VI

Cosmos and Society Made Correlative

1. Introduction

I have three main tasks in this article, which is the sixth and last of the series. I will discuss the positive features of Murinbata religion, the dynamical or integrative aspect of the rites, and the underlying philosophy. In order to put those subjects in context I will first sketch the probable development of the religion over part of the nineteenth century so as to show the ascendancy of old symbolic forms over change, and will survey some of the circumstances in which the symbolisms lost their power when direct European influence made itself felt.

In many respects the Murinbata material is a remarkable confirmation of the worth of Arnold van Gennep’s schema as set out in *Les Rites de Passage*. On a factual level there is much that fits his classifications as closely as if it had been collected with that intent. I found his work unsuitable only in some of its schematic and conceptual aspects. For example, his sixteen possible ways of classifying rites were far too complex, abstract and dependent on ideas that have proved mortal. More important, his conception of *three* major phases of *passage* did not fit the Murinbata material which, in my opinion, required at least *four*. It was not a matter of an additional minor phase but one decisive for studying Aboriginal religion as religion and not as something else, e.g. a symbolical extension of social relations. Between *séparation* and *agrégation* van Gennep allowed only for *marge*: but if I identified the Murinbata ‘wild dog’ phase with *séparation* and ‘swallowing by Mutjingga’ with *marge*, there was a third phase before *agrégation*; that is, the phase of token return before incorporation. But the identification of *marge* with symbolical destruction was at least doubtful. It seemed to
me closer to van Gennep’s thought to identify séparation with ‘setting apart’ and marge with ‘wild dog.’ What then of ‘swallowing by Mutjingga,’ which was the actual turning point of the main Murinbata rite and, if I am correct in my analysis, the symbolic equivalent of demŋinoi, the great transformation of The Dream Time? I had intended to examine the schema in detail in the last paper of this series but space will not now permit and my primary object here is to present original material. A discussion of the utility of van Gennep’s whole approach, including its apparent (for ‘apparent’ see p. 273) dependence on Durkheim’s empirically inadequate and logically defective categories, and the real suitability of terms like ‘passage,’ ‘transition’ and ‘initiation,’ must wait upon another occasion. Such an examination is long overdue in the context of Australian Aboriginal studies. But I should not fail to make clear here that my dependence on him though indirect is profound. I regret that I have not found it possible to enter on the bearing of the material on a number of important recent developments in the study of myth and ritual.

As to the positive features of Murinbata religion, I conceive them to have a special claim on careful statement and thought because in the past so much was made of the negative features of Aboriginal religion. The Murinbata in all essentials closely resembled the Central Australians whom Spencer and Gillen described as having ‘nothing whatever in the way of a simple, pure religion.’ Had they been studied at that time they probably would have been dismissed in the same terms: magic and totemism, yes; religion, no. Earlier in the nineteenth century the Rev. John Dunmore Lang might have said of them what he said of the whole Aboriginal race: that they had ‘nothing whatever of the character of religion, or of religious observance, to distinguish them from the beasts that perish.’ Such descriptions owed something to theistic conceptions of religion and to fashionable social theory. But primarily they were due, I suggest, to the conversion of negative facts into a supposed proof of the thesis that the Aborigines, being primitive, could not possibly therefore be religious.
I have described the Murinbata as a people who had no idea of a
god or gods that called life into being. Life always had been and, in
spite of a mediating catastrophe, continued. Earthly life was supposed
to cycle between mystical source and mystical goal, but there was no
first cause or final end. Many spirit-beings were supposed to exist and to
intervene in men’s lives for good and ill, but nobody worshipped any of
them or, in any formal sense, prayed or made offerings to any of them,
even though dispositions to do so were implicit. There was a belief in a
shadowy after-life, but in that state no reward for this-life conduct was
expected, or punishment feared. No institution existed that could be
called a church, no functionaries rightly describable as priests. Nothing
in the tradition suggested that anybody need be, or was, concerned over
sin or salvation or felt the rack of conscience. Neither individual nor
total life was supposed to move towards an end that would consummate
history; indeed, there was no true sense of history at all. On such
grounds they too could have been denied both religious capacity and
attainment. Possibly they had a rather narrow escape: the naturalist
Knut Dahl, who visited the Jesuit mission on the Daly River less than a
hundred miles from Murinbata country, formed the view that the local
Aborigines were ‘without trace of real religious conceptions.’ The Jesuits
did not share that opinion. In a report to their superiors they criticised a
prevailing estimate that the Aborigines were ‘in a kind of transition stage
between beasts and men,’ and in particular, were ‘deficient in the most
elementary spiritual notions.’ In that respect they were, with Ridley and
Threlkeld, in the sparse company of nineteenth-century missionaries
who fought against the current of their time.

The Murinbata rites were, at the most fundamental level, attempts
to make social life correlative with the plan and rhythm of the cosmos.
The appropriate occasions for rites, it is true, were ‘socially defined’ but
the definitions were in terms of an inexorable cosmic cycle, to which the
social situations were made correlative. The strongest symbolisms may
be read to say that cosmic necessity was the datum of social necessity.
It probably was the power of those symbolisms that led the Murinbata
to fit change to the form of permanence, with the result that change
resulted, not in the evolution of an open society, but in the further involution of a tradition-oriented society.

2. Tradition as Symbolised History

Like other Aborigines, the Murinbata believed that their tradition was old, continuous and true. On the evidence, I had to conclude that, historically speaking, it was shallow, selective, and neither true nor false; as Lauriston Sharp said neatly; ‘somewhat adjusted to meet the exigencies and accidents of the inescapably real present’.

My experience bore out Sharp’s among the Yir-Yiront of Cape York. In 1933–35 he made intensive inquiries to find if there were any memory of a clash in 1864 between Europeans and Aborigines (in all probability the immediate ancestors of the Yir-Yiront) on the Mitchell River. He wrote: ‘some 70 years later—in all the material of hundreds of free association interviews, in texts of hundreds of dreams and myths, in genealogies, and eventually in hundreds of answers to direct and indirect questioning on just this particular matter—there was nothing that could be interpreted as a reference to this shocking contact with Europeans,’ an event in which about 30 Aborigines were killed and many more probably wounded. In 1935, hoping to find a datum for a chronology of changes of social organisation which I was then studying, I tried to discover if there were any memory of an attack made in 1839 by men of the Nangor clan on Captain J. L. Stokes R.N. when he landed at Pearce Point (Treachery Bay) from H.M.S. Beagle. I was less persistent than Sharp but I failed then, and on subsequent occasions, to find anyone who had heard of the affair. Many other inquiries about the past ended inconclusively but gave strong indications that important episodes had altogether dropped out of mind. A conclusion became inevitable: to conceive of a tradition was misleading if it implied a unitary body of attitudes, beliefs and customs persisting unaltered over

time. If one could speak of Murinbata tradition at all it had to be as
the product of a continuous art of making the past consistent with an
idealised present. There had been ‘history’ in the sense of events of both
change and development; one thing had led to another; but ‘what really
happened’ must rapidly have ceased to signify in important respects.
There had been a continuous compounding of history. Otherwise, the
homomorphism between institutions which was still the case could not
have developed and persisted. But under what principle had history
been compounded? In whose interest? By what means? How far into
the past could the process be found to have operated?

In the hope of finding at least the shadow, if not the substance of the
past situation, I collected what information I could about Tjimburki, the
oldest rite of which I had heard. Evidently it had last been performed
before the end of the nineteenth century. The fact that it was celebrated
was a matter of Murinbata testimony about a number of deep, circular
earth-excavations which were clearly man-made. I discovered them by
accident after I had learned a little about the rite. The Murinbata had not
thought to point them out, having little interest in them. Evidently no
one feared, avoided, or respected them although, from all accounts, they
were sacred places in the past and were kept as secret and inviolate as
the bullroarer grounds more recently. No one then or recently alive had
taken part in the rite, but I was able to piece together some information
given me by old men who as small boys, still uncircumcised, had been
told a few things by their older male relatives.

Tjimburki was clearly a rite of initiation—‘bigger than Punj,’ I
was told. But it was also a religious celebration, with other aims than
initiation. Possibly, it was a productive rite either to bring and end the
rainy season, or more likely, to end the rain and bring the dry season.
A few men thought it started in the season known as Tjäärke (late
September-early October) and lasted until Wiŋ (late April-early May);
the majority, that it started in Wiŋ and finished in Tjärke. But it lasted
for many months. Circumstantial details inclined me to think that it
probably began at ‘burning grass time’ (Wiŋ) and reached its climax,
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but not its end, at ‘new grass time’ (Tjärkke). Youths to be initiated were introduced into it just before the dry season was due.

It ‘belonged’ to the very old men, even more so than Punj, and was a more draconic rite. The celebrants had to avoid all intercourse with women and stay silent—except for singing—for the duration. A ritual leader (kiyrman), showing himself at a distance from one camp, summoned all the mature men by a high-pitched hail. He smothered them with soft charcoal, after which the two disciplines became immutable. He then led them from camp to camp, at each one summoning and painting the men, until there was a large assembly. Coming at last to a secret place, they danced by clans, while the others sang, within the ring-shaped hollows. [My informants said that the rings were more than 6 ft. deep and 50–100 ft. in diameter but, as far as I could judge from the silted remains, the ring still to be seen at Ngadinitji may have been 30–50 ft. wide.] The outer edge was girdled by a fibre-rope buried in the piled earth, and on top of the earth leafy bushes were made into a screen blocking the vision of anyone outside. Little was known of the style of dancing but two features were agreed upon, the first being very reminiscent of the death-rite, the second of the bullroarer-rite.

The dancers went in spiral around a pole (painted red and white) which was fixed in the centre of the ring and, while they danced, the kiyrman swung over their heads, in the manner of a bullroarer (which, however, was not used), a type of bag or basket (muṭai). For the bag to touch the dancers was thought to be extremely dangerous, so that they had to crouch as it passed overhead. The men wore no bodily decorations other than charcoal. ‘My father told me: “all you could see were red eyes,”’ one man remembered. The kiyrman was thought to have had a great secret concerning the dry season, but no one knew what it was; possibly, it had to do with pulupulu, a hawk, and the poisonous sting-ray, which were celebrated in the dances. The rite followed the same plan each day. All men slept at the sacred ground. Women had the duty of providing food and a few men went daily to obtain it from them. When the time came to burn the grass the young men who were to be initiated were secreted at the dancing-ring. They were put to severe
disciplines of an unknown kind. Several old men said they remembered how the rite ended. Celebrants and initiates came back, marked with paint, to the camp which, in welcome, formed the arcuate cluster known as Mununuk. Women, lacerating themselves until blood flowed, wailed formally. The adult men were at once freed from the rules against speech and cohabitation, but some time had to elapse before the youths could speak or enter into adult life. It was not known whether they were given a special name or title in their new status, but my informants could remember that food had to be presented ceremonially to them by women.

