was therefore understood by Van Gennep as a reality in motion, not necessarily in evolutionary terms, but more in a historical sense. The geographical extent of representations related to the maternal womb being fertilized by an ancestral spirit did not in any way suggest that they were of formidable antiquity, as there might be recent cases of distant borrowing “in a very short time”. (Van Gennep, 1905: xxxix-xl) It was clear to him that Arunta representations of foetal conception were part of broad circuits of similar or related beliefs. Arunta terms had their “equivalents” in other groups, such as (according to the spelling of the period) the Warramunga, the Wulmala, the Walpari, the Umbaia, the Worgaia, the Tjingilli, the Bibinga, the Gnanji, the Mara, the Anula, the Unmatjera, the Kaitish, the Ipirra, the Iliaura or the Urabunna, but gained specific characteristics in each case. [31]

In his dialogue with British Tylorian anthropologists, Van Gennep was able to take their assumptions about the evolution of Aboriginal societies as attempts to reconstruct their history. This is exactly what he did with Frazer’s theses, especially his third theory on the origins of totemism (1905), which attributed a pivotal importance to virgin birth. For Frazer to “strengthen his position”, Van Gennep suggested, he only had to abandon his ideas of primitiveness of the Arunta, whether relative or absolute, particularly regarding their views

on the mechanism of conception (Van Gennep, 1905: lxii; see Rosa, 2003: 246). Van Gennep then criticized the attempts to hierarchize the history of social institutions, for in order to assert the logical anteriority of one institution over another, “one is forced”, he wrote, “to establish a scale of values, which one still does by comparison with our own civilization”. Moreover, ‘in any system of classification of human groups according to their civilization, one must take into account the personal equation: one scholar finds such and such an institution superior, the other regards it as inferior”, whereas this was “impossible to declare” (Van Gennep, 1905: xxvii-xxviii). These remarks concerned the anteriority of matrilineal descent, a fundamental tenet for Sidney Hartland, who considered that prehistoric ignorance and “motherright” went together.

One might think that Van Gennep was closer to his declared opponent, Andrew Lang, than to his allies, Frazer and Hartland, in the sense that his idea of Arunta-type beliefs being idiosyncratic products might be comparable to Lang’s idea of aberrant evolution. The Arunta might have developed, as Lang sustained, a unique reincarnationist theory, but Van Gennep considered, unlike Lang, that ignorance of sexual reproduction was neither the cause nor the consequence thereof; as in all other cases, it was embedded in the belief system. When he spoke of “the belief of Australians in the possibility of a *lucina sine concubitu*”, Van Gennep was conflating the two terms of the equation – ignorance and belief – into one. Ignorance was always present in the form of belief, and belief implied a magico-religious biology amounting to nescience. The *kuruna* entering a woman’s womb as a pebble had been chiselled over the centuries by the transformative conservatism of the Arunta, which connected individual and collective action in ways echoing similar historical processes everywhere. “(...) [H]ow useless,” he concluded, “would be explanations of beliefs that are already valid only because they exist” (ibid., xlv).

On top of that, for Van Gennep the result of Arunta history was not aberrant, but common idiosyncrasy. Aboriginal ideas were comparable to those of peoples who had developed their own magico-religious biology. On the one hand, Van Gennep criticized the “open-ended” comparative method of Tylorian anthropologists and made an effort not to lose sight of the systems of which isolated elements were a part. When exploring the relation between beliefs and social institutions, he made no claim to generalize such inferences beyond the limits of a specific cultural area, which he called “civilisation area” or “cultural cycle”, echoing German diffusionism (see, for example, Van Gennep [1909]: 270) – as was the case of Australia. On the other hand, virgin birth was for him, despite its complex variations, an idea shared by peoples with no historical connection between them, present in most if not all of human history. He stated this view in 1904, in “*Lucina sine concubitu*”: “(...) [S]uch a belief is universal; it is what the Germans call a *Völkergedanke* (...)” (Van Gennep, [1904]: 14–15). He might have written *Elementargedanke* instead, for Adolf Bastian (1826–1905) employed this term when making abstraction of concrete cases. Whether a *lapsus linguae* or not, referring to virgin birth as a *Völkergedanke* encapsulated Van Gennep’s own mystery and charm as a distinctive, eclectic figure in the history of anthropology who had the audacity to keep, while transforming it, one of the most criticized tenets of evolutionary anthropology: the similar

content of beliefs coming from historically unrelated societies.

