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Metaphor in Comparative Studies, Or, The Folklore of Anthropology: Frazer, Malinowski, Trobriand, and Us

Francisco Vaz da Silva

Abstract

This article looks at the nineteenth-century preconception that ‘primitives’ ignore fatherhood—how it crept into ethnographical reports, made its way into anthropological theory, and sparked debates for the best part of a century. The discussion looks at the influential work of James Frazer and Sidney Hartland—at how these authors relied on folk metaphors to reason about the ignorance of ‘primitives’—and exposes Bronislaw Malinowski’s place in that tradition. Beyond revisiting Trobriand ethnography, this essay argues that knowledge in anthropology and folkloristics is inherently metaphorical. It makes a case for heeding metaphors across cultures, including in scholarly models, as a tool for understanding the varieties of human thinking.

Introduction

Once upon a time, anthropologists thought that so-called savages were so dismally ignorant as to be nescient of physiological paternity. Up to the 1970s, the belief that savages are innocent of paternity popped up in passionate debates (see, for a late flare, Leach 1967; Spiro 1968). With the benefit of hindsight and a fair share of insight, Carol Delaney pointed out that in such debates anthropologists conceptualized paternity in the light of a ‘folk theory that has been dominant in the West for millennia’ (1986, 496). I take this insight as a timely reminder that metaphorical thinking is as rife among Western natives as it is among the more exotic sort. The cognitive research of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson has shown that our own ‘ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature’ (1981, 3). If so, it is arguably the job of folkloristics to examine critically the folk models endemic in our scholarship—after all, as Alan Dundes memorably put it, ‘among others, we are [the folk]!’ (1980, 19).

Valdimar Hafstein (2005) opened the way with a thoughtful examination of biological metaphors in folklore theory. On a different path, this essay focuses on the interface between anthropology and folkloristics at the turn of the twentieth century. It harks back to the writings of James G. Frazer, Edwin S. Hartland, and Bronislaw K.

Malinowski to examine the metaphorical framework of early constructions about ‘primitives’—to clarify how early anthropologists and folklorists allotted knowledge (to themselves) and ignorance (to others) according to Western metaphorical schemes. This essay also aims to provide a sense of how those Western metaphors translated into ethnographical ‘facts’, which eventually fed back into anthropological theory. Malinowski is a case in point. As he brought Frazerian thinking onto his novel Trobriand fieldwork, I argue, Malinowski’s reliance on folk metaphors cast his endeavour to ‘grasp the native’s point of view ... *his vision of his world*’ (Malinowski 1922, 25) in the rather drab mirror of Western common sense.

But saying that Malinowski’s reliance on Frazerian clichés warped his understanding of what he heard and saw in Trobriand is not the whole story. My broader point is that the study of metaphors is a powerful byway to implicit knowledge. Most importantly, it helps avoid the *traduttore, traditore* sort of problems inherent to comparative studies (see Schneider 1984, 3–4). For this particular point, I take inspiration from Claude Lévi-Strauss’s proposition that the problem of the gap between ‘us’ and ‘them’ might be overcome ‘on the plane of unconscious thinking’. That is because, as he put it, unconscious thinking ‘enables us to coincide with forms of activity which are both at once *ours* and *other*: which are the condition of all the forms of mental life of all men at all times’ (1987, 35–36). For instance, as Lévi-Strauss recognized in European folklore a symbolic pattern he had previously discovered in Amerindian myths, he invoked ‘universal analogies’ that are recognizable ‘no matter what one’s mother tongue may be’ (1964, 344). Such matching expressions, he clarifies elsewhere, ‘are the emanation, in popular language, of thoughts that draw their substance from the very roots of the mind’. In the ‘metaphorical process’, Lévi-Strauss sums up, the mind regresses to ‘the primitive apprehension of a global structure of signification—and *that* is an act of the understanding’ (1988, 192–95). The following discussion aims to clarify how focusing on metaphors helps make different cultural patterns commensurable *in their own terms*.

Metaphor in ‘Ignorance’ of Paternity

Nineteenth-century authors mostly reasoned in evolutionary terms. In anthropology, this mindset entailed imagining a primitive condition bereft of everything Western civilization took for granted. The hallmarks of civilization being the territorial state, the monogamous family, and private property, the hypothetical primitive condition would be—as Adam Kuper (2005, 11) put it—‘nomadic, ordered by blood ties, sexually promiscuous and communist’. Kuper adds that this mirror-image of ourselves ‘is best described as a myth’ (vii), extant in myriad variations.

James George Frazer (1854–1941) built a variant of that myth that emphasises the muddled thinking of so-called primitives. Among the Australian aborigines, ‘the rudest savages as to whom we possess accurate information, magic is universally practiced’, he declared—magic being ‘nothing but a mistaken application of the very simplest and most elementary processes of the mind’ (Frazer 1920, 233–34). To Frazer’s mind, the savage mode of thought is spurious *by definition*—as he put it, ‘were [magic] ever to become true and fruitful, it would no longer be magic but science’ (222). Thus, Frazer describes the massive ethnographic record he compiled in *The Golden Bough* (1906–1915) as ‘the melancholy record of human error and folly’ (1913, 304). Specifically, Frazer offers ‘a picture ... of ... primitive man all over the world ... groping and stumbling through the mists of ignorance and superstition in the eternal search after goodness and truth’ (1976, v).

The tenet that primitives are ignorant draws on the analogical notion that aboriginal peoples are to civilized elites as children are to adults. The underlying rationale is that primitives (like children) are but starting a path to knowledge that civilized folk (like adults) have all but successfully completed. One entailment of presuming primitive ignorance is the expectation that people in lower societies have not attained to the knowledge of physical paternity as yet. It fell to Hartland, a gifted folklorist, to articulate this rather vague preconception into a full-fledged doctrine. In a wide-ranging comparative study on supernatural births, *The Legend of Perseus* (1894–96), Hartland studied worldwide stories of supernatural births from virgins (parthenogenesis) along with the widespread uses of magical charms to promote conception. The common thread to such stories and practices is the assumption that children are not conceived from ‘the semen received in the act of coition’ (1894, 148). This ‘attitude of mind’, Hartland reckons, must have ‘sprung either from a kind of promiscuity wherein the true father could not have been ascertained, or from an imperfect recognition of the great natural fact of fatherhood’—most likely, from both factors (181).

In a follow-up study, *Primitive Paternity* (1909–10), Hartland elaborated his rationale for the ignorance-of-fatherhood axiom. The intellectual faculties of primitive man, he fancied, are ‘dormant, like a bud before it has unfolded’. The primitive is credulous ‘as a child’, his knowledge ‘severely limited; his range of ideas is small’ (1909, 256). Given that sexual intercourse often does not yield pregnancy, which, moreover, ‘would not be visible for weeks or months after the act which produced it’, attention ‘would not be early or easily

fastened upon the procreative process'. Any number of events, Hartland presumes, 'might have taken place in the interval which would be liable to be credited with the result by one wholly ignorant of natural laws'. And then, predictably, 'the partially developed reason of primitive man would be caught in the snare of the fallacy *post hoc ergo propter hoc*'. Such a common blunder of archaic thought, Hartland reasons, 'once germinated would be very difficult to uproot from the uncultivated soil' (1910, 251–52). Hence, 'for generations and æons the truth that a child is only born in consequence of an act of sexual union ... was not realised by mankind'. Even in 1910, Hartland adds, there are peoples 'among whom it is unknown' (250).