Although the information was slender it was sufficient to establish that there were important resemblances between Tjimburki and Punj, the rite that displaced it, if I interpret the facts correctly, three or more generations ago. But Tjimburki evidently required a much longer period than Punj, possibly more than twice as long. Its custodians were older. The rules about sex and speech were more severe, which suggests that its other disciplines were too. Its liturgy may have been less complex, and less rich aesthetically. [The encircling rope and the swung bag or basket had disappeared from Murinbata culture by 1935, but the central, painted pole was occasionally used in a secular dance known as Malgarin.] In the main, as far as the scanty facts would allow me to judge, the external differences from Punj were matters of style and emphasis. Unfortunately, I could learn nothing substantial about the content of ideas and purposes. There were no extant myths dealing in any but an incidental way with the two natural species mentioned. Tjimburki may have belonged to the class of mythless rites, but my knowledge of it is too thin for me to attempt a structural examination as with other rites of that class. At the same time, both Tjimburki and Punj clearly were religious celebrations as well as initiations, with at least some motifs and structural elements in common. But if Tjimburki was concerned with a mystery then no one remembered what it was.

There is no doubt that Tjimburki had one or more predecessors. In and around Murinbata territory I came unexpectedly on a number of stone-structures which were as clearly the work of men as the
excavations. Hundreds of stones, in some cases thousands, were arranged in geometric shapes (circular, ovoid, arcuate and linear). No one had confident knowledge of their provenience and use. There was also the great puzzle of the many splendid rock-paintings—some reminiscent of skulls—in and around the region. I have already remarked on the fact that some were asserted most positively to be connected with Kunmanggur, The Rainbow Serpent, and some with Nunakangal and Kulumbin, two other mythical heroes associated with dysentery and death. It was tempting to see in all these remains further evidences that Murinbata religion over time had moved among a range of major emphases. I could see that the seasonal cycle, catastrophe by disease, puberty, maturity and death all had in common, from the Aboriginal viewpoint, the fact of inexorability. Could an hypothesis be shaped along those lines? I felt I had to cling to those aspects of Murinbata history which some could remember, or said they could remember, reasonably well. However, I was compelled to conclude from the purely physical evidences that the development of the religion had been much more complex, certainly more discontinuous, than they remembered, knew, or admitted. A brief account of two matters will make that fairly plain.

There was a time at which the Murinbata did not possess the bullroarer. In its stead the spear-thrower was used in the same fashion that is, swung from a cord so as to make a humming sound by vibrating in the air. The oldest men thought that custom may have come after the fall of Tjimburki, at which the bag or basket was swung, because they knew that the Djamindjung tribe had taught their fathers to abandon the ritual use of the spear-thrower in favour of the bullroarer. At first the bullroarers had plain, unincised surfaces. Those with incised patterns came later; indeed, they were new to the Murinbata when I first visited the region in 1935. But the oldest known to the Murinbata were coloured black, not red, which suggests a possible assimilation to the colour-style of Tjimburki. However, either Tjimburki was more ancient than I was led to believe or there were more co-existent rites in the second half of the nineteenth century than the Murinbata could remember clearly.
An accumulation of fragmentary facts inclined me to the second view. I could satisfactorily prove that five great decisions had been taken in series.

The Murinbata, situated on the frontier between two distinct cultural regions, were progressively imposed on by their southern neighbours, the Djamindjung and associated tribes, which were themselves under or coming under the influence of bullroarer cults and the highly segmented forms of social organisation of their southern and south-eastern neighbours. The religious influences preceded the social, which the Murinbata had comprehended very imperfectly even in 1935. Four elements—circumcision, the cult of the bullroarer, the abstract scheme of subsection organisation, and matrilineal totems (ŋulu)—all came to the Murinbata by Djamindjung pressure in couple with their own attractions. Each required some adaptation of the northern ritual complex, of which Tjimburki, allied in form and style with Mulunu, the death-rite, was the senior initiation. The fourth element (ŋulu) came to nothing, but the three others were adopted in the order named.

1. Circumcision was taken over as a rite for mature men. It probably displaced or compounded with one or both of two other rites, known as Ngangula and Jandurtji, which were preliminary to Tjimburki. I presume, but am not certain, that the spear-thrower was used ritually in one or the other, perhaps both, of those rites. The Djamindjung continued to impress on the Murinbata that the spear-thrower should be replaced by the bullroarer which they themselves were now using in conjunction with subincision. That aspect of the rite appalled the Murinbata, who would have none of it. However, they took over the bullroarer and adapted parts of its ritual to a similitude of the form of Tjimburki. (2) They gave the new rite the name of Manggawila and made it the senior initiation. In that way Tjimburki dropped out of sight.

2 In 1935 I heard both these names, but unfortunately did not investigate what they implied. I knew that they referred to rites that were no longer practised, but concentrated most of my attention on the new social forms (subsections and matrilineal totems) with which the Murinbata were struggling.
In Manggawila the bullroarers were unincised, coloured black with charcoal, and decorated with tufts of kapok in simple linear designs. I am uncertain how long that phase continued but, from all accounts, the ritual calendar was now congested and made heavy demands on time and resources. At some stage the Murinbata took an important decision. (3) *They passed the rite of circumcision to boys at puberty* who, up to that time, had been initiated, within the northern ritual complex, at a rite known as Karamala, which did not require circumcision. (4) *Karamala became an initiation for boys not yet ready for circumcision.* But the cult of the bullroarer continued to grow in appeal. A substantially new style of rite—known as Punj—appeared, characterised by red instead of black bullroarers and with incised patterns rather than tufted decorations, and new secret songs and dances. Another important decision followed. (5) *Punj was kept exclusively for mature men, and Manggawila, the former senior rite, under the name of Djaban was ‘given’—that is, forced on—small boys in place of Karamala, which dropped out of use.* In that way the northern ritual complex survived only in covert ways within the initiatory series, mainly in two of the three styles of circumcision rite described in an earlier paper. When I arrived at Port Keats in 1935 memories were still fresh of a time when ‘men with beards’ had been circumcised. It was possible positively to identify Djaban, the then pre-pubic rite, as Manggawila under another name, and to talk to men who, as boys not yet circumcised, had taken part in Karamala. And, as among the Nangiomeri, the cult of Karwadi (Punj) was at its height.

The process that I have reviewed appears as one in which ‘history’ was both accepted and yet defeated by being made captive to symbolic forms. Diffusion brought exciting new motifs and styles of religious activity. But to be acceptable the new apparently had to be compounded with the old. The unfamiliar had to be put in symbolic continuity with the familiar. In the upshot neither the past was disowned nor change made impossible. But to combine change with a rational conservation of the sacred forms and values already existing led to an involution of development, not to an evolution.
A summary of the facts about Karamala and Djaban will be relevant at this point.

Karamala was intended to prepare young boys for the ordeal of circumcision. Like that rite itself, it was supposed to speed a boy’s physical growth to manhood. It must also have been a powerful psychic, mental, emotional and social stimulus. Furthermore, since in effect it rehearsed every feature of the next rite except the act of circumcision itself, it must have done much to dispel childishness by revealing the rewards, excitements and power of the world of men.

When boys were within two or three years of puberty men of the class of wife’s brothers (naŋgum) took them away, with parental consent, to a distant place. Entirely safe from human harm, they were kept under kindly but firm guardianship, and instructed in male knowledge. After a lapse of weeks or months, clansmen from the host country mustered to take them home, with many gifts. Later proceedings were, in principle, a simplification of the circumcision to come. No warning spear was flung into the home-camp to announce the boys’ imminent return. Instead, one of the escorts approached the camp just before dawn and blew a long drawn-out note on a drone-pipe. The boys’ relatives at once started formal wailing and self-wounding, and when daylight came formed themselves into the welcoming arc, Mununuk. The escorts then came out of concealment and, accompanied by musicians and singing-men, all being brightly painted, brought the boys forward laden with gifts. As in the circumcision rite, they were taken to be wailed over and fondled by close kin. Dancers repeatedly performed the goose (ŋalmungirë) dance while the boys sat embraced by their fathers’ arms. A break came then in the proceedings while the visitors and boys retired to eat food prepared by the hosts. In late afternoon the ceremony started on a second phase. Freshly painted (black and white were the only colours used) the visitors brought the boys to Mununuk but, a short distance from the waiting kin, covered them with leafy bushes and stood clustered around them. A set of ‘nests’ (dirë) had been made along a wide arc fronting and flanking Mununuk and the leaf-hidden boys. Painted dancers,
at first singly, then in pairs, sprang from the nests and performed the goose-dance to the musical accompaniment of drone-pipe and tapping-sticks. When the dance had been repeated many times the bushes were removed and the dancing visitors went a short distance away while the musician piped the boys close to their kin. While the assembly listened to the piping, the main guardian explained to the boys the food taboos they must observe for a long time to come. That task over, the visitors formed mass and rushed at Mununuk as though to thrust the boys home. Halting a few feet away, they danced while the boys were again being fondled by their joyful kin. At sundown the celebration ended. The boys were now free to sleep with young friends within the circled fires of the camp. Each gave to his father the gifts brought from distant places. The fathers passed the articles into the kulu exchange system, in which each boy had now earned a place. They were ready for the greater challenge of circumcision.

The resemblance between Karamala and the circumcision ceremonies practised until recently is plain. I could obtain no other explanation of its abandonment in favour of Djaban than that there was ‘too much business,’ and the probable truth of that may be accepted. Possibly there were other pragmatic considerations. From all accounts the nineteenth century circumcisions were exceptionally painful affairs; perhaps the surgeons were less skilful; at all events there was a rationalisation that the operation was too severe for grown men (‘the skin is too tough’) and that it would be better done at puberty. But I have no doubt that it was the attraction of Punj that really explained the change. Consequently Karamala, now the least important secular rite, was given up; the age of circumcision was lowered; Manggawila, in the name of Djaban, but still a secret, religious rite, replaced Karamala; and Punj, in successive stages of complexity, wholly replaced Manggawila as the main religious celebration and higher initiation for mature men. All appear to have had, in spite of difference of content and style, much the same structural plan.

I will now deal briefly with Djaban. In the early dry season a recognised *pule* (‘boss’ or leader) talked quietly with the fathers of uncircumcised boys (*lamitini*) to get their consent for a secret meeting to arrange the place and time of initiation. Invariably groups of boys were initiated together, since the ceremony was complex, lengthy, and sometimes a burden on resources, and the ritual calendar was usually very full. At a time when several clans were at one place, the *pule* flattered the boys by inviting them to go hunting with him and with other mature men and circumcised youths. To allay suspicion, the party often hunted for a while, but the *pule* soon led them to a prearranged place where, perhaps pleading fatigue, or a wish to eat, he halted. All then sang until sundown. The party returned to camp, where the boys were required to sleep between fires in the centre of the camp-circle. By that sign the women knew, supposedly for the first time, what was afoot. But there was no wailing; nor was there any next morning when the *pule* took the boys away—now as *ku were*, ‘wild dogs’—to yesterday’s place, now called Ngudanu Nandji Djaban.

At Ngudanu the boys were made to sit down, with older classificatory wives’ brothers (*naŋgun*) as their mentors. It was conventional to pillow their heads on the mentors’ thighs or loins. The older men for some time sang from a large repertory of songs. Later in the day it became necessary to conceal from the boys preparations for the first revelations. Some pretext was seized upon (often quarrels were simulated and fighting postures taken up) to send them off to Da Mambana, an isolated and secret place, out of eyeshot but within hailing distance. They were put under a guardian to ensure that none attempted to spy on Ngudanu. While they were absent dancers painted themselves with kaolin and put on decorations of white kapok, then hid themselves in a thicket.