The theme of supernatural birth often elicits an overly critical view of disciplinary past. The question of Aboriginal nescience is considered an ideological product of the colonial era, and those who read the archives differently may be connoted with the past (Rosa, 2019). Van Gennep's writings on virgin birth may challenge the knowledge/power binomial because, more than any other scholar of his time, he insisted on the historically ordinary aspect of ignorance on sexual matters. From this point of view, Australian ignorance should not be seen as an ethnographic exception nor as a prehistoric relic. Pregnancy was not supernatural among them and natural elsewhere, but supernatural everywhere, whether it was associated with sex or not. Western science was a crucial point of reference for Van Gennep in that it justified the use of the term *ignorance*, not in the sense of practically all humankind being ignorant of the exact physiological facts of human fertilization, but rather in the sense that there was an encroachment of magico-religious ideas in world history, regarding the human body and particularly conception. Therefore, all supernatural births were concerned, including those of divine or heroic nature, like Jesus Christ's, and pseudo-scientific ones, like William Wollaston's or, for that matter, Charles-Auguste Petitpoids'.

Van Gennep dared to mingle ideas and intellectual traditions that our penchant for classification is more accustomed to dissociating. In January 1911, during a lecture given at the University of Brussels, he advised students never to lose sight of what made the strength of both ancient and exotic facts: "to be really the flesh of living men" (Van Gennep, 1911: 79-80). If we adapt this motto to the estranged relationship between today's practitioners and anthropology's ancestors, we may admit that in his reflections on virgin birth Van Gennep, an independent figure, perhaps saw things we have lost the capacity to see.

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[1] Due to the focus of this article on disciplinary history, I will retain the spelling of Spencer and Gillen for ethnonyms and vernacular vocabulary, while calling attention to the fact that some of the texts quoted use terms that may now be considered obsolete and inappropriate.

[2] I thank Anton Serdeczny for his comments on this article, a shorter version of which was previously released in French (Rosa, 2018).

[3] For a broader contextualization of Van Gennep's career, see Laurière, 2021.

[4] Van Gennep had in mind Durkheim's theses in "La Prohibition de l'inceste et ses origines" (1898), which explained exogamy through totemism as a religion focused on the sacredness of blood shared by humans and their animal ancestors. The sacredness of menstrual blood was at the roots of the prohibition of incest (see Rosa, 2003).

[5] Following in the footsteps of David Schneider (1918–1995), Carol Delaney (1986) further developed this argument by insisting that paternity is a cultural construct unrelated to the connexion between sexual intercourse and pregnancy.

[6] His critique of Frazer had begun in 1961 with "Golden Bough or Gilded Twig?".

[7] Later Spencer and Gillen would transliterate the term as *knanikilla*.

[8] Later referred to as *Alchera* since *Alcheringa* meant "of the *Alchera*".

[9] The publication of *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien* between 1907 and 1920 was to generate a battle between defenders and detractors of Spencer and Gillen's ethnographic authority. Van Gennep was among the first: "(...) the rumours that were circulating about the poor quality of the materials supplied by Spencer and Gillen have no basis in fact". (Van Gennep, 1908: 38).

[10] According to Strehlow, an ancestor could enter a woman to be reborn as a child, but it could only be reborn in this way once (*cit. in* Van Gennep, 1908: 38).

[11] As we shall see, Spencer and Gillen later introduced the term *ratappa* on their own initiative, to signify the child in the womb.