Notice Hartland's use of the seed-and-soil metaphor to link so-called primitives and sexual ignorance. Frazer, in *Totemism and Exogamy* (also published in 1910), completes and illuminates for us this metaphorical line of thinking. The context is Frazer's formulation of his third (and last) theory of totemism. Frazer infers from Australian beliefs—which, he assumes, 'are but one remove from absolutely primitive totemism' (1910, 4: 58)—that 'the ultimate source of totemism is a savage ignorance of the physical process by which men and animals reproduce their kinds; in particular it is an ignorance of the part played by the male in the generation of offspring' (61). Frazer's rationale for this theory is as follows:

How could the infantine intelligence of the primitive savage perceive that the child which comes forth from the womb is the fruit of the seed which was sowed there nine long months before? He is ignorant, as we know from the example of the Australian aborigines, of the simple truth that a seed sowed in the earth will spring up and bear fruit. How then could he infer that children are the result of a similar process? His ignorance is therefore a natural and necessary phase in the intellectual development of our race. (1910, 4: 61–62)

In this quite remarkable line of reasoning, Frazer uses the metaphor of the seed cast into the earth to explain paternity; then, he declares that Australian aborigines ignore that seeds yield plants; hence, he concludes, savages could not possibly know that human 'seed' bears children. That this line of thought is self-referential deserves to be underlined. The supposed savage ignorance of paternity is, in fact, ignorance of the particular metaphor Frazer uses for paternity. This metaphor, as Delaney pointed out, underlines a longstanding folk model of paternity in the West.

Also notice that Hartland uses the seed metaphor for the ‘sprouting’ of an idea—or, rather, of a blunder—in the ‘uncultivated’ soil of aboriginal minds. The point here is that Hartland, like Frazer, is in thrall to the Western habit of metaphorically linking paternity and ideas. We still do it, admittedly, whenever we call a man’s book his ‘brain child’, deem an influential idea ‘seminal’, or name an academic setting for planting ideas on each other’s minds a ‘seminar’. The very notion of sexual ‘conception’, which we use on a daily basis, assumes that the semen-ejaculating male has ‘an idea in the female body’ (Laqueur 1992, 35).

I would stress this point: early anthropologists thought about paternity in terms of a seed-and-soil metaphor of paternity, and they faulted ‘savages’ for being ignorant of that particular folk model of procreation. What is more, anthropologists reasoned along the lines of a metaphor linking knowledge and procreation even as they posited the aboriginal ignorance of procreation. At the core of anthropologists’ beliefs about savage beliefs we find a self-referential hall of mirrors.

Self-Referential Ethnography

That hall of mirrors encompasses ethnographical ‘fact’. Early on, Frazer’s metaphorical musings took the status of hard facts thanks to a Frazer-inspired fieldwork team in Central Australia:

[Baldwin] Spencer was a trained naturalist, while [Frank] Gillen was a man of very little education, and Gillen’s field research was completely subordinated to Spencer’s ideas. ‘Do please let me have a list of questions by each mail’, he would write to Spencer. ‘I must have the guidance of your scientifically trained mind to work or I shall accomplish very little’. Spencer confirmed this mode of operation in a letter to Frazer. ‘I send him up endless questions and things to find out, and by mutual agreement he reads no one else’s work so as to keep him quite unprejudiced in the way of theories’. Without guidance, a fieldworker might simply miss what was of importance. That was how Spencer explained [William] Howitt’s failure [one decade earlier] to report on the religious aspects of totemism. (Kuper 1980, 19)

The theoretical guidance Spencer mentions was mostly by Frazer, toward whom Spencer and Gillen (1899, x) acknowledge their ‘deep sense’ of obligation. Almost thirty years later, Spencer dedicated the updated monograph to Frazer, ‘our master’ (Spencer and Gillen 1927,

v). Frazer, on his side, hails ‘a new era’ opened by Spencer and Gillen’s ethnography (1910, 1: 175), and he gushes about ‘the flood of light’ their work threw on the ‘beginning of totemism’. Lying full within this ‘radiant circle’, Frazer says, was the ‘scarlet thread’ that eventually led him to ‘the heart of the labyrinth’ (1910, 4: 73–74)—a byword for Frazer’s third, so-called conceptional, theory of totemism.

The scarlet thread provided by Spencer and Gillen is the Central Australian ‘theory’ that spirit children make their way into women from certain trees, water spots, or other ‘natural features at which the spirits of the dead are waiting to be born again’. Underlying this native tenet, Frazer states, is ‘a belief that conception can take place without cohabitation’. From this ‘belief’, Frazer feels free to infer ‘a savage ignorance of the physical process by which men and animals reproduce their kinds; in particular an ignorance of the part played by the male in the generation of offspring’ (1910, 4: 60–61). Frazer’s conceptional theory of totemism, in a nutshell, is the hunch that the ‘simple idea, the primitive superstition at the heart of totemism’ is ‘a primitive theory of conception’ based on the ignorance of physiological paternity (57).

To be clear: Frazer’s notion that conception can supposedly take place without cohabitation accords with Spencer and Gillen’s data. The interesting point is that Spencer and Gillen frame the issue according to the Frazerian credo:

[W]e 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. (Spencer and Gillen 1899, 265)

Now, saying that the child is not the direct result of intercourse, that intercourse prepares the mother for conception, is one thing. But saying that the child may come without intercourse is quite another matter. Spencer and Gillen settled for the rather iffy assertion that the sexual act is preparatory—yet, somehow, not needed—for pregnancy. That this iffiness comes from casting native ideas in Frazerian terms is confirmed by the fact that an observer not beholden to Frazer’s views plainly stated that the natives link sex with

procreation. Carl Strehlow, a German Lutheran missionary working in the same area, reports that,

according to the Aranda view, and this also applies to Loritja, sexual intercourse puts the woman's uterus into the condition of being able to receive a *ratapa*; the uterus must be prepared for this, without previous coitus is the ... uterus closed. (Leonhardi 1910, xi)

It is reassuring that all fieldworkers saw eye to eye on fundamentals. Strehlow agrees with Spencer and Gillen on the local tenet that babies are the result of *ratapa* entering women. Like Spencer and Gillen, Strehlow did hear native statements to the effect that sex is for pleasure, not for procreation. But, unlike Spencer and Gillen, Strehlow felt free to note that dogma—not ignorance—is at stake:

By the way, the old men know, as I am assured, that cohabitation is to be regarded as a reason for the child conception, but they say nothing to the young men and women. It is certain that both Aranda and Loritja know the connection between mating and offspring in the animals, about which the children are already enlightened. (Strehlow 1908, 52 n.7)

Moreover, we learn from Theodor Strehlow (Carl's son, and an ethnographer in his own right) that the native denials of the father's role in procreation were linked to special social occasions. Such denials 'used to be made in their most sweeping form only in the presence of the women, the children, and the younger men, and any *inquisitive white outsiders*', he specifies (cited in Scheffler 1978, 11). The last words are crucial. Spencer and Gillen, as well as Carl and Theodor Strehlow, were all treated to such sweeping statements of native dogma. The point is that Spencer and Gillen chose to address the Aranda dogma according to Frazer's axiom of native ignorance; whereas Carl Strehlow—hailing from the non-evolutionist German tradition (see Kenny 2013)—assumed that 'it is not primitive ignorance that underlies the conceptualism of the Central Australian peoples; rather, the doctrines of totemic ancestors, of their transformation into trees, rocks and *tjurunga*, and of the *ratapa*, have as a consequence generated these artificial constructions' (Leonhardi 1910, xi).