When all was ready the *pule* went half-way to Da Mambana and hailed the guardian, who brought the boys to Ngudanu, forcing them as they came to bow their heads and to keep their gaze fixed on the ground. Simultaneously, all the grown men other than the hidden dancers and a handful of singers burst into the wild horseplay known as Tjirmumuk.\(^4\)

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\(^4\) See ‘On Aboriginal Religion. I. The Lineaments of Sacrifice,’ *Oceania*,
The boys were told to stand facing the singers and then, quite suddenly, were ordered to look to one flank, where the painted dancers sprang to view from concealment. Thence they ran behind the singers to perform a dance which was repeated frequently throughout the afternoon.

At sundown the party returned to camp. The boys were now required to wait in the bush, with the guardian, until dark. They ate food brought to them by affinal relatives. In the distance they could hear the uproar of Tjirmumuk being performed in camp, but were much too far off to see. Then, with full darkness, men came out to escort them to their sleeping positions of last night. They might not speak to anyone, nor anyone to them, not even their brothers or parents, though fathers might give sons titbits of food without speech. Late at night, older men stood over them and sang one of the public songs of Djaban. Then they slept.

Next day a stern and darker aspect appeared. Boys who were thought too hard-spirited (in Murinbata, ‘bad headed,’ ‘hard eared’) were put to sit in the sun, or to lie face-up with eyes open to the sky. But only the most recalcitrant had to do so alone; the others might have at the same time the comfort of the arms or lap of naŋgun. That lasted throughout the phase of singing. Then the ritual pattern of the previous day was repeated, and so on for many days. The boys heard splendid songs and saw spectacular dances, each linked with culture-heroes and with Dream Time exploits. On the seventh day two disguised men, carrying spears, sprang from the thickets to simulate Kumaijen, The Flesh of the Road, the warlocks who at times put the region under a reign of terror.

Towards the end of the dancing-phase, the tension fell markedly. The last dance of a long cycle was performed by only a handful of men. Most of the others had taken the opportunity of the boys’ absence at Da Mambana to paint themselves grotesquely in such a way as to put on a frightening aspect. With faces plastered and heads masked by bark, no one’s identity could be recognised. Some put a stick through their pierced nasal septum and drew it up and back, tying the stick tightly with string knotted behind the head, so that the face took on a brutish
cast. Thus disguised, they had vanished before the boys’ return. The dance petered out in a desultory way and the guardian, playing on the boys’ fears, told them that all the men had gone to prepare for a fight. He urged them to go with him to camp, the one place of safety. The road back became one of fear as the guardian, looking this way and that in well-simulated anxiety, spurred his charges on. When they came near the camp they saw that there were fires burning close to the path. Under the guardian’s order, one boy was sent to pluck a brand. Instantly, from behind the fire, a masked figure sprang from hiding, and threw a spear so as to miss the boy by the narrowest margin. The terrified boys ran this way and that but, turn where they may, another monstrous figure appeared, out of nowhere, and a spear, an axe, or a heavy stick was thrown, to the accompaniment of a grunting imprecation. Only one path was clear—the path back to Ngudanu. They ran there, led by their guardian and, as they reached it—‘those boys, their hearts thumping always,’ one man told me, recalling his own feelings—the dancers came again before them, together with men disguised as Flesh of the Road. At that stage each boy was given fire-sticks (minga) by his naŋgun.

That night Tjirmumuk in camp reached an exceptional pitch. Burning sticks were flung without regard for where they fell, and licence of speech and conduct were at a peak. But the play was confined to men. The women, mere spectators, sat holding their children. The Djaban initiates as usual stayed out in the darkness at fires from their own fire-sticks.

Next day the whole character of the assembly at Ngudanu changed. There was singing but no dancing. The boys were painted with red and white colours and festooned with gifts from naŋgun and other affines. That done, they were escorted to camp for formal presentation to their female kin. As in Punj, each boy crawled on hands and knees to Mununuk between the straddled legs of a line of men of the opposite moiety from his own. Briefly wailed over by the women, who lacerated themselves (mothers cutting their thighs, sisters their calves, other women their scalps), they crawled back through the lines of men, and all the male participants ran back shouting to Ngudanu. There, having
been washed, the boys were painted on chest and legs with the sign of the bullroarer, though only the older men were supposed to know its secret significance. They were now Kadu Djaban, but still must be isolated and watched by guardians, who had the special task of seeing that they used only their own fires, made with their own fire-sticks, and that no one else used the fires by accident or intent. A month elapsed before they might speak to close female kin, and then only after the women had presented food formally to them. They continued to wear the sign of the bullroarer, not knowing its import. In a few months the time came to repay and reward their nangun and others who had helped them through the rite. That was done by a feast of food cooked on a fire lighted from the boys’ own fire-sticks, which were destroyed in the fire at the same time.

Even so brief a description makes clear that Djaban or Manggawila was very much the same rite as Punj; at the least, the chrysalis from which the senior rite developed. There were considerable differences of content, and also of mood and tone, but they both had the same plan and configuration. The resemblance to Karamala is also clear. Thus, as far back as it seems possible to go, there is evidence of a certain continuity of ritualised form and symbolic content in two important fields—the secular field of circumcision, and the religious field of celebration, both being fields of ‘initiation’ but at the same time a good deal more. It is a reasonable hypothesis that the homomorphism between changing rites, between variable myths, and between rites and myths, over a period in which sacra and sacred values were themselves in change, was due to the suzerainty of symbols. But not, one would think, to their sovereignty, since the symbols pointed beyond themselves.

The absence of a time-datum is a real embarrassment in such a study. On several occasions I thought I had found one, only to have it slip away under other inquiries. I had to conclude that even in matters of genealogy I was dealing with testimony that allowed judgments about presumptive fact, but not very much more. A hard fact—one beyond the polite collusion of memories—was hard to obtain. It is a painful wrench for a European mind to have to deal with so shallow a
perspective on time, and with mentalities that are ahistorical in outlook while asserting the contrary. Fortunately, although—as someone has said—variation is the law of oral tradition, constancy appears to be one of the laws of ritual tradition. One may even suppose that in a society affected by change it is the inertial property of ritual concerning sacred things that countervails what Professor Firth has called ‘the plasticity of myth.’

3. The Collapse of a Tradition

Since I began writing these papers, I have been made aware that some anthropologists still treat with reserve reports of the Aborigines’ intense preoccupation with sacred rites. Evidently they suspect subjectivism in the accounts or perhaps a mere convention of description. I can only say that the evidence that the old Murinbata were fascinated by their rites seemed to me plain and credible. But gratuitous doubts are notably hard to dispel.

The ritual calendar evidently had already been substantially curtailed when I first met members of the Murinbata tribe in 1932. That had come about because of two things. There had been heavy depopulation by dispersal, disease, and fighting between clans. The external or inter-tribal structure had eroded. But the clans were as interdependent in ritual as they were in marriage, trade, and the settlement of serious disputes. The only really important field of life in which a clan was independent was that of domestic economy and even there autonomy was limited by consideration for kin, affines and friends in other clans. In 1935 12 clans of three weakening tribes around Port Keats could muster only 150 souls, but all the major rites—with the exception of the main mortuary rite—though truncated were still being practised. The evidence that the Murinbata in particular had gone to pains to keep them alive was substantial. Anything from three to six months of every year were spent mainly on the various ceremonies. Visitors came from long distances in spite of the fact that the adjacent regions were
almost depopulated. There was a jealous insistence on prescribed forms, rights and duties. Painstaking care was lavished on preparations, and participants entered into the rites with every appearance of zeal. Both men and women had been killed for real or supposed offences against sacred places and things. The development of the mission station was much hindered by the sudden disappearance of men and boys in order to practise one or other of the rites, and by attempts to block the use of areas with sacred associations. While it is true that the ritual activities were enforced by the power of older men, and that younger men and women conformed, the facts cited are not intelligible except as the outward signs of deep attachment to the work in hand.

The collapse of the old ritual life came about by a conjunction of three things: persistent pressure by the missionaries to put an end to all pagan ceremonies, the decay of the external structure of tribal life, and the onset of a general sophistication. But the process was a slow one. The older Murinbata condoned it, in the first place, from motives of expediency, not from loss of enthusiasm, although a decline of interest set in once the impairment of the external and internal structures—a progressive trend—had reached a certain stage. The pressures to bend before a new, single authority, against which there was no appeal, were too insistent to be resisted except by a common front for which the men had no genius. The value placed on European goods—of which there was no other source—weakened everyone's will. The flow of candidates for initiation dried up when all infant males were circumcised at the mission hospital and, as they came to a right age, were withheld from the other rites. The number of visitors fell off when, because of their interference with the work of the mission, they were made to feel unwelcome, and because the shrunken ceremonies were a disappointment. But, in my judgment, it would have been possible to revive the entire ritual complex as late as the early 1950s, since there were still alive a sufficient number of older men possessing both the secrets and the interest. After that time, many deaths occurred among the ritual leaders, and a new set of influences became ascendant. The general inflation then affecting the whole of Australia had impact even
in the remote bush. All the Murinbata, irrespective of age, became intensely interested in making money, which became more plentiful. Wage-labour, travel, producing goods to sell, and gambling absorbed everyone’s attention. But on my last visit (1962) I found in one clan efforts to keep the old mystical culture alive.

So much for the foreground. There was a background, entirely Aboriginal, which suggests that a certain corruption of the cults had set in as the product of religious conservatism and politics. By extending the displaced rite of Manggawila to immature boys the Murinbata set in train a number of consequences. Hitherto, perhaps only a secular sanction—at least on the conscious level—had dictated the sexual rift between growing boys and females, especially their mothers and sisters. Now it had a specifically religious sanction. That intensified the psychological and social disabilities of women. Their loss of status was reflected in an attempt by the men to force a kind of initiation on them. During the 1920s—precisely when I could not establish—older men took a number of girls, at or after puberty, into the bush for several weeks under the pretext of making a Djaban for them. They used the girls sexually but, for reasons I could not discover, the attempted innovation did not prosper, and no systematic custom developed. The attempted extension of men’s political power, under religious sanction, suggests that there was some religious deterioration in Djaban compared with Manggawila. Probably some of the mystical content of the parent-rite was lost, or withheld. The details of the rite, as practised in the 1930s, inclined me to that view. It was clear that the central experience through which the initiates had to pass was one of force and terror. In spite of solicitous care and days of brilliant theatre and social pomp, they were made conscious of duress by men who must have seemed to them half in league with powers of darkness. The Flesh of the Road did not appear at Punj, nor was there anything like the attack by—as far as the boys knew—the brutish demons of the bush. The instructors said that the rite was ‘to make boys understand,’ and spoke of it as an essential preparation for Punj, but—judging by what I saw and by what initiates said—they remembered the rite most strongly in after years for the
mortal fear it caused them. There was of course a positive content. They learned something of the religious culture and became familiar with ceremonial patterns. The new status to which they attained brought satisfaction. But all that was within a repressive conditioning of mind, outlook and personality. It was an integrative experience that left a mark for life. Theirs were the generations that tried to defeat the efforts of the missionaries, who arrived in 1935, to interest them in Christianity. The Jesuit missionaries among neighbouring tribes on the Daly River had found that ‘once a young black has been initiated at one of these corroborees he becomes quite impervious to the religious instruction of the missioners.’ That was found to be the case at Port Keats also, and, because of it, Djaban was suppressed.