[12] Edmund Leach acknowledged that it was not empirically absurd to suppose the existence of human groups who were ignorant of fertilization, except that the Australians' obsession with kinship issues and the complexity of their systems made it highly improbable that they had not grasped the reproductive effects of copulation (Leach, 1966: 41).

[13] Precociousness, licentiousness, and infanticide as the only anti-conceptual method explained, according to Spencer and Gillen, why the Central Australian woman was "completely *passée*" at the age of twenty-five or, at most, thirty, while at forty she was "a veritable hag". (Spencer, Gillen, 1912: 196).

[14] The fact that coitus was a kind of "magic lubricant" for a large proportion of Australian Aborigines, was also attested, according to Van Gennep's analysis of the available literature, by the sexual use of women in ritual circumstances. He mentioned the common mode of integrating outsiders through sex, at least in the central region. The newcomers would take one or two women some distance from the camp and leave. "If the men of the group visited accepted the negotiation, they all had sex with the women. In short, this group sex was a pure 'magical adjuvant' in an 'act of union and identification'." (Van Gennep, 1981 [1909]: 53-54.)

[15] Wolfe affirms that Spencer was particularly predisposed to find ignorance of sexual reproduction among Central Australian Aborigines. His correspondence proves, however, that J.G. Frazer was urging him to look instead for pantomimes of copulation to aid in the multiplication of natural species (see Marett, Penniman, 1932: 18-19). It was ethnographic illustrations of *The Golden Bough* that were in question, not of E. S. Hartland's *The Legend of Perseus* (see below).

[16] It is not my purpose to reconstruct the colonial situation in Central Australia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but it contrasted with the regions of New South Wales and Victoria where massive European colonisation over the last century had decimated or expropriated entire populations. In Central Australia, there was variation in the degree of contact and interaction of the Arunta and other groups with the relatively small white community (Spencer, Gillen, 1912, I: 185) In 1894, at the time of the Horn expedition, only a limited number of local groups were in contact with the telegraph stations, the Lutheran mission in Hermannsburg and the few cattle farmers in the country. The settlers in this huge territory numbered a few dozen, yet the sub-protector of Aborigines in Alice Springs, Francis Gillen, had already had to step in to stop the homicides that one of the two mounted policemen was committing under the pretext of stopping Aboriginal cattle raids. These violent relations calmed down after Gillen's intervention (Stirling, 1896, 7-9; see Spencer, Gillen, 1912, I, 189-190) In 1896, Spencer and Gillen recorded the ritual performances of groups who had contact with the settlers and became friends of their sub-protector, but this does not necessarily mean their cultural reality had been greatly transformed under European influence. Arunta groups in direct contact with the whites went further away for a good part of the year and only a few individuals or families decided to stay. Light-skinned children were born in this context. However, Spencer had occasion to point out that the idea of attributing their light skin to the "white man's flour" did not last long. He claimed that the influence of the settlers on the Aborigines who lived permanently with them was very strong precisely in sexual matters (Spencer in Marett, Penniman, 1932: 158-159; see Austin-Broos 2009).

[17] Patrick Wolfe constructs a whole argument to explain Hartland's hesitation when faced with the new data (Wolfe, 1994: 177). This is not to understand the Victorian codes of intellectual modesty. Hartland was not being hesitant but emphasising the premonitory value of his own thesis.

[18] He also referred to the recent work of K. Langlow Parker (1856-1940).

[19] In a letter to Frazer (13/11/1911), Baldwin Spencer wrote that "all of Howitt's work in Victoria was done amongst the natives who had long been civilized and had lost their old beliefs" (in Marett, Penniman, 1932: 122).

[20] This is a somewhat surprising revelation: that Van Gennep had the intention – the dream, which never materialised – of writing a book entirely devoted to supernatural births. Despite ethnographic gaps for other parts of the world, he was attentive to examples from outside Australia, such as the Sinaugolo of New Guinea, for whom conception took place in the chest and only later the foetus descended to the belly. Or the idea of the Baganda of Uganda for whom the sperm resided in the calves of the man, hence the expression: "While I was still in my father's calves" (Van Gennep, 1908 [1904]: 158).