That a Frazer-free witness would cast doubt on a crucial point of doctrine was awkward, and swift action was taken. In response to a letter dated 1908 from Spencer, who sneered at the credibility of a missionary who presumed to investigate the natives' 'sacred beliefs and

customs', Frazer pronounced that Strehlow's sources 'are deeply tainted'. Frazer added that it would be impossible for him, who had 'no first-hand knowledge of these tribes, to filter the native liquid clear of its alien sediment' (1910, 1: 186 n.2). Thus, he vowed to ignore Strehlow's contribution.¹ As ever, heeding the metaphorical strain helps understand Frazer's thinking. Having rejected 'tainted' reports, he keeps to data 'filtered' according to his own specifications. Therefore, he gets to work with facts built from the theory that will bear on the facts.

Malinowski and the Master

Frazer and his sponsored ethnography pulled a worthy successor, Bronislaw Malinowski, into anthropology. Malinowski's sister reports a surviving notebook of their mother in which 'she translated, obviously for Bronio, brief excerpts from *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* by Spencer and Gillen and from *The Golden Bough*' (Wayne 1985, 532). Malinowski himself, in his 1925 lecture in honour of Frazer, claims that as he first read *The Golden Bough* as a student he realized 'that anthropology, as presented by Sir James Frazer, is a great science'. Thereafter, Malinowski declares, he became 'bound to the service of Frazerian anthropology' (Malinowski 1948, 72).

Much to his credit, Malinowski in an early review of *Totemism and Exogamy* published in Polish in the journal *Lud* (1911–13) leveled strong criticism at Frazer's method and conclusions. He found it 'regrettable' that Frazer would ignore Strehlow (Thornton and Skalniak 2006, 128), denounced the Scottish anthropologist's habit of deploying general theories 'solely on the basis of facts from central Australia' (139), and took issue with Frazer's habit of using 'concepts drawn from purely hypothetical ... personal assumptions and dogmas' (135). This early critique of Frazer displays Malinowski's lifelong commitment to the empirical study of institutions and their functions in cultures.

Yet, this early essay also shows the common ground between the young pupil and the old master. That long-term agreement hinges on the point that, as Malinowski himself puts it, the 'primitive mind' is not 'capable of any precise and defined concepts'. The crucial Frazerian dogma reverberates in Malinowski, who asserts that the Australian aborigines display a 'mystic, nebulous way of thinking'. Their 'faith in a supernatural incarnation is extremely deeply rooted', and it 'entirely conceals from them their realisation of the natural process of reproduction, and the causal connection between intercourse and

conception is completely unknown to them'. Malinowski adds that the existence of peoples who ignore physiological paternity is 'an extremely important fact for ethnology'. Such ideas, he thinks, 'are bound to exert a fundamental influence on a number of social institutions' (Thornton and Skalník 2006, 129–31). This sentence prefigures the particular leitmotiv in Malinowski's ethnography that I propose to address.

Malinowski's first book on Trobriand ethnography, featuring a Frazerian title, was prefaced by Frazer. The older anthropologist saw in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* 'fresh proof of the extraordinary strength and tenacity of the hold which this world-wide delusion [magic] has had, and still has, upon the human mind' (Frazer 1922, xiv). Malinowski declared himself especially pleased with this preface because his 'first love for ethnology is associated with the reading of the "Golden Bough", then in its second edition' (1922, xviii). In the following year, he published in *Nature* a glowing review of the abridged version of *The Golden Bough*. In the review, Malinowski heaped praise on Frazer's 'genius in understanding ... the nature of primitive man, such as we see him represented by the peasant and the savage'. He argued that Frazer presents theories 'far ahead of the available evidence', which foreshadow empirical discoveries, as is the wont of science. Notably, Frazer's recognition of the 'extreme importance' of the ignorance of paternity has been confirmed by Malinowski's own finding that such ignorance 'is of extreme importance in shaping the matrilineal ideas and institutions of the natives'. Regarding magic, Malinowski confirms that in his fieldwork he found himself 'at once in the thick of a social and psychological situation such as is postulated by the *Golden Bough*'. The 'empirical fecundity' of *The Golden Bough*, Malinowski intimates, hinges on its 'intimate understanding of savage modes of thought and behaviour'—Frazer's book 'shows us primitive man as he really is' (1923, 559–61).

In the same vein, Malinowski in his 1925 lecture in honour of Frazer claimed that the view of myth Malinowski brought in from 'open-air anthropology' really belongs to 'the "Master"' (1948, 73). As he put it, *The Golden Bough* 'contains the theory of the ritual and sociological function of myth, to which I have been able to make but a small contribution, in that I could test, prove, and document [it] in my fieldwork' (123). Malinowski in this lecture made the point that his proffered lesson from fieldwork was already written in *The Golden Bough*, and what notions he ascribes to the 'contemporary savage' stem from Frazer's musings (73).

I grant that this is not the standard view on the issue. George Stocking, for instance, noted that from a literary viewpoint 'Malinowski's anthropology may be regarded as a seedling of the *Golden Bough* ... But from a more general methodological and theoretical viewpoint, the differences are clear enough' (Stocking 1983, 94). Some differences are, indeed, clear enough. But, as a subsequent fieldworker in Trobriand put it bluntly, a number of Malinowski's 'ethnographic errors and/or misinterpretations ... center around his hypothesis that Trobriand social organization is based in native ignorance of the facts of physiological paternity' (Montague 1979, 96–97). My own point is that Malinowski's ethnography stems from the *Golden Bough* in the fundamental premises of what a savage is and what sort of things an anthropologist might say about it. It is a matter of anthropological paradigm, not merely a question of style. As Clifford Geertz once put the issue at stake:

Know what [the anthropologist] thinks a savage is and you have the key to his work. You know what he thinks he himself is and, knowing what he thinks he himself is, you know in general what sort of thing he is going to say about whatever tribe he happens to be studying. (Geertz 1973, 346)

What Malinowski thinks a savage is has persisted remarkably unaltered in spite of fieldwork. Before Malinowski ever met a 'savage', he claimed that the Australian natives' 'totemic beliefs and theories of conception prevent the aboriginal mind from forming the idea of physiological paternity' (and 'even probably weaken the social importance of maternity'). Certainly, 'there is no room for any ideas of physiological paternity' (Malinowski 1913, 209). The tune remains unchanged after his fieldwork. On Trobriand ideas he reports, 'the belief in reincarnation, and the views about a spirit child being inserted into, or entering, the womb of the mother, exclude any knowledge of the physiological process of impregnation' (1916, 406). A decade later, in his main study on the subject, Malinowski repeats that in the native dogma of spirit reincarnation 'there is no room for any sort of physical paternity' and rejects the notion that the natives might be 'more or less aware' of physiological fatherhood (1929, 179–80). Even as he issued an ambivalent 'Evolutionist's Recantation' in 1932, Malinowski kept saying that his old tenet is 'plausible', and the related evolutionary assumption is 'unimpeachable' (1932, xxii).