Within a decade Murinbata elders had noted and spoken unfavourably to me about a great change of social personality among boys and young men. The suppression of the rite of Punj during the same decade, and the inanition of the second puberty rite because of infant circumcision, had produced a generation as much at odds with their own elders as with the missionaries. It seemed ironical that the fully initiated Aborigines then gave the mission more loyal support than those to whom the pagan rites had been forbidden. The explanation was not far to seek. The initiated men, unshaken in attachment to their own rites and beliefs, and already possessing all the power and status that an Aboriginal culture could give them, had worked out an expedient *modus vivendi* with the mission. The younger men were between two worlds in neither of which they had confidence, unambiguous status, acknowledged power, nor—in their judgment—sufficient reward. They were insouciant, impatient, and given over to an aimless activism. The older Murinbata, perhaps characteristically, said of them that they ‘did not understand.’ In a sense that is as good a description as might be given. Their grasp of the European world was negligible, and of the Aboriginal traditions very poor. Many complained to me that their own old people could, or would, tell them little or nothing. The old people, in turn, said that they had ‘let go’ the big things. But I think they may be interpreted also as saying, in effect, that the ‘big things’ must be done
to bring understanding; talking about them was not enough. That was perhaps their rationalisation. But I also felt that they had compensated themselves for a loss of power and privilege by withholding secrets from a generation that had slipped away.

At about the same time as the attempted Djaban for girls, an effort was made to couple with Punj a custom named Wilili which, by repute, was common among the Victoria River tribes, probably as part—more likely a political extension—of a distinctly different bullroarer cult. As it was practised for a short time by the Murinbata, Wilili was associated with the use of a tiny bullroarer (known as karait pule—‘dead friend,’ ‘ghost leader’) which, when swung, gave out a high-pitched, shrill sound that, according to some men, made women overcome with sexual desire. The ritual leader (kiṅman, itself like Wilili a Djamindjung word) stood at a distance from camp at night, and swung the karait pule. At this signal all men who were Kadu Punj, that is, fully initiated, and all adult women, went out into the darkness to have intercourse according to their appropriate ŋinipun (subsections). Each man, that is, coupled with women from the two subsections into which he might marry. I could discover little else that was significant. The attitude of my informants was somewhere between shame and amusement. They would not admit to having taken part themselves but hinted that others, who roundly denied the charge, had done so. All agreed that Wilili was not true Murinbata custom. I felt fairly sure that that was so. I judged that a comparatively small group of men, enthused by their experience among the southern tribes, from which they were learning the new subsection system of social organisation, had tried to impose on their own people as part of Punj a custom that was possibly not a religious feature of the southern cult but a political extension of it. Be that as it may, Wilili was clearly incremental, not integral, to the bullroarer rite of the Murinbata. I suspect an attempt to give a religious sanction to the new system of social organisation, which was then causing upset because it challenged too many vested interests. Other episodes came to my notice—the mass sexual abuse of women for real or fancied threats to the men’s secret life, and the killing of several men for supposed
profanations of Karwadi—which showed plainly enough the interplay between religion, politics and private motive. The facts must weigh in the balance of judgment about the religion or, rather, the manipulation of it. It would be a pity if Aboriginal religion, once denied as a possibility, should be judged by its excesses or abuses. But it would also be a pity if total disbelief should be replaced by a sentimental estimate.

4. The Positive Features of Murinbata Religion

I propose now to state and discuss a number of propositions about the religious complex that in part summarise the main fields covered in earlier articles and in part depend on new material. The facts are local, but each proposition appears to bear out in a broad way conclusions which have been reached by many anthropologists who have studied other Aborigines. In some cases the facts of other regions have been left either as uninterpreted ‘custom’ or dealt with from viewpoints which I do not share. The extent to which my propositions hold true of those regions can therefore well wait on occasion and criticism. For the moment I put them forward as applying to one region only. They are not tied to any particular definition of ‘religion,’ and are drawn rather to illustrate what it meant ‘to be religious’ in the former context of Murinbata life.

(a) The religion incorporated a view that the structure of the world and life was fixed once-for-all at a remote time in the past. There was no creation ex nihilo but a culmination and transformation of things and conditions already existing. What then happened prefigured what could and did happen afterwards. The possibilities for men’s life were determined. All significant things took on their distinctive structures and tendencies, so that existing things were types or symbols of ancient things.

(b) Myths depicted the structuring past as a set of dramas, each of which moved to a climax in which a particular set of things became determinate. Persons and animals diverged from a unitary stock. Each went to its appropriate domain of present life, with powers and
limitations as they now are. The main institutions of mankind began. The
great features of the physical environment took shape. Thus, although
some of the content of the myths was cosmogonical, they were on the
whole cosmological, giving a pattern of relevances between things, a
moral order between structures of existence, such that the totality of life
was a cosmological structure.

(c) Certain myths, principally but not only those closely associated
with religious rites, dealt with divisive things, dualities or opposites,
that somehow were reconciled or brought to a term, though only
momentarily, and with effects that were both unitive and disunitive
and continued as concomitants of existence thereafter. The whole set of
definitive, institutive dramas gave the process of life a kind of dualistic
ontology.

(d) The Murinbata thought the dramas of the past a very great
mystery, but one that their forefathers had understood and that they too
could understand, at least in part, by depending on a received tradition,
which in fact was not questioned. There was no class of detached
questioners nor evidently any growth of facts seen as problematical.
Instead, there was a strong emotional and rational impulse to conserve
and act on a received tradition that had supposedly proved its truth by
continuity from the storied past.

(e) The Murinbata considered the countryside filled with plain
evidences that the dramas had occurred. The places of climax were
known and named, and each one contained proof—a shape, or form, or
pattern—of a great event. Even when not well understood, the presence
of such evidence was taken to be a sign betokening old intent and
present significance. The forces expressed in the dramas were thought
to be immanent in all such places and to be dynamically available for
men to use. The whole environment, though charged with numinous
import, was still a ground of confidence since it had been continuously
occupied by their own people.

(f) Living persons were thought to be connected intimately—
as individuals, sexes, genetic stocks, groups and categories—with
personages, places and events of the dramas. The connections were
thought of as historical, mystical, substantial and essential. They were
expressed mainly through the device of totems. Totems, as signs, stood
for the identity of and unity between persons known to possess them
by proper or mythical title, and proclaimed the possessors as the true
custodians of rights in rem, in personam and in animum over such
benefits and limitations of life as were instituted by the dramas. As
symbols, entering into a large number of systems, the totems mediated
to Aboriginal imagination the things made determinate in the dramas,
and guided the Aborigines in appropriate conduct towards them.

(g) It was thought that during the dramas two domains of life
became distinct but remained co-existent and interdependent. There
were then, and are now, an incorporeal (but not necessarily invisible)
domain, and a corporeal (but not necessarily visible) domain. The
former has the greater power. The Murinbata believed that daily life
gave continuous proof that spiritual force intervened in men’s affairs of
its own accord and, to some extent, at the behest of men with mystical
power over it. They supposed that many classes of beings existed in
the spiritual domain, two having particular importance: eternal beings
which resembled human persons but had not lived as such, and beings
that once had been human though possessing powers beyond those of
ordinary humans. The most elaborate myths and, in some cases, rites
developed about the second class.

(h) The main rites simulated events of the founding dramas, though
in covert ways often difficult to perceive through the complex and
crescive symbolisms. The rites followed a set liturgical formulary, and
had the character of great celebrations, being made the repository of
the highest products of imaginative, theatrical and material art. Each
ritual occasion vivified in the minds of celebrants the first instituting
of the culture, deepened the sense of continuity with men’s beginnings,
and reaffirmed the structures of existence. Inevitably they produced an
archaist outlook, a reactionary temper, and a conservative impulse.

(i) The ruling stratum, the older men, enforced a general assent to
the terms of life which they, as the last receivers of tradition, had adopted
at pain and cost. In part to conserve their own investment in ultimate values, they coupled religious celebration with disciplinary ordeals for youths, the next receivers. Thus, openly as well as covertly, they used the rites to sustain the paramountcy of male interests. By ritualising the biological and social development of males they put a higher worth on their own sex, both as flesh and as spirit, than on females. But although the rites exemplified and the myths rationalised that relative valuation they also tacitly acknowledged the fleshly and spiritual worth of women. In this respect political force may have dominated the religion in the interest of men, but it did so only in their secular interest; it did not, and could not, deny women their place—in some respects a leading place—in the structure and ontology of the life-process.

(j) Within the rites the initiated men used kindly, but often severe, methods and condign sanctions to attain two purposes: to subdue youthful egotism so as to accord with modes approved for men, and to bring some understanding of traditional mysteries. The mysteries evidently were obscure but powerful intuitions of men’s life and condition. Being so complex, they could only be adumbrated by means of symbolisms couched in familiar idioms, e.g. sexuality, the conflict and trust between kin, parricide, family relations, and so on. But the symbolic idioms were mediating, not ultimate, expressions. Their significations were the structures and transactions which were instituted for men by the transformative marvels of The Dream Time. The design-plans of the main myths and rites were symbolic affirmations of those events.

(k) To pass through the ritualised ordeals put a mark on the psychological, emotional, mental and social character of the initiates. It probably heightened their sense of ambient mystery and may have deepened their interior life. It certainly put them in fear of authority and taught them the value of social fellowship. The instructive artifices were extremely skilful. Throughout the ordeals fear was in some sense countered by security, isolation by comradeship, privation by sustenance, and pain by reward. A discovery of the dependency of life was eased by the revelation of things that could be celebrated joyfully.
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The dangers to life were relieved by a gift of the ritual means to assure its confident continuance. The end of the ordeal was the seal of manhood and the key to a man's privilege. All this was done in a context of high excitement, secrecy and beauty. Every man who came to full manhood did so, not only with no man's hand against him, but covered by the freely-given blood of a class of men who, though inherently opposed to him, depended on him as he did on them.

(l) Until very recent years the weight of the past, pressed by the hand of authority, lay heavily on the Murinbata present. But evidently it was not a dead weight. In spite of archaism, reaction and conservatism, a dynamic of life found and used a potential for change and development. There is evidence that several cults followed one another in a sequence. Some of the myths suggest a certain growth of cognitive discovery. Some facts can also be interpreted as an abuse or corruption of the religious cults.

The sum of evidence sustains three conclusions. (i) If any Australian Aborigines lived, as used to be suggested, in a stationary state of society with a static culture, the Murinbata were certainly not among them over any period which it is possible for inquiry to touch. (ii) To identify their religion with totemic phenomena would be a mistake. (iii) The society was not the real source and object of the religion.