[21] Perhaps Lang was himself conditioned by a certain cultural overvaluation of the fertilizing role of the male progenitor, since he took those cases as an illustration of knowledge, not of ignorance. Van Gennep

did not say so explicitly, but he recalled that this kind of belief was operative at least in southern Europe.

[22] Under the title *Ébauche de la religion naturelle*.

[23] Before Van Gennep, the expression *Lucina sine concubitu* was used by the Comte de Charencey (1832-1916), a biblical degenerationist who sought parallels to Semitic ideas of virgin birth by way of cultural diffusion on a global scale. Hyacinthe de Charencey published *Le Fils de la Vierge* (The Virgin's Child) in 1879 and *Les Traditions relatives au Fils de la Vierge* (Traditions referring to the Virgin's Child) in 1881, but it was in 1894, in *Le Folklore dans les Deux Mondes*, that he used the expression *Lucina sine concubitu*.

[24] On the importance – and shortcomings – of metaphors in anthropological literature, particularly the use of Western folk models of paternity within the virgin birth debate, see Silva (2021).

[25] I refer to the second edition of *The Golden Bough* (1900) because the theory of the three stages was added then on an abstract level, qualitatively different from the rest of the work. Actually, the leitmotif of the *Golden Bough*, the killing of the god or rather of his human representative, implied a fusion of magical and religious principles, as well as animistic conceptions that were not intrinsically magical or religious in the Frazerian sense (See Rosa, 1997).

[26] Turmel's publisher, Émile Nourry (1870-1935), who was also Van Gennep's publisher and friend, took up the same ideas in his book *Les Vierges mères et les naissances miraculeuses* (The Virgin mothers and miraculous births), published in 1908 under the pseudonym Pierre Saintyves.

[27] A lack of perception of this shift in the original biblical meaning was the basis of the work of Hyacinthe de Charencey, for whom the idea of virgin mothers was part of the Semitic universe, and particularly of Judaism, from which it had spread throughout the world, even before Christianity. To be sure, the idea of supernatural birth, especially by divine intervention, was not absent in Judaism, in which, however, there was no mention of virgin women, but of women who were barren or too old to bear children.

[28] According to Van Gennep, supernatural births went up not two, but three generations of the human family of Jesus, judging by an old French poem according to which the mother of the Virgin “took birth in the heel of her father, because he had touched the heel of the knife with which he had just cut an apple” (Van Gennep, 1908 [1904]: 24).

[29] For Van Gennep, the matter was not closed. “Mariolatry’ has not yet completed its evolution”, he wrote. (1909b: 136.) From his point of view, the possibilities of interaction between individual and collective action were certainly not unlimited, so it was unlikely that the Church would go so far as to incorporate virgin birth into the dogma of Pius IX. As a scholarly sanction of popular feelings, the 1854 texts had emphasised the spiritual, not the physical aspect of Mary's immaculate conception. But the anonymous sensibility might still evolve in ways independent from higher theology.

[30] There is no evidence to suggest that Van Gennep visualised young Australian natives as rebels who could break away from tradition under colonial influence and despite the perversity of the colonial system. The ethnographies of his time might have provided him with clues to this problem, but the idea

never occurred to him to embrace the Aboriginal 'youth cause'. From this point of view, Australia was decidedly too far from Algeria. (On Van Gennep's Algerian fieldwork and writings, see Sibeud, 2004; and Pouillon, 2020).

[31] For example, the spirit-children of the totemic ancestors chose the women they wanted to enter very differently. Among the Arunta as well as the Kaitish, any fat woman who approached an *oknanikilla* was likely to be impregnated and, as a result, her child could have a totemic identity unrelated to that of the parents; but in other tribes, reincarnation was not random and ancestral spirits rejected foreign women or women whose husbands did not belong to the group, in relation with a matrilineal or a patrilineal totemic descent.