If anything, Malinowski's view hardened over time. Consider the metaphors he used to express his tenet. In the 1911 review of Frazer, he argued that the native's mystic, nebulous

way of thinking *conceals* from them their realization of the natural process of reproduction. Here Malinowski reasons along the lines of an old metaphor—knowing is seeing—that entails representing ignorance as a visual obstacle—a veil, or a cloud—and new knowledge as a dis-covery (see Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 238–40). Incidentally, to say that the natives’ mysticism ‘conceals’ from them whatever they might know about sex grants the possibility of native knowledge. But that allowance changes in the 1913 book on Australian aborigines. As the grip of Frazerian orthodoxy hardens, Malinowski swaps metaphors. Henceforth, he states that the native tenets *prevent* positive knowledge because they leave *no room* for any ideas of physiological paternity. In this new metaphorical line, a conceptual system is a container and representations are contents (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 31–32). The logic of this metaphor is exclusionary. Because a container has limited space, abundance of one sort of contents excludes other sorts. Given the Frazerian dual framework (belief versus knowledge, magic versus science), the container metaphor entails that an abundance of metaphysical beliefs leaves ‘no room for’—excludes, prevents—positive knowledge. Ergo, Malinowski states, the ‘broad assertion that the natives are entirely ignorant of the existence of physiological impregnation may be laid down quite safely and correctly’ (1916, 406). Take good note that this is, on Malinowski’s part, a metaphorical inference rather than a statement of fact. The logic of his argument is of the analogical sort—a timely reminder that anthropologists resort to symbolic thinking just as other natives do.

Frazer in Trobriand 1

Malinowski made his first fieldwork contribution to Frazerian ethnography in ‘Baloma: The Spirits of the Dead in the Trobriand Islands’ (1916). In the footsteps of Spencer and Gillen, he found that Trobriand natives asked about the origin of children would answer: ‘the *baloma* gave it’. To his credit, Malinowski grants that the issue is ‘at times complicated in an extremely puzzling manner by some hints about copulation’ (1916, 407). He even recognizes that ‘the physiological process and the part played by the *baloma* could perfectly well be known to exist side by side’. But ever the Frazerian apostle, Malinowski aims to establish that ‘we do not deal with a positive state of mind, with a dogma leading to practices, rites, or customs, but merely with a negative item, the absence of knowledge’ (416).

It is Malinowski's explicit intention in 'Baloma' to validate Hartland's hypothesis of a 'non-recognition in early times of the physical relation between father and child'. Malinowski asserts that Spencer and Gillen's 'discoveries' had 'brilliantly confirmed [Hartland's] views', and he notes that Frazer had 'given the support of his illustrious opinion to the view that ignorance of physical fatherhood was universal among early mankind' (1916, 414 n.1). The novelty of Malinowski's contribution, in his own mind, is to find the ignorance of paternity among a relatively evolved people. This discovery suggests that the Frazerian nescience of paternity 'is a condition lasting right into much higher states of development than it would have seemed possible to assume on the basis of the Australian material only' (418). In short, Malinowski presumes to offer empirical data that can expand the time scale of primitive ignorance—a worthy service to Frazerian anthropology.

Again, Malinowski had started his career in Frazerian anthropology before ever setting foot in the antipodes. Back in 1913, he had attempted to weaken the impact of Strehlow's dissension from Spencer and Gillen. In that discussion Malinowski acknowledged two thorny questions. First, he allowed, there is 'undoubtedly some difficulty' in 'the fact that the natives apparently know the real process of propagation in the case of animals'. Second, he granted, the notion that sexual intercourse prepares the mother for the reception of a spirit-child might 'create some connection between copulation and pregnancy, and so a bridge for the formation of ideas of paternity' (1913, 211). Malinowski proceeded to explain away both problems with verve and panache—but they came back to haunt him in his own fieldwork.

In Trobriand, Malinowski found himself repeatedly 'puzzled by the assertion that cohabitation is also the cause of the advent of children, an assertion which ran parallel, so to speak, with the fundamental view that the *baloma* [ancestor spirit], or reincarnating *waiwaia* [spirit child], are the real cause'. After he found that 'a girl of very loose conduct would be more likely to have a child, and ... a girl ... who had never had intercourse ... could have no child', Malinowski felt that the foundations of his 'construction ... seemed threatened with total collapse'. His quandary came to a head after he encouraged the natives to 'compare animals with men, asking whether there is also anything like a *baloma* bringing the small pigs to their mother'. Eventually, an informant answered: 'they copulate, copulate, presently the female will give birth'. As Malinowski granted, 'here

copulation appears to be the *u'ula* [foundation, cause] of pregnancy'. Now he found himself 'in one of the desperate blind alleys ... when one comes to suspect that the natives are untrustworthy ... or that one has to do with two sets of information, one of them distorted by white man's influence' (1916, 411). Predictably, he assigns any possible knowledge of paternity to the influence of white people.

How Malinowski proceeds to explain away such issues is quite typical. Regarding the native association between sex and conception, he comes up with an 'essential' distinction 'between the idea of the mechanical action of intercourse, which covers all the natives know about the natural conditions for pregnancy, and the knowledge of impregnation ... of which the natives have not even the lightest glimpse' (1916, 413). In this view, the reason why a virgin cannot conceive is simply that her vagina must be mechanically opened before a spirit-child can enter her. Unfortunately, the explanation founders in light of Malinowski's own information that the prevalent belief regarding reincarnating *waiwaia* is that they enter women 'through the head'—the belief of vaginal entry being 'much less authoritative' (1932, 148–49). Why, one may ask, would it be indispensable to open a passage that is actually optional for incoming spirits?

Concerning the native knowledge that copulating pigs bring about impregnation, Malinowski states:

In the case of animals, the whole problem about reincarnation and about the formation of new life is simply ignored. The physiological aspect, on the other hand, is well known. Thus when you ask about the animals, you get the answer that it is necessary that the physiological conditions should exist, but the other side, the real problem of how life is created in the womb, is simply ignored. (Malinowski 1916, 413)

This fascinating line of reasoning, true to the Frazerian *habitus*, manages to turn the natives' knowledge into a form of ignorance. The natives are charged with ignoring their own metaphysics, focusing instead on physiology—all of which Malinowski might approvingly call positivism if only the natives were Europeans.

In a second attempt, Malinowski refined his explaining away: the native knowledge of the efficacy of pigs' copulation 'simply means that vaginal dilation is as necessary in animals as in human beings'. Unfortunately, he also noted that the *baloma* explanation of pregnancy does not apply to animals: 'In man, spirits are the cause of pregnancy, in

animals—it just happens’ (1932, 163–64). Which, again, raises the question we met regarding people: why would vaginal dilation be necessary if not for incoming spirits?