These conclusions seem particularly important in view of much that has been written concerning the Australian Aborigines. Few anthropologists would now uphold the nineteenth century idea that the native Australians had settled on a dead plane of uniform changelessness, although some may still underweight the dynamism within their institutional life. But it is not seen clearly enough that totems and social situations simply provided familiar, convenient symbols by which to adumbrate what could not be designated more sharply or succinctly; that is, the things of ultimate religious concern. To regard totems as the essential content of the religion would be to say that symbols are more important than what is symbolised. To make Murinbata society religion's source and object would be to treat as ultimate what is only proximate, and to deny a patent fact: that in their rites the Aborigines
had some objects beyond themselves, beyond egotism, and beyond social gain. The great symbols, and not just the totemic symbols, were valued for their own sakes; in some sense they may even have obscured what they stood for; but they were never of ultimate concern, that is, empty of further reference. Social and selfish objects were pursued within the religion, and to some extent it may have been a religion of functionaries; of the elders, that is, who controlled its administration; but that part was not the whole. Both the rites and myths, when analysed, suggested that the religious objects were the intuited dualisms supposed to compose the life-process. The rites did so obscurely and only in part; the myths much more vividly and fully. The stories of founding dramas that transformed the archetypal past into an ontological process in which every Now could be justified or judged by Then, were surely nothing if not cognitive essays to justify high concerns of life and to guide conduct towards them.

5. The Context of Understanding

In the space of a few pages I will do what I can to substantiate these statements by illustrations and comments referred when possible to 5 (a)–(l). They will also outline the context of understanding I have used.

In earlier articles I suggested that the key to the mentality set out in (a), (b) and (c) was an idea that not only the structure and process of life were settled by the drama but man’s whole lot, including the possibilities for his life. Different myths dealt variably with that theme. The myth of Old Crow and Old Crab is particularly interesting. The version given in brackets is an alternative.

Crab (bali) was mutjinga (very old woman). She was very sick. Everyone thought she was dead. They buried her in a hole. But she was not dead. She stayed there about five days. She made a new shell and left the old one in the ground.

[Crow (wa’k) and Crab argued. Crow said to Crab: ‘What are you going to do (in order to die the right way)?’ Crab said: ‘You wait here.
This is what we people should do (in order to die the right way).’ She went into a hole. She stayed there changing her shell. She made a new shell. She threw the old one away.

Crow was there waiting. The people were crying. Yau! Crab was there! The mutjinga came back. Everyone was happy. Crow was angry. He said to Crab: ‘That way takes too long. This is what we people must do.’ He plucked Crab’s eyes out. Then he died immediately.

[Crow was there waiting. He went to search for Crab. He looked in the hole. He said: ‘This way takes too long. It takes too long to get strong this way.’ He went back to the waiting-place. Crab stayed in the hole until her shell was thick and strong. Then she came back. She said to Crow: ‘That is what we should do.’ Crow said: ‘No, it takes too long. Someone might come and kill (hurt) us. There is an easier way to die. This is what we should do.’ He rolled his eyes, fell down backwards, and died at once.

Crab took water and poured it on him. ‘O, he is dead.’

The two versions illustrate the difficulty of obtaining univocal versions of myths, but both exemplify the point under discussion. The Murinbata maintained that crabs did not die if left unmolested. When they grew old they changed their shells and renewed their youth and strength. The same possibility existed once for men, but was spoiled by Crow.5 The myth was the standard answer to questions about the ultimate why and wherefore of death: Crow’s decision determined all men’s fate thereafter.

The idea of death in a life that otherwise might have gone on renewing itself is a vivid particular image of the fundamental trauma that had so many expressions in Murinbata culture.6 Life, the process

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5 Was it a true option? The Murinbata likened the question put by Crow to Crab to the question put by one dancer to another in a rite if there were a choice between a man’s being, say, Turtle or Kangaroo for the next dance. Each man decided on a dance he knew how to do. Crab’s decision rested then on special, possibly secret, knowledge? No, the Murinbata said. Crow could have followed Crab’s example if he had wanted to.

6 It may be noted, incidentally, that in a broad sense the story-structure
of existence, was determined and thus limited—death being the great limit—by its structure. Its structure set all the possibilities within life. The myth seems to have overtones: a hope of immortality and a fear of its possible risk and cost, or at least of attaining it. The significance of the second remains obscure. But the Murinbata of the past gave themselves a certain assurance of the first through their beliefs about life.

There was evidently no myth about life’s genesis, but the fact of life was posited for the heroes of The Dream Time. Nor was there any myth, as far as I could discover, concerning the first manifestation of spirit-children (ŋaritygarit), except insofar as Kunmanggur or Kukpi put them in spring-waters. But those heroes were doubtfully true begetters. The central idea was that life was natural but death was not; the proof: that men had to be shown how to die without renewal. But ‘death’ was corporeal only. The body (ngen)7 ‘fell down,’ the breath or ‘wind’ (ŋitkit) stopped, and the shadow (wul) became still but the spirit (ŋjapan) survived, and—less certainly—so did an image/double/reflection/counterpart (ŋuluŋ). But what happened thereafter to the spirit was far from certain. There was talk both of a double death—that a ghost eventually became a butterfly,8 which acquired the colours of the ground in which burial had taken place—and of a transition in which the spirit either used an agent (miir) to take it to a new womb or transformed itself, or the woman, into that agent, so that it was both. Testimony on these points was divided. It also left a little uncertain whether it was the child-spirit itself or its guide that sought a woman of the opposite moiety. One notion was well established: that the ŋjapan went a long

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7 The word ngen was used for both human and animal bodies, but ku (‘flesh’) could be used with reference to humans only after death, when their ghosts were called ku-karait. In all other contexts ku implied edible flesh.

8 Some Murinbata, however, maintained that the word for butterfly (manman) had two meanings, but they had lost the exact significance of the second.
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way away. Hence the number of Murinbata supposed to be incarnations of the dead of other tribes. Facial or bodily resemblances were taken as proof that a dead person’s soul/spirit had found a new body and—of a sort—immortality.

The myths on which I have concentrated in the articles bear out that preoccupation with subjects of gravity suggested by \( (a), (b) \) and \( (c) \). But I learned also of many other myths that \textit{prima facie} seemed to reflect only inconsequential interests. The tragic element scarcely appeared at all. Some conformed, in a very broad way, to the paradigmatic plan of the major myths. But \( (d) \) not all conformed, or did so evenly. The whole body of myth seemed made up of elements of different substance and weight. But the \textit{fact} of the attachment of \textit{some} myths to rites, and the probability that \textit{all} rites could be ranged into historical series, made me consider seriously a possibility which, if it could be established, would be of much importance: \textit{that the span of the total body of myth was the measure of the depth of ritual development}. In other words, cults may wax and wane, but the insights that men have once attained into their rituals of passion have a longer life, and perhaps too a life of their own. If the true function of myth is to rationalise the exalting of things to the status of cult objects and if myth has a longer life than cult, then two sets of facts are easier to understand. The symbolic correspondences within and between the religious and secular orders may be interpreted as proof of a constant preoccupation with a limited class of sacred things. And the myths not attached to any recent or extant rite are as much the memorials of old formations of cult as are the stone-structures and earth-excavations. That may be put as an hypothesis, although one that I could not prove conclusively. But all the evidence pointed to the probability that change—and decay—had been continuous in Murinbata ritual life for a very long time. The great problem of interpretation was not to account for that, since flux is the natural law of human affairs, but rather to account for two things: the recurrent stabilities of ritual form, and the apparent repetition of the one ritual theme. I was satisfied about the fact of both and saw in it the measure of the unimportance of many discrepancies in Murinbata culture which might otherwise
have seemed of central and intrinsic interest. But I felt persuaded that to search for the system of Murinbata life was as mistaken as to search for the tradition. At the most there had been workings towards system and momentary captures of it.

In point of fact, the beliefs by which the Murinbata assured themselves of their human continuity were not at all well stitched together. The outline of the main ideas of life and death sketched above were a sort of general doctrine. But some clans at least seemed to consider that the spirits of apical ancestors stayed on near the ‘big’ (i.e. main) totem-centres. Nothing seemed farther from the living clansmen’s minds than that such spirits should go off for alien incarnation. Possibly the supposed presence of spirits explained the association (not a uniform one) between some totem centres (ŋoigumiŋgi) and ‘poison countries’ which were places of religious dread. Men would avoid such areas in the territories of other clans, and approach their own circumspectly. Each man called out his personal names in direct address to the spirits. No one knowingly ate food obtained in the immediate locality, since it was supposed to bring death or sickness. But the ŋoigumiŋgi as such were not places of danger or dread. I felt there were gaps between the world-drama as depicted in (a)–(d) and the more domestic aspects dealt within (e) and (f).

There was no difficulty in getting the Murinbata to agree that their traditions left much unclear, but the conflicts were evidently of little interest to them. I had many discussions of this order. So every person had a soul or spirit and after the obsequies—what? ‘It comes back ŋaritŋarit (child-spirit).’ How? ‘Miṙ.’ What was miṙ? ‘Anything—fish,

9 The persistence of this belief is illustrated by the following episode. In 1961 a young man whom I had known since his infancy dreamed that he was visited by two clan-spirits, who took him to the clan’s main totem-centre. There they showed him beautiful visions, and two spirit-dancers taught him a song and a dance. On waking, he drew a striking picture of his visions, and taught his clan-fellows the song and dance. Picture, dance and song are now thought of as the clan’s precious possessions, not least because of the young man’s death a year later.
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fat, food, bird, smoke, lightning.’ Were miṙ and ŋaritŋarit the same? ‘No. That ŋaritŋarit is a child (wakal); it is njapan; it catches hold of miṙ.’ How did it do that? ‘It finds a good place; miṙ brings it to dimbitj.’ What was dimbitj? ‘Where a man’s njapan grows up.’ Was dimbitj the same as ŋoigumiŋgi (totem-place)? ‘No, dimbitj can be anywhere; wherever ŋaritŋarit finds a woman, that is dimbitj; ŋoigumiŋgi is father’s country.’ But the totem-place was also njapan-place? ‘Yes; it is different; ŋoigumiŋgi is ŋakumal (‘dreaming’-place).’ So miṙ and ŋakumal were different? ‘Yes; that miṙ has nothing to do with ŋakumal and ŋoigumiŋgi.’ So miṙ and dimbitj were the same and different, and ŋakumal and ŋoigumiŋgi were the same and different? ‘Yes, one thing, one thing, one side, one side.’ That did not seem very clear: let us talk more of miṙ. ‘A man gets marks (liṭai) from miṙ.’ What kind of marks? ‘That child there; his miṙ was buffalo. There are marks on that child where the spears hit. Every time that child cries it sounds just like a buffalo.’ So the buffalo was ŋaritŋarit? ‘No, it was miṙ; it just stood there, waiting for the spear; that ŋaritŋarit made it deaf; it wasn’t really a true buffalo: it was that man’s wife!’ That was hard to understand: how, the same? ‘They were ŋinipun numi (of one kind).’ Were they one njapan? Laughter: ‘woman is kadu (person); buffalo is k (animal flesh).’ Were they ŋakumal numi (one totem)? Laughter: ‘buffalo walks everywhere; he has no ŋakumal.’ Were they ŋuluŋ numi (one image)? Laughter: ‘buffalo has four legs, woman has two legs.’ So; well, what does a man get from ŋoigumiŋgi? ‘He gets marks (liṭai) from that.’ What kind of marks? ‘You look like your ŋakumal; you smell like it; ŋakumal is like you, yourself; like your father (brother, friend); it is just like you being there; it is pushing you; you can’t let that place go.’ What else from ŋoigumiŋgi: the ŋuluŋ (image)? ‘Men do not know; the old men did not say.’ The ŋinipun? ‘No, a man’s ŋinipun is from his mother.’ Always? ‘Some people like to follow up the father.’ Had they heard that some blackfellows ‘throw away’ the father? ‘Yes. Murinbata do not like that. We like father-son to be kurjik numi (one moiety).’ So they got kurjik from ŋoigumiŋgi? ‘No, it is different.’ But every ŋoigumiŋgi was Kartjin moiety or Tiwunggu moiety; it could not be both? ‘Yes, it cannot be both.’ But what about X, where there was
a Kartajin totem-place in Tiwunggu country? ‘We don’t know; maybe that place really belongs to Kartajin. That was before we were alive.’ That seemed very mixed up; let us start again; perhaps a man really got ɲinipun from ɲoigumingi? ‘No.’ Well, from ɲakumal? ‘No.’ Well, from ƙurjik? ‘No; from mother, sometimes from father.’ Let us start again: how did ɲaritɲarit find the right woman? ‘The miŋ finds one.’ How? ‘Maybe it smells her; no one knows.’ But miŋ is ɲandji (a thing); how could a thing smell? ‘It isn’t really a thing; people say it is like your wife; we don’t know properly.’ Well, it was all very hard to understand. ‘Yes. That is what we think.’ What was ‘the hard hand’ (manaŋ detemam), the law, in all this? What were ‘the words of the lips’ (murin ɗaitpiŋ), the truth? ‘That is all the old men said; we do not know any more.’ What was ‘the weighty, the big thing’ (ɲandji ɲala). ‘The big thing is ɲakumal; it is like you yourself; you yourself are there; something is pushing you.’