Frazer in Trobriand 2

In *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* (1929), Malinowski endeavoured to set out the ‘Baloma’ argument in the broader context of Trobriand culture. Now he developed his old assertion that the ignorance of paternity exerts a fundamental influence on social institutions.

Put in a nutshell, Malinowski made the point that in Trobriand the ignorance of paternity befits ‘a matrilineal society, in which descent, kinship, and every social relationship are reckoned through the mother only’ (1932, 2). Maternal kin, he proceeds to explain, ‘form a closely knit group, bound by an identity of feelings, of interests, and of flesh’. The ‘idea that it is solely and exclusively the mother who builds up the child’s body, the man in no way contributing to its formation, is the most important factor in the legal system of the Trobrianders’. The natives say that the mother ‘makes the child out of her blood’, she ‘feeds the infant in her body’ (3)—‘the blood helps to build the body of the child ... nourishes it’ (149)— and then ‘she feeds it with her milk’. Because brothers and sisters come out of the same mother, they are ‘of the same flesh’ (3). Blood makes flesh, then, and matrilineal kin share blood and flesh. Correlatively, Malinowski maintains that the native notion of *tama* expresses the ‘exclusively social’ notion of fatherhood (4). From a child’s point of view, *tama* simply expresses ‘husband of my mother’ (5). The ‘father, *tama*, not regarded as of the same bodily substance, stands, nevertheless, in a close emotional, legal, and economic relation to the child’ (436). Each *tama*, Malinowski specifies, repays his wife’s sexual services ‘by all he gives to the children in love, care, and goods’ (270).

It is part of the enduring value of this book that it reports data that look decidedly anomalous. One such instance is ‘the deep, personal attachment which a father feels for his children’ (1932, 13). It runs so deep, in fact, that Malinowski explains the canonical form of arranged marriages (between a man’s son and his sister’s daughter) as a procedure that allows sons to acquire by marriage what their fathers cannot grant them through inheritance. This procedure, Malinowski explains, is part of a ‘compromise between father-love and matriliney’ (81). Which raises an obvious question: Why would *tama* be so persistently partial to their charges that ‘a compromise between the two principles of

matriliny and paternal influence' (177) would be necessary? Why, indeed, would such pervasive father love and paternal influence even exist?

The problem gets thornier in light of deep-seated native ideas involving physical inheritance. As Malinowski puts it,

In a matrilineal society, such as the Trobriands, where all maternal relatives are considered to be of the 'same body', and the father to be a 'stranger', we would have no doubt in anticipating that facial and bodily similarity would be traced in the mother's family alone. The contrary is the case, however, and this is affirmed with extremely strong social emphasis. Not only is it a household dogma, so to speak, that a child never resembles its mother, or any of its brothers and sisters, or any of its maternal kinsmen, but it is extremely bad form and a great offence to hint at any such similarity. To resemble one's father, on the other hand, is the natural, right, and proper thing for a man or woman to do. (1932, 173-74)

Given his premises, Malinowski cannot make sense of the twin social dogmas that (i) children naturally resemble the purely social father, and (ii) are not supposed to resemble their consubstantial maternal kin. True to Frazerian form, Malinowski blasts these native tenets as 'savage indeed, so lop-sided, distorted, and quaint' do they appear (1932, 173).

Then he breaks into metaphorical justification:

On the apparently unpropitious soil of strict matriliney, with its denial of any paternal bond through procreation and its declaration of the father's extraneousness to progeny, there spring up certain beliefs, ideas, and customary rules, which actually smuggle extreme patrilineal principles into the stronghold of mother-right'. (1932, 173)

Never mind that the ideas of lowly savage muddle-headedness and of quasi-civilized 'extreme patrilineal principles' hardly fit together.ⁱⁱ Instead, notice that the 'unpropitious soil' of matriliney where patrilineal principles 'spring up' recalls Hartland's trope of the sprouting of an idea in the 'uncultivated' soil of the aboriginal mind—a timely reminder that this monograph abides in the conceptual world of Hartland and Frazer.

Problem-Solving: Blood and Bones

Granted that the Frazerian template falls short of explaining why children supposedly resemble their *tama*, but not their maternal kin, it is only fair to acknowledge that Malinowski offers useful clues.

He remarks that, given the reincarnation tenet and the implication that ‘the new life ... begins with death’, it is appropriate to start with death when considering conception (Malinowski 1932, 145). It is the case, indeed, that death ceremonies show the same sharp difference between maternal kin and the father’s side as occurs regarding procreation. Just as children supposedly resemble their non-biological father, so after death it is expected of them—‘the non-kinsmen of the dead man, the people not actually bereaved’—to carry on the mortuary tasks and conspicuously express their grief. Maternal kin are not supposed to resemble one another, and at death ceremonies the maternal kin are passive, ‘behaving as if nothing had happened’ (129). I ask: might explaining why children are active at their *tama*’s burial help explain why they supposedly resemble him? Would making sense of why the maternal kin keep aloof at burials shed some light on why they should not resemble one another?

The reason why matrilineal kin must remain passive at burials is fortunately clear to Malinowski. Since they share blood and flesh, they are like one single body, he explains, and the dead person is to them like ‘a branch lopped from a tree’. Therefore, the ‘pernicious influences from the body would attack them and cause their disease and death’ (1932, 128). By the same token, because a man’s wife and children do not share his blood and flesh, they can handle the corpse. In particular, the sons’ duties include painful acts ‘of piety’ such as the ‘excision of the bones and their subsequent use as relics’. The act of detaching the bones from the putrefying corpse, Malinowski says, is ‘a heavy, repugnant, and disgusting duty’. While performing this task, the sons ‘are expected by custom to curb and conceal their disgust, and to suck some of the decaying matter when they are cleaning the bones’ (133). In contrast, the maternal kin are barred from any contact with the bones, in particular with those ‘still wet with the dead man’s bodily juices’. Eventually, after a few years, the bones ‘carefully wrapped in dry leaves’ are handed over to the maternal kin of the deceased. Then, finally, the bones are deposited ‘on rocky shelves overlooking the sea’ (134).

In short, burial customs uphold the same division between maternal kin and the father's side that occurs in native ideas on procreation. Malinowski did show that the passivity of matrilineal kin at burials finds an explanation in procreation ideas—but he neglected to look at the active role of children from the same perspective. Now, doing so reveals bones conspicuously linking fathers and children. My point is: Malinowski's statement that the child is of the same 'substance' (flesh and blood) as its mother does not warrant his claim that 'between the father and the child there is no bond of physical union whatsoever' (1932, 3). Whereas conception beliefs show that flesh and blood link mothers and children, burial ceremonies suggest that bones connect fathers and children.

To test this hypothesis, I ask: Would the bones clue help explain the supposed resemblance between fathers and children? The answer is complex. Consider Malinowski's discussion of 'the inconsistency' between 'the social doctrine concerning the influence of the father over the physique of the child' and the matrilineal system:

When questioned they will say: 'Yes, maternal kinsmen are the same flesh, but similar faces they have not'. When you inquire again why it is that people resemble their father, who is a stranger and has nothing to do with the formation of their body, they have a stereotyped answer: 'It coagulates the face of the child; for always he lies with her, they sit together'. The expression *kuli*, to coagulate, to mould, was used over and over again in the answers which I received. (1932, 176)

Malinowski, as might be expected, interprets this stereotyped answer in terms of the social father's nurturing influence in making 'the child as it is' (1932, 176). Even so, he must have been aware that something else was at play. In his translation of the native statement, 'he'—the husband—is distinct from 'it': the agent that coagulates the face of the child. The inescapable inference is that 'it' is the emission of 'he' who lies with the mother—and 'it' coagulates the face of the child.

This is, then, the matter of the facts. We grasp what Trobrianders kept trying to explain to Malinowski—why, in their view, children will naturally resemble the father. Sons and daughters will resemble their father for the good reason that his emission moulded their faces. *Kuli*, 'to coagulate', is the process of lumping shapeless womb blood into a formed embryo. So, granted that the mother bequeaths her substance to the child, the

father grants form to that substance. The crucial point is that the principle of consubstantiality on the mother's side meets with a principle of form on the father's side.

Promisingly, this point also clarifies why maternal kin should not resemble one another. Given the assumption that fathers shape embryos, any similarity between matrilineal kin would imply that the father is a maternal kinsman. This is why any statement of similarity between maternal kinsman 'can only be made to insult a man' (1932, 175). Malinowski adds:

It is, in fact, a technical phrase in serious bad language to say *migim lumuta*, 'Thy face thy sister's', which, by the way, is the worst combination of kinship similarity. This expression is considered quite as bad as 'have intercourse with thy sister'. (1932, 175)

Because the rule of exogamy demands that the apportionments of the father and of the mother to children emanate from distinct groups—form on the paternal side, substance in the matriline—conflating similarity and consubstantiality would imply incest.

In short, the twin dogmas that children resemble their *tama* and in no case should resemble the maternal kin are intelligible in light of the clear notion—repeated over and over to Malinowski by his informants—that a father's emissions shape his children. Crucially, acknowledging that there is a father's role in conception allows making sense of those tenets that mystified Malinowski. He got stumped because he did not acknowledge the father's role in procreation. Overall, the Frazerian template of savage nescience kept *the ethnographer* in ignorance.

Procreation Metaphors

Given the father's shaping role in conception on the one hand, and the image of bones linking fathers and children in death ceremonies on the other, one might plausibly think that the father's semen makes the bones that shape the embryo. If so, then a distinct model of conception linking semen with bones, and blood with flesh, emerges before us. This possibility actually matches Lévi-Strauss's erstwhile observation that one finds all across East Asia the leitmotiv that 'bones come from the father side, and flesh from the mother side' (Lévi-Strauss 1967, 454).

Checking on the underlying metaphor of conception in Trobriand entails looking beyond Malinowski. I start with Leo Austen, the assistant Resident Magistrate of the

Trobriand Islands in the early 1930s. Austen was insistently told that the father has no role in procreation, and he assumed Malinowski was correct in his reporting of native ignorance. Even so, Austen noted (as Theodor Strehlow had done regarding Central Australia) that the reincarnating-spirit theory was more popular with men, whereas women focused more on practical matters such as the sexual ‘stoppage of the menstrual periods’ (Austen 1934, 113). Austen heard that sexual intercourse is necessary to stem the flowing of the menses—a condition for pregnancy, which starts with a ‘turning over of the blood’ (110), after which the child is ‘formed out of the mother’s blood’ (107). Otherwise, if the blood ‘capsizes’ (104), there is no pregnancy. The tacit notion of blood coagulation by semen stands out in such statements.

H. A. Powell, a PhD candidate active in Trobriand in 1950–51, confirms that the *baloma* theory is a social tenet fit for dignified male interactions, which is why—he notes—the natives emphasised to Austen the dogmatic denial of paternity. Austen, he explains, was

in a position to interfere with indigenous social institutions ... Austen’s official status would make it as inappropriate for Kiriwinans (other than such old ladies as his account refers to!) to engage in what they described to me as ‘women’s and children’s talk’ with him as with any of their indigenous superiors. (Powell 1968, 651–52)

Powell himself managed to grasp that ‘the semen acts as a coagulant of the menstrual blood, producing a “clot” which a spirit child (*baloma*) enters by way of the head or otherwise, and which proceeds to grow after its “quickenings” by the entry of the *baloma*’ (1957, 277). And he realized that the physiological account provided by women does not contradict the official spiritual account preferred by men:

My suggestions that this account either contradicted that of Malinowski or else was garbled ‘mission talk’, were strenuously denied by my informants, who maintained that both accounts were ‘true’, but that they were ‘different’. Malinowski’s, they said, was ‘men’s talk’, valid in formal situations, e. g. in matters of land ownership and the like; the account given to me was ‘women’s and children’s talk’, that is it was what fathers or their sisters told children as they became old enough to take more than a childish sexual interest in the opposite sex. (Powell 1957, 277–78)

Annetta Weiner, who did her fieldwork in the 1970s, likewise echoes the cultural tenet that ‘a woman conceives exclusively by an ancestral spirit from her own matrilineage’ (1988,

57). But she was aware of physiological representations. On the one hand, men ‘cannot contribute blood to the baby, only women can do this’, she was told (1977, 62); on the other, the husband ‘builds up and nurtures (*kopoi*)’ the foetus with his sexual emissions (1988, 57). Moreover, Weiner corroborates the point made by Malinowski’s informants (but misunderstood by Malinowski) that the father’s contribution to conception ‘is not only expressed as necessary to the growth of the fetus but also represented at birth by noting the physical similarities between infant and father’ (58).

Also important to note, the image of conception as blood clotting was reported among the matrilineal Dobu, who are nextdoor neighbours often ‘of the same clans’ as the Trobrianders (Fortune 1963, xi). As Reo Fortune describes in 1932 the ‘native theory of procreation’:

There is no ignorance of the part played by the male in procreation in Dobu. Semen is believed to be voided coco-nut milk which has passed through the body of the male, and is ejected at the point of orgasm. This voided coco-nut milk semen is believed to fertilize the woman, causing the blood within her, which when unfertilized comes away in monthly menstrual flow, to coagulate and form the foetus. (Fortune 1963, 238)

Predictably, patrilineal societies holding the same metaphor in the same region foreground the contents of the father’s contribution. Among the Iatmul of mainland New Guinea, for example, the ‘theory of gestation’ described by Gregory Bateson in 1936 highlights the fatherly transmission of bones:

It is supposed that the bones of the child are a product of the father’s semen, while its flesh and blood (somewhat less important) are provided by the mother’s menstrual blood. This idea is carried logically to the conclusion that the afterbirth, lacking bones, is therefore the child of the mother only. (Bateson 1958, 42)

Likewise, men among the patrilineal Sambia of Papua New Guinea imagine that, as Gilbert Herdt put it, ‘semen ‘mixes’ (or coagulates) with female blood inside the womb’ (1981, 195). An informant pointedly specifies: ‘Blood—your mother gives you. And bone, skin—your father gives it to you’ (196).