Inquiry, as a European understands it, could bring few such matters to clarity, as a European demands it. Intelligent and helpful Murinbata would point out that they had never thought of such questions. Some younger men, whom I had set to work to question their elders, told me they had been rounded on quite fiercely. There, they were told, is what is true: the dreaming-places, the dreamings; as I recorded it, each such place a nexus of four symbolisms: essential (‘that ɲoigumingi keeps you alive: you are strong from that’); substantial (‘the ku-karaŋ know you are the right man; they know the sweat from that ɲakumal’); mystical (‘a thing we do not hold in the ear, but true’); and historical (agnatic links from living men to remembered ancestors). And there were the proofs: the groove cut in the rock by Tjinimin’s spear; the cleft of rock pierced by Karak’s beak to bring back water to the world; the place where Nginu chose fresh water as a domain rather than salt; the rocky bar where Wa’k and Bali debated how to die; as I recorded them, instances of faith transforming arbitrary signs into symbols of an assured provenience of life. Each sign was supposed to designate a source or ground of order in life, and each symbolism mediated that order into the constructions of life. In such circumstances Aboriginal fact and European category had precious little to do with each other. The Murinbata clung stoutly
to what old repute as being true had. They seemed to say that, however remarkable, things were true because they had served trusted men well from the beginning, and I felt capped for an answer.

Selective tradition, plastic myth and exuberant symbolism are an awkward triad. I found it scarcely possible, even with parsimonious aims, to see more than broad shapes, and then only by disregarding the social aspects of symbols; not dismissing them as unimportant, but as peripheral or incidental to a study of religion. For example, the varieties of totemism (f) seemed to me of secondary interest in that sense. It is not necessary for me to defend that view here beyond saying that I share Tylor’s opinion that totemism has been ‘exaggerated out of all proportion to its theological magnitude,’ and Goldenweiser’s that it is ‘a conglomerate of essentially independent features’; but, within that general view, I thought it clearly more important to try to study the symbolised rather than the symbols. The essential aim was to find the significations of the content and structure of a particular life of devotion within and under the masks of symbolism, one of them being the exotic mask of totemism, which in that respect I saw as but a language of imagery and, as I judged, of little religious interest in itself.

It was not of course possible to follow that aim directly. Every turn in the study of Murinbata imagination, experience and effort threw new light on the structure of their life of devotion. Only those perhaps who have attempted such a study will grasp the difficulty of avoiding sidepaths. For example, the rich inventiveness of imagination (g) was the source of unending problems of choice. Drive through one strong inquiry, or several necessarily weaker? If one, then would there be more profit in clarifying the puzzling and perhaps crucial element known as ŋuluŋ and if possible linking it (as the Murinbata did not) with the

10 I have stated it sufficiently in a paper ‘Religion, Totemism and Symbolism’ which will be published shortly.
11 I referred earlier to ngulung as ‘image/double/counterpart’ for want of a better description. I heard it used on different occasions in distinct though related senses. The painting of Kunmanggur at the cave at Kirindjingin was said to be The Rainbow Serpent’s ngulung; the actors in
borrowed and much misunderstood *ŋulu*, the Djamindjung matrilineal totem, or in finding a possible link between the sharp-toothed women of Merkem, who still—so I was told—seduced and ate incautious men, and Mutjingga, who comforted and ate the trustful Dream Time children? Inevitably I left unexplored fields that may have been more fruitful than those I chose, and I cannot do more here than hint at the complexity of the imaginative culture. Except for incidental remarks I will omit topics on which my information—and in some cases the Murinbata’s too—was notional (e.g. the hobgoblins supposed to people the sea-strand, hills, caves and jungles); those (e.g. magic and warlockry) which I would prefer to examine in a different context and those which require a very detailed discussion (e.g. the particular and general scope of important symbols). The last is an unfortunate omission in that Aboriginal culture derived much of its aesthetic appeal from the symbolisms of water, fire, earth, wind, smoke, thunder, lightning, blood, the body’s members and exuviae, hills and caves, earth and sky, sea and land, wet season and dry, animal kind, and all environing things that exhibited motion, vitality, distortion, striking form, or oppositeness. In the religious sphere such symbolisms play vivid parts. To write of ‘exuberance’ in that connection cinema films were called *ngulung*; an abandoned camp was *ngulung*. The Murinbata said that it meant ‘something like a trick’ and tried to clarify that by the example of a camp from which, in fear or duplicity, people had gone away leaving things behind to suggest that they were still there. Yet *ngulung* is ‘like *ŋjapan*’ but distinct from it. Perhaps its core-meaning is somewhere between ‘illusion’ and ‘simulation.’ Probably ‘simulacrum’ is the most apt word.

12 Aboriginal warlockry seems to me religious superstition used from political motive. It appears to consist of distorted elements standing over (*supersto*) from otiose cults and myths and used as a system of private menace within the contemporary social and religious orders. Its category is distinct from the abuses of contemporary religion, e.g. the submission of young women to Djaban for purposes of lust. To treat its co-existence with a religion as a ground for giving it equality with the religion seems to me unjustifiable unless in actuality it has that equality, or even dominance. In my opinion, neither was the case among the Murinbata.
is not an over-statement. I must depend on the descriptions of the rites to have suggested how a different study—say, of Aboriginal theatre as an art-form—would reveal the affinity of the Aboriginal mind for symbol—construction from commonplaces. The greater significance of the things to which the symbols point is my only reason for giving the symbols but passing note.

Perhaps the main matters in (g) on which comment will be helpful are the distinctions between spirit-beings. The personages mentioned by name or status-term in myths (Kunmanggur, Mutjingga, Kukpi, Kulumbin and Timandji being among them) were thought of as *kadu njapan*, ‘spirit/ghost persons.’ The belief was quite clear: they had once lived as true persons, though possessing superhuman powers. They were described also as ‘persons with fathers.’ It was indeed that property that marked them off from another great class of spirits, who had no fathers and were thus *kadu baŋambitj*¹³ persons who came, or caused themselves to be, in some mysterious way, by their own power; as the Murinbata said, ‘found themselves, without fathers.’ They were supposed to be invisible (except to men known to be *tjämuj* or spirit-seers) and also insubstantial (‘they have no *ŋen*’) but at the same time to have a man-like appearance. Although ‘not from blackfellows’ they were sometimes spoken of as *kadu karait*, or ‘dead persons,’ in contradistinction from *ku karait*, actual known persons who had died. It may make for clarity if I refer to *kadu baŋambitj* as pure spirits and to *kadu njapan* as clan-spirits or ghosts in order to mark them off from another genus, that of creature-spirits or hobgoblins, known as *ku baŋambitj*.

The Murinbata were terrified of hobgoblins, more so if that were possible than of ghosts. They feared the dark, and disliked jungles, thickets, caves and gorges. No one liked to walk alone. They were manifestly uneasy in some dank, solitary places I had reason to visit, and spoke much about hairy monsters with feathered arms, claws and

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¹³ The verb was used only in the third person. The prefix *bangam* was used with a large class of transitive verbs (cut, drop, follow, cover, break, strike). The meaning of *bitj* is obscure. It seems to connote a life-source, as in *dimbitj*. It is probably at least cognate with *bit* in *ngembital* (semen).
teeth of huge size and red eyes. I heard the most circumstantial tales from men of a matter-of-fact type, whom I knew to be full of physical and moral courage, about their own and others’ encounters and escapes. While they gave free rein to their imaginations, they nevertheless produced fairly standardised accounts and followed a more or less uniform convention in describing the classes of hobgoblins. Even so, they left me less than sure that there were firm dividing lines between hobgoblins and ghosts on the one hand and ghosts and pure spirits on the other.

In the actual practise of the religion the special class of clan-spirits to which Kunmanggur, Mutjingga and Kukpi belonged were clearly ascendant. But the pure spirits should be noticed too if only because they had no positive place in the recent cult-life, and possibly had not at any time, though firmly established in the belief-system. These self-subsistent beings had as their realm the sea-strand, the land, and the sky. Evidently they shared it peaceably. People professed to have no fear of them although in fact parents used their names to frighten children, and there is no doubt that one member of a pair of kadu baŋambitj (see p. 264) aroused acute fear because of a supposed link through The Flesh of the Road, the warlocks, with a class of hobgoblins.

The most eminent of the pure spirits was known as Nogämain, a sky-dweller, who lived (according to some) maŋe nukunu—‘of his own will’ or ‘in his own fashion’—and alone, except for a dog, with ‘no father, no mother, no brother, no child’; but (according to others) with a wife and son, the son being symbolised by a hunting spear (tjänba). It was supposed to be Nogämain’s influence, through his son, if a hunter killed a kangaroo or wallaby with one throw of a spear. Some people identified Nogämain with the man in the moon, and one of the smaller marks on the moon was often pointed out to me as the dog. Others were not so sure and, when asked about the spirit’s abode, made a generous gesture towards the whole sky and said a single word—kangal, ‘on high.’ Now and then I heard thunder and lightning attributed to

14 Many of their sketches strongly resembled the hominid figurines painted by unknown artists in rock-shelters in the region.
‘the people of Nogämain.’ It was generally agreed that he was one of the spirits responsible for sending spirit-children: I heard the statement *wakal bata Nogämain manḍadai* many times—‘Nogämain sends down good children.’ But since I had heard the same of both Kunmanggur and Kukpi, and could find no myth about him or any evidence that he had a connection with the religious ritual, I thought him comparatively unimportant. I was therefore much surprised to be told by one of the oldest Murinbata men that as a child he remembered hearing *ŋalanḍar ŋalanḍar* (the oldest men) calling out to Nogämain at night when they lay in camp short of food or ‘hungry in the tooth’ (i.e. craving) for the special foods that the spirit was supposed to be skillful in finding. My informant told me that the men would begin with a cry *Kaṙ!* follow it with a long trill *rrrrrrrrrrr!* and then use the imperative *Ku wada tjiŋabup! or tjitai ḏuŋapak!.*: ‘flesh-for-eating+? waiting+? wanting+you leave (it) for me’; ‘honey+you put it up (in tree) for me.’ The petitioner would repeat the invocation at intervals throughout the night, using the same form each time, varying it only for the food of choice.