In short, we meet in Melanesia a model of procreation that sets apart a red and a white thread in child-making—blood makes flesh, semen makes bones. Patrilineal societies using this model tend to extol the passing of bones from father to children; in contrast, the

matrilineal bias in Trobriand minimizes the male contribution and focuses on the feminine blood where ancestor spirits reincarnate.

Conflicting Metaphors

I have stated that the Frazerian template of savage nescience kept the ethnographer in ignorance. Let me add a few words on how Malinowski kept to the '*surface structure* of what people *said*' (Weiner 1976, 10; italics in the original) and fitted that to the Frazerian canon.

By his own admission, Malinowski used to positively 'goad' his informants into producing quotable denials of the role of men in procreation (1932, 160). In order to test 'the firmness of their belief', Malinowski—'never afraid of using a leading question, or of eliciting the natives' point of view by contradicting it'—took to impersonating 'definitely and aggressively an advocate of the truer physiological doctrine of procreation'. Reportedly, he was 'somewhat astonished at the fierce opposition evoked by my advocacy of physiological paternity' (158). Eventually, Malinowski realized that the natives had long been 'exasperated' by his alignment with the missionaries on this matter. As he explains, the Christian dogma of God-the-Father 'is strongly associated with the institution of a patrilineal and patriarchal family, with the father as progenitor and master of the household' (159)—all of which contradicts Trobriand matrilineal values, which the native metaphysics of procreation express. Not surprisingly, it was when Malinowski goaded his informants into comment or contradiction of 'the talk of the missionaries' that he obtained some of his 'strongest and clearest statements' of the denial of men's role in procreation (160). This statement brings to mind Theodor Strehlow's remark that Central-Australian denials of the father's role in procreation would be made in their most sweeping form in the presence of 'inquisitive white outsiders' (see above).

In sum, Malinowski used quotes from people standing for their own cultural values in the face of colonial agents (including the visiting anthropologist) as prime evidence for fitting his 'savages' to the Frazerian mould of ignorance. Malinowski, on the other hand, framed knowledge of paternity in terms quite familiar to us:

When, instead of merely asking about the *u'ula* of pregnancy, I directly advanced the embryological view of the matter, I found the natives absolutely ignorant of the process suggested. To the simile of a seed being planted in the soil and the plant growing out of the seed, they remained quite irresponsive. They were curious,

indeed, and asked whether this was ‘the white man's manner of doing it’, but they were quite certain that this was not the ‘custom’ of Kiriwina. (1916, 408)

Malinowski’s simile is, of course, the metaphor used by Frazer to argue that Australian aborigines are ignorant of paternity. Malinowski—like Hartland and Frazer before him—considered paternity from the vantage of the seed-and-soil metaphor, which, as Delaney points out, rests on the assumption that a woman’s body, ‘like soil, provides the nurturant context for the foetus’, whereas the child ‘*originates* with the father, from his seed’ (1986, 497). Delaney adds, ‘Malinowski’s and the missionaries’ theory, which is the same as the [Western] folk theory, is just as erroneous as that of the people they were trying to enlighten!’ (508).

My own point is that the Hartland/Frazer/Malinowski notion of paternity is every bit as metaphorical as their informants’ view. Even as Malinowski responded to the *baloma* tenet with the seed-and-soil creed, all he did was bring a Western patriarchal folk model up against a local matrilineal notion. No ignorance, or knowledge, of paternity was ever at stake.

European Folklore

As Malinowski swapped conflicting metaphors with his informants, he managed to keep himself quite unburdened by native views. But it did not have to be this way. Metaphors, by definition, work as conceptual bridges across domains—and they more or less translate into one another. In point of historical fact, both the coagulation metaphor and the seed-and-soil trope have a long history in the West, which suggests that they offer commensurable images of body processes.

Recall that Hartland and Frazer used the seed-and-soil image to reason about procreation *and* knowledge. This metaphorical trend has a venerable pedigree in Europe. Plato (in *Timaeus* 73b–c and 91c–d) maintained that the demiurge ‘made the marrow ... to be a universal *seed* of every mortal kind, and in this seed he then *planted* and enclosed the souls’. The demiurge then encased the mortal part of souls in the bones, but the part of marrow that, ‘like a *field*, was to receive the divine *seed*, he made round every way, and called that portion of the marrow “brain”’. A theory of procreation follows. When the seed stored in the brain ‘passes from the head along the neck and through the back’, Plato explains, it produces lust, followed by the sexual act in which the male sows ‘in the womb, as in a *field*’ (Plato 1963, 1196 and 1210; my italics). Aristotle (in *Generation of Animals* 747a)

operates on similar premises as he says that men who overindulge in sex have sunken eyes because ‘the nature of the *semen* is similar to that of the brain’, and the region about the eyes ‘is, of all the head, the most *seminal* part’ (Aristotle 1995, 1: 1158; my italics). Notice how Plato used the seed-and-soil metaphor to draw a parallel between Creation and procreation—the demiurge plants divine seed in brains, then men sow the seed in wombs. This parallel accords with Delaney’s point that the seed-and-soil metaphor implies—up to the present day—that males deposit heavenly seed in earthly wombs.

Models of generation that link the whitish stuff in brain/marrow with semen are not peculiar to the Greeks—the impressive ethnographical span of this notion actually ranges from Melanesia, where we meet (among the Gimi of Papua New Guinea) the notion that ‘when a man ejaculates, the stuff inside his skull travels down through his spine and into his penis’ (Gillison 1983, 39), to the Western household belief that masturbation is bad for your wits because (as Aristotle would understand) it drains the brain. Compare Shakespeare’s depiction (in *All’s Well that Ends Well* 2.3.274–75) of a man’s sexual exertion as ‘spending his manly marrow’ (see a discussion with sources in Vaz da Silva 2008, 14–16).

The Melanesian notion of the male emission ‘coagulating’ female substance has a prestigious pedigree in the West as well. In the Jewish scripture, Job (10:10) tells the Lord: ‘You poured me out like milk, congealed me like cheese’ (*Tanakh* 1988, 1352). In the Greek world, Aristotle (in *Generation of Animals* 729a) details the same cheese analogy:

What the male contributes to generation is the form and the efficient cause, while the female contributes the material. In fact, as in the coagulation of milk, the milk being the material, the fig-juice or rennet is that which contains the curdling principle, so acts the secretion of the male. (Aristotle 1995, 1: 1132)

This curdling/coagulation metaphor has been used throughout centuries by authors ranging from Pliny the Elder to Hildegard of Bingen (see Belmont 1988; Needham 1931). Dante Alighieri, for instance, depicts the male emission as ‘it begins to operate, first coagulating, and then giving life to what it has brought together as its material’ (Dante 1993, 308). All the while, the analogy was certainly current among the folk. In the late thirteenth century, officers of the Holy Inquisition in the Pyrenean region recorded utterances hinging on the notion that a certain herb endowed with anti-rennet properties is, hence, ‘contraceptive’ (Ladurie 1980, 173). In the same region, a modern ethnographer found among a community of Basque shepherds the notion that there is ‘equivalence’

between the action of rennet upon milk and that of human semen upon ‘the fecund red blood’ in the womb (Ott 1979, 704–705). Sandra Ott adds that the same words (meaning to curdle, to coagulate) designate the foetus, curdled milk, and ‘pig’s blood that formed clots after the beast’s throat was cut’ (1981, 184 and 193). Indeed, the coagulating blood of pigs used to be another popular metaphor for conception across Europe (see Vaz da Silva 2008, 42–45).