Because it was the only instance that came to my notice of a direct petition, in a form approaching that of prayer, to a spirit for a benefit of life, I was inclined to be incredulous. But when other old people told me the same I felt that I had no good reason to be gratuitously doubtful. The old people to whom I spoke were impatient with any suggestion that they had been influenced by the example of Christian prayer. As I pointed out earlier (p. 259) direct appeals to clan-spirits for protection in places that would otherwise be dangerous were routine. Appeal to a pure spirit for a material benefit would seem to be psychologically continuous. It is perhaps relevant to point out that Nogämain, alone—as far as I could discover—among *kadu baŋambitj,* was also supposed to be *kadu ḏaitpiṅ,* ‘true man,’ and thus distinct from Kunmanggur, Mutjingga and Kukpi, who were *kadu re,* which seems to have the sense of ‘man as he was before man as he is now,’ that is, man of The Dream Time, who was unified somehow with what is now the animal kingdom. One aspect of Nogämain that I found baffling, and could never disentangle satisfactorily, was the distinction between him and one of the pair of
spirits mentioned (p. 263) as having some kind of relationship through warlocks with a class of hobgoblins. Some Murinbata insisted that Nogämäin was also Kangalmau, though others denied it. Those who identified them said of Kangalmau what the others said of Nogämäin.

But those who argued that Kangalmau was different were themselves divided in opinion whether there were one or two Kangalmau. I thought the tendency was to confound Nogamän, under the name of Kangalmau, with a pair of kadu baŋambitj known as Tanggamau, both sky-spirits, one well-disposed towards humans and the other malign in the extreme. They were thought to be in strange alliance with warlocks, who were themselves some sort of embodiment both of humans and a predatory class of creature-spirits known as ku tida. I had reason to believe that the name Tanggamau was borrowed from the Djamindjung tribe to the south, and that what was taking place was yet another instance of the crescive growth of plastic myth which I had noted in the case of Kunmanggur. All the mythical personages seemed clear-cut figures in ordinary conversation but lost outline or became shadowed by ambiguity under closer study. It seemed to me precisely that property which allowed both their mythological and ritual development. Hence also, I concluded, the somewhat blurred dividing line between the three classes of spirits. At their centres the differences were clear, but their borders commingled like sky, sea and earth themselves. Eventually I saw the wisdom of not forcing the ideas to a precision that was not in them. And, further, of accepting in a hospitable way what the Murinbata also said: that in the bush all around them were still strange people, true living persons, who showed themselves from time to time—like the women of Merkem, on the other side of a creek or, like the wild-looking, bearded, unknown men who would stand for a moment on hilltops and then vanish.

With imagination so active, and danger so omnipresent, the Murinbata had the highest confidence of life within their own clan-estates. Beyond, they were kamalik—‘strangers’—except in the mother’s country (kaŋatji), the country of the mother’s mother’s brother (kawu), which was often identical with that of the father’s father (kangul), to
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a lesser extent in the father's mother's (maŋga) country, and in the dimbitj, where the ŋaritŋarit first appeared or came from: ‘that is where my ŋjapan grew up’; ‘the people there are calling for me.’ The ghosts of such places were benign, or likely to be if one's name were known. Elsewhere, both human and mystical dangers were great, although cognates and close affines could be counted on for some protection. It was a measure of the enthusiasm for the rites that, at some peril, men went long distances and stayed for long periods in order to take part. In that respect (h) the religion had a civil and political function. However transiently, it muted the tension ruling between opposed groups. And, in every rite, the very principle of some main symbolisms was to express the power of trust over hostility. The social structure was not the only, but it was not the least, of the structures of existence brought at such times into relation with the plan and rhythm of ritualised life.

The darker side of the religion should be noted in connection with (h)–(l). I have mentioned the victimisation of women and the self-serving way in which the cult leaders used their power. There is no doubt also that real or fancied slights to Karwadi were made the excuse for frequent homicides. Something must be allowed of course for the approved modality of male personality, the anarchic secular polity, and the diffuse ethical sanctions but, even so, the religion plainly was one that lent itself as easily to private as to political use. But other facts set out in (k) and (l) may be thought to have a certain dignity. That a people who (if one accepts the evidence of the myths) saw themselves as the heirs of a cracked estate should have been so enthusiastic (if one accepts the facts of observation) in the pursuit of ever-new values of actuality argues for a revision of one's view of 'primitive' man and religion in Aboriginal Australia.

6. A Philosophical Speculation

The Murinbata had no proverbs or wise sayings that I could discover. The hierophants of the rites, the wise men, the spirit-finders and the
reputed warlocks seemed to have only trivial secrets. There were no philoso-
phers to stand aside and make life an object of contemplation. But in the senses that they had an outlook on life and the world and that the outlook had categories they could be said to have had a ‘philosophy.’ I tried to understand it as far as I could.

The myths and their comments on them might be generalised in the following way.

Things began. How or whence, no one knows. But there was a state of life that, though differently, contained all that now exists. Strife divided it into the present parts. The parts remained connected by common source (The Dreaming) but were made distinct, separate and in some cases opposed. That mysterious transformation (demŋinoi) led to the fact, constitution and appearances of all the entities now recognised as totems (miř, ŋakumal). They are distinct from men, but as brothers (fathers, sisters, friends) to them because of connections through places of marvel (ŋojumungi and dimbitji). Powers immanent in those places are still available to men. The Dreaming that was, still is: demŋinoi still happens. Because of that many remarkable events now occur. Child-spirits enter the corporeal world and survive it. Pure spirits and creature-spirits that ‘did not start anywhere’ but ‘found themselves’ persist and may intervene in men’s lives. Men of mystical ability draw special powers from the existent Dreaming. They do so not by thought (bemkanin), which is ‘like a dream in the head,’ but by dream (nin) itself. Theirs is an omnipotence of dream, not of thought. It lets them cross all the divisions of time, space and category that demŋinoi put into the radical unity of the beginning. Ordinary people cannot do so: they are separate, limited existents, distinct and sometimes opposed. Even people who are in some sense the same (e.g. siblings and clans of the same moiety) are distinct in other senses. They can cohere, or lose identity, only for purposes for which they are the same, which are the purposes settled on their clans as sacred corporations. In other matters they are distinct identities so that there must be restraint or tension between them. People who are distinct and opposed (e.g. spouses and clans of the other moiety) cannot cohere or lose identity at all. But they
depend on each other for many things and must therefore associate. But they can do so only with symbolised or actual hostility.

That measures, in an impressionistic and approximate way, the struggle between circumstance and principle, identity and relation, independence and interdependence, which seemed to me to characterise Murinbata society. It disallows any hypothesis or postulate that the society or culture was a ‘unified system’ or an ‘organic’ or ‘integrated whole.’ In couple with the empirical facts, it may lend some force to my contention that in Murinbata life there were only workings towards system and transient captures of unity. I would contend that nothing more was possible in a somewhat anarchic society which, while being caught up in change and development, was segmented into like (but not identical) and unlike (but not independent) parts that had to compete for many of the scarce goods of life, and to do so under conjugate principles, i.e. a set of principles no one of which covered all real-life situations.

Why then religious unity? Two facts in correlation have to be noted. Murinbata religion had as its focus the inexorable limits on all men’s lives: the only occasions on which all Murinbata appeared to feel a moral duty to help one person was when he was afflicted by the inexorable. One can perhaps catch a glimpse of the middle term by reference to the religious developments already mentioned, which I will now summarise and connect with religious practice.

7. The Dynamics of a Developing Religion

I. The religion was one of those constructed, as someone has said, in the third person. But there was a propensity to religion in the first person. That propensity was exemplified in three things—the invocation of Nogämäin, the direct addresses to clan-spirits, and the blooded oblation and symbolical destruction of initiates at the highest rite. The forms of prayer and sacrifice were latent, but the practices had not actualised. In terms of Hume’s principle—that one cannot think of things
that one has not antecedently felt—the Murinbata may be said to have developed a ‘feeling’ for prayer and sacrifice but to have stopped short of the ‘thought.’

II. The religion had been in the course of development for at least the better part of a century, probably longer, before European influence made itself felt directly. The religious emphases had changed several times over that period. But only those changes were accepted that would fit in with the established ritual forms, which thus became perpetuated. There was a distinct tension between the attractions of change and the forms of permanence.

III. In the recent past the religion centred on inexorable events of human life—puberty, maturity and death—but, strangely, not upon conception and birth. A woman’s discovery that she was pregnant was regarded as a sign that a child-spirit had made a prestation of itself by its own volition, and at a place and time of its own choice. Nevertheless, the inexorables were thought of as being in sequence along a stretch of a cycle with two parts, one corporeal and determinate, one spiritual and less determinate. The spiritual part of man had by necessity to move through that cycle even as fleshly man. The principle of the religion was to make fleshly, determinate and social life correlative with the spiritual cycle. But life in human, worldly society was at all times a function of that cycle, and subservient to it.

IV. The ‘definition’ of the life-situations in which the cosmic sequence was ‘recognised’ had changed over the last century, particularly in respect of puberty and maturity. There were gaps between the physiological stages and the social recognitions of them as religious occasions. The last change before European influence set in was to desacralise physiological puberty and to sacralise the rift between growing boys and females. Evidently, the connections between religious recognition and particular physical stages were not rigid or intrinsic. In the last change the growth of ‘understanding’ became more important than the attainment of physical puberty and manhood.

V. Neither the impregnation of a woman by a child-spirit nor the birth of a child was ritualised, and a ‘father’ and ‘mother’ were
thought to have no causative part in either event. A pregnancy could be aborted and a new child abandoned or killed, without moral fault or mystical risk. That is, a new life could be treated as an unsolicited and unwanted prestation without value in itself. But if it were kept, that is, accepted into the society of the living, then value was imposed on it. That changed its status from prestation to treasure. It became a named identity. An accepted life, growing in human society, was then subject to two necessities: as a spirit, it had to move along an inexorable course and, as a human person, it had to be given value and status appropriate to progressively developing functions of its worldly life. The religion divided the spiritual course into arbitrary (and changing) segments and made correlative with them changes of social function, value and status.