Metaphorical Bridges

There are, I think, three lessons here. First, concurring metaphors are broadly interchangeable. Aristotle managed to add to the image of rennet coagulating milk the metaphors of a potter shaping clay and a carpenter fashioning timber—even as the seed-and-soil trope lurked in the back of his mind—to argue the single point that:

the male contributes the principle of movement and the female the material. This is why the female does not produce offspring by herself, for she needs a principle, i.e. something to begin the movement in the embryo and to define the form it is to assume. (Aristotle 1995, 1: 1133)

Good to note: the principle of movement that shapes materials is actually ‘the principle of soul’, of divine origin, whereby ‘the residue of the female ... becomes an embryo’ (Aristotle 1995, 1: 1144). All the concurring metaphors by Aristotle express the single overarching postulate (also laid out, albeit in etiological mode, by Plato) that the male’s shaping function enacts a spiritual principle. In this patriarchal view, conveyed in various metaphors, procreation echoes creation.

Second, one metaphor is apt to carry various nuances in different settings. Take curdling. In patrilineal contexts, shaping by the father is emphasised (along with possibly a link between semen and bones), whereas matrilineal societies tend to foreground the female contribution (hinging on blood and flesh). Moreover, as Maurice Godelier noted, on a worldwide scale sex is not enough to make a child. Besides the physiological elements contributed by the mother and father, social names will link children to ancestors, and some spiritual entity grants the spark of life (Godelier 2003). Again, in patriarchal Greece the curdling metaphor firmly aligns the male’s soulful contribution with God, whereas in matrilineal Trobriand the spiritual element is in the matriline.

Third, metaphorical recurrences crop up in faraway cultures. Pyrenean shepherds who contend ‘that bones are formed by semen’ (Ott 1979, 703 and 707) resonate with the Iatmul

notion that bones are a product of the father's semen. Plato's notion that the seed stored in the brain passes along the back to the sexual organs meets the Gimi idea that when a man ejaculates, the stuff in his skull travels down his spine into his penis (see also Sauneron 1960; Yoyotte 1962). Moreover, Malinowski's informants would have understood Aristotle's point that fathers impart shape to womb blood. The eerie constancy of these basic images recalls Lévi-Strauss's point on metaphoric processes. It also calls for this remark by Françoise Héritier:

... it appears that only a small number of explanatory models can be built that are capable of answering certain central questions [e.g., 'What goes into the making of a person? What does he or she transmit in turn? In what way does a child combine what it receives from each of its parents? How can we account for likenesses?']. The thinking involved in the building of such models has to account for the same directly observable empirical data, which leave scant possibilities of choice. The answer, if shaped in the mind that formulates it, is also already shaped by things themselves. (Héritier-Augé 1989, 160)

My own overall point: Malinowski would have better understood faraway natives if only he had been cognizant of European metaphors (instead of being driven by them). Anyway, the benefit of hindsight allows us to recognize that Malinowski's seed metaphor and the Trobriand coagulation trope are variations on a tight set of compatible images of procreation—the result of a metaphorical mode of thinking that uses tangible processes to explain hidden, or abstract, domains of reality.

Metaphor in Scholarship

Now I get back to the point that anthropology and folkloristics are as much about metaphor-driven beliefs as they are about anything else. Hafstein, in his piece on biological metaphors in folklore theory, cautioned that metaphors deployed in discursive practices may become invisible: scholars risk 'taking the metaphor literally', he notes (2005, 427). Indeed, this point brings to mind Frazer's argument that the ignorance of sprouting seeds entails nescience of paternity; it also recalls Malinowski's deployment of the seed metaphor to convey the 'truer physiological doctrine of procreation', aka the 'embryological view of the matter' (see above). For both the master and the disciple, the metaphor is the knowledge. Nor is this an isolated case. Psychoanalyst Otto Rank likewise professed (in

1924) that the ‘truthful answer’ to give a child interested in the origin of children is, ‘the child grows in the mother’s body somewhat as the plants grow in the earth’ (1993, 30).

The lesson here is that the ancient metaphor embraced the evolving knowledge in the Western world. As Delaney remarked, ‘the revelations of science do not in and of themselves bestow meaning’ (1991, 13). Rather, rendering those revelations in familiar metaphors imparts cultural sense to them. Old images die hard, one might say. Even after the discovery of the ovum in 1826, Delaney remarks, the female contribution was perceived as ‘primarily nurturant material’. And even after the rediscovery of Mendelian genetics in the early twentieth century, which led to the appreciation that the ovum contains half the genetic makeup of the child, the patriarchal preconception crystallized in the seed metaphor kept framing the notion of paternity. Including in academia. The bottom line, Delaney lucidly submits, is that ‘[a]nthropologists’ beliefs about paternity were not dependent on scientific discoveries; they had existed for millennia’ (1991, 12–13).

Conclusion

I have described mental processes in a hall of mirrors, which is of course a metaphor. That is my point: we all think and act along the lines of metaphors most of the time. As Friederich Max Müller nicely put it long ago, ‘all words expressive of immaterial conceptions are derived by metaphor from words expressive of sensible ideas’ (Müller 1873, 372). If anything, my own rhetoric aims to enhance this fact. Just like paying attention to the metaphors used by Hartland, Frazer, and Malinowski helps us understand the unselfconscious schemes that drove their thinking, so heeding the metaphors in my argument should unveil tacit thought patterns in this essay.

In my own assessment, the foregoing argument rests on two main metaphors: the mirror-image trope, and the coincidence-of-forms image. This essay asks: What are ‘facts’, what is ‘knowing’—for natives and, not least, for anthropologists and folklorists? Knowledge in the humanities, I have answered, is inherently metaphorical in the sense that scholars use metaphors to reason about other peoples’ metaphors. ‘Facts’, the foregoing discussion suggests, are the fashioning of observations after such constructs. The point is that metaphors are not innocent, and we must wield them critically. The mirror-image trope makes the point that the us/them dichotomy encourages addressing the Other (alien peoples, the folk...) as the negative form of whatever stereotypical image we hold of

ourselves. The coincidence-of-forms image, on the other hand, underlines the commonalities of human cognition. To my mind, this is the way to go. The empathetic study of different peoples' representations, in their own terms, involves heeding the metaphors we all live by.

Notes

ⁱ. In fact, despite this excommunication, Frazer (1910, 4: 59 n.1) did mention Strehlow again when that suited his own argument. The disingenuousness of it all must have been blatant, for Hartland (1911, 15) took issue with it.

ⁱⁱ. The association of mother-right to Trobriand in this quote is misleading. The term 'mother-right', as famously used by Bachofen in *Das Mutterrecht* (1861), supposes an ancient state of female domination. Whereas, as Malinowski repeatedly makes it clear, in Trobriand there is male domination by means of matrilineal succession.

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