VI. Human and social necessity was thus ‘defined’ in terms of a cosmic and spiritual necessity. The person himself was treated as helpless. He had to surrender to imperatives. He could neither create new values and status for himself, so that other people must confer them on him, nor could he by himself vacate the values and status conferred on him in the past, so that that too must be done by others for him. The two tasks—to obliterate the old and to confer the new—were made moral duties for the class of men most opposed to him in organised social life. His own people—the clan which had given him his first place and value in social life—could not be asked to destroy what they had conferred, and could not alone command what had to replace it.

VII. There were thus two data for religious practice, a cosmic datum and a social datum, both imperative. The rites that developed the data were compound and complex. In respect of the cosmic datum, they were rites of assent, and implicitly of reverence, towards a spiritual imperative and, in respect of the second, fiduciary rites towards an imperative of men. They were unrepeated and progressive because the spirit’s course was irreversible and because its life-functions were developmental. Their dynamism was therefore integrative. In the compound-complex aspect they coupled two dominant types of symbolism: (a) the forcing of a person outside human fellowship and, after transformation, his restoration to fellowship; and (b) the removal from him of all social
value, status and functions and, after their destruction, the conferring on him of enhanced value, status and functions. What I have called the enthusiasm for ‘ever-new values of actuality’ (p. 266) evidently had its dynamic in the discrepancy between ‘restoration’ and ‘enhancement.’

VIII. Nothing could be discovered about the aetiology of the symbolisms. But in several respects they constituted a work of artless genius. They bracketed, as having in common something dismaying and relevant to men, several distinct structures of existence, including the cosmological, social and probably ecological structures, as well as the structures of functions, values and status within the total process of life.

IX. There were distinct correspondences of form and symbolism between the rites and myths. And both rites and myths had a structure or design-plan of a dialectical or progressively integrative character.

X. The myths seemed the first springs of contemplative religion, using allegorical idioms. In several important myths the dominant theme was an irreparable injury to man at the beginning of life under instituted forms. The sense of injury—whether a needless or a necessary injury was hard to make out—was expressed in several metaphors, but the common signification seemed to be a paradox, antinomy or dualism common to all the structures of existence. Thus, it did not appear that Murinbata society could be regarded as the religion’s source and object. Rather, the religion appeared as the society’s completion, within the ambit left by the injury.

With relation to (III) it is consistent that a people in a hard environment, with a poor material culture and little detached knowledge, should develop a religion around the inexorable. But anthropology does not seem to have made any postulate about primitive man, or primitive religion, under which two things are ‘consistent’: an effort to transcend the inexorable and to transform cosmic strokes against the individual into group celebrations at which everyone, however opposed, should be under duty to help, honour and gratify the afflicted and, by so doing, bring about a unity that, however transient, was higher than any other occasion of social life made possible. Murinbata religion was
clearly more than a religion of activists who, assenting to the limits of life, pursued the values of actuality. No social imperative made them celebrate joyously what could not be changed.

It is impossible to say positively that European influence may not have had something to do with the developmental aspect (II) of the cults. It is my firm opinion that there was no incorporation of Christian elements, and I hope that the facts presented will silence gratuitous doubts based on feelings that Aborigines, being ‘primitive,’ could not possibly have had serious thoughts about life. But the period of European influence in Australia, even in the Northern Territory, is longer than the period which anthropological inquiry can touch. The external structure of Aboriginal life was very sensitive to influences from a distance. Faraway changes may have precipitated cults, or enabled cults to develop, that affected the Murinbata long before they had even heard of Europeans. Against that possibility one must set the strong architecture of the facts in (III)–(X).

Their construction seems to me intrinsically Aboriginal, and thoroughly consistent with the whole tenor of that culture. But, in particular, the involution of development mentioned in (II) argues very strongly for endogenous as against exogenous influence. Elements of foreign Aboriginal culture certainly reached the Murinbata, but were not all equally assimilable. The test was the extent to which they could be made conformous with existing structures. One might say that development took a spiral course and that the spiral turned inward, not outward. It intensified rather than weakened Murinbata culture. The means of that involution can be seen in the devolution of sacred custom. When the greater attractions of Punj could not be resisted, the Murinbata did not discredit Manggawila: they gave it lower place and lesser sacredness of the same orders. They also kept the later Punj in continuity with the earlier form of the rite. The same principle probably led to the persistence of form throughout the other rites.
8. The Religious Economy

I would depict the Murinbata as valuing continuity both for its own sake and for the sake of the aesthetic appeal of its symbolisms, but also as making it a rational principle. Their mentality had what might be called an Adrasteian mould in that it imposed on time and change an image of persistence as the main character of reality. It could not deny Chronos but gave Adrasteia the triumph. In religious mood, they were enthusiastic but not ecstatic; they venerated but did not worship their sacra; they welcomed change insofar as it would fit the forms of permanence. In that way they attained stability but avoided inertia.

Obviously, a religion like theirs, that did not look back to a golden age or forward to an after-life that would resolve the dubieties of history, did not thereby escape any of the problems of this life. In some sense it may even have exacerbated them. One of them was the problem of variable value. It is characteristic of value that not even sacred values stay stable. They rise or fall unless they are kept stable since stability is not the same as inertia. Too great or too rapid a swing of sacred values is likely to bring down the whole structure of religion, by tainting the new with the discovered defects of the old. A collapse of Murinbata religion would have broken up their society—and later did—because of the intimacy of the connection. The problems were handled by these people very well. They cited The Dream Time as if it were an absolute although, as I have pointed out, it was but the moving shadow of their changing life. They held that it had left them with a stock or capital of things, good or bad, with a place in life and that there would be a continuous flow from the stock if they conserved the sources by honouring a received tradition. In point of fact, ‘the tradition’ was constantly adapted to new sacra and a new distribution of values, and political force was used to impose and maintain such assimilations. In that situation the appeal to an authoritative ground had its conveniences for those who guarded and interpreted the tradition and, as I have shown, the custodians used their positions repressively, on occasions abusively. But a cynical evaluation of those facts would not be warranted. This was not a society
in which political institutions had separated; there was no intellectual
detachment from beliefs; ‘believing’ was not itself a test of religiosity;
and fanaticism had not developed concerning particular formulations
of belief—indeed, there could be no fanaticism since apparently dispute
about the mysteries did not occur. If one can speak of an ‘innocent’
authoritarianism, this was it. The Murinbata had not yet discovered that
men could dispute the truth or falsity of the great events from which
men themselves had issued. There was authority, not divine, but the
consequence of things happening to, or done by, beings greater than
ordinary men. What issued was murin ḏaitpiṙ, ‘true words.’ Truth, once
exhibited, remained a datum.

To what extent they ‘believed’ their beliefs, or ‘really’ saw the world
from such viewpoints, would be hard to say. They could not adduce
a principle for every situation. Probably only a handful of men and
women at any time had a compendious knowledge of the culture. Fewer
still can have had a detached knowledge. General statements which they
made to me about tendency in belief and conduct were often disputed
and, I thought, best taken as norms idealised by the few, even when
followed by the many. But it seemed to me that those idealisations, that
is, rationalisations about structures of fact and value that may or may
not have been the case, were of particular interest in themselves; and,
in matters of religion, intrinsically more interesting than anything I
might learn from disciplining study to the level of statistical tendency.
When I speak of a religious economy in an Adrasteian mould I am well
aware that I am dealing in impressionism. But, then, the Aborigines
were themselves impressionist. It is worthwhile to set out the prudential
way in which, under their larger art of life, they disposed a limited estate
between ends which had appeal. The facts of (I)–(X) may then seem
facts of good reason.

Souls were conserved by being put into cycle between the corporeal
and incorporeal domains. The mortal part of men was buried in their
clan-estates, which were kept in the perpetual possession of the clans
as sacred corporations. The mystical property of each estate—the
ability to fructify the totem species, to control vital phenomena such
as rain, disease and wind, and to dream of song- and dance-giving spirits—were guarded as jealously as the products of the abilities and the outward emblems of the clan’s identity and rights. No one could cast off his clan or partition the estate. Malpractice was suspected if the flow of life-benefits from the estate weakened, for example by the disappearance or scarcity of a totem species and, as pointed out earlier, clans raided each other, not to capture land, which would not have been thought a rational act, but to steal the animating principle from totem-places. Why more was not made of *talu* or *intichiuma* rites to regenerate natural species remains unexplained: the region was rich in foodstuffs but not so rich that no shortages occurred. The emphases were rather on guarding the sacred places and their mystical powers. The succession of cults could have had something to do with the comparative diffuseness of the ‘increase’ customs. But even so that characteristically Australian complex—the notion of an original endowment of each clan with the means of life, a corporate plan of entitlement to the flow, and a conservational usage—was very patent. The cults exercised their appeal within the larger society made up of many clans of similar outlook. It was in part because of the similarity that the association between clans in the religious rites could only be an association of support, not of competition. Nothing was being allocated at such times. There could be no struggle for a division of what had already been divided.

In the social aspect, the purpose of the rites was to combine, for practical ends of life, including the interest of someone particularly afflicted by a limit on life, what had originally been disbursed. Inexorable changes, forced on men by the cosmic structure of life, could not be denied: all that could be done was to quarrel with them or to make them correlative with living. As I have remarked elsewhere, the Murinbata, like all the Aborigines, gave the impression of having stopped short of, or gone beyond, a quarrel with the terms of life. The myths are evidence that they reflected and felt a fatal impairment, but the rites are evidence that they met the issue in a positive way. They brought the inexorable within the total economy of living and put positive values upon it, so as to integrate it with social actuality and actuality’s values.
But what then of the diffuse syndrome which I described as a propensity to religion in the first person? And, in particular, the ‘sorrow for Mutjingga’?—an emotional disposition present, as far as I could ascertain, for the first time. They are puzzling questions to which I have not found answers. With a further observation, I will leave the account as one of a dynamic religion in which successive cults had celebrated a continuous significance that in the last cult appeared to have been enhanced.

The Murinbata, like many other Aborigines, postulated that the birth of a child was not caused by human intercourse. But I heard or saw sexual symbolisms which made the acceptance—I do not doubt that fact—of the postulate seem very nearly incredible. At the same time the schema of mystical impregnation by child-spirits was plainly another exemplification, though a shadowy one, of the structural schema of the rites and myths: death put a soul outside human society; it went away, came back transformed, and entered life again in a new state and locus. On the facts, the Murinbata were but one or two steps away from a discovery that the birth and/or social acceptance of a new life could be made a cosmically-defined occasion for a religious rite. One or two steps in the devolution of an extant rite—as from Manggawila to Djaban—would have sufficed had the discovery been made. Would it have brought them an equivalent step nearer the discovery of human agency in procreation? I saw here an analogue of the ‘feeling’ and the ‘thought’ in relation to prayer and sacrifice. In the mystery of agency in birth, the Murinbata had a ‘feeling’ for human causation but had not attained the ‘thought.’ It is an interesting speculation what might have followed from the positive discovery. A mystery dissolved would have desacralised a cardinal datum. The social imperative of ‘initiation’ could no longer have rested on a religious necessity. The religion could no longer have been merely correlative with a cosmic plan.

The first paper in the series (I) ‘The Lineaments of Sacrifice’ was written in the field. At that stage I had in mind to write a set of perhaps three. So many distinct problems had to be noticed that I could not manage them in less than six. Even so I have had to leave the subject
far from exhausted. I see now that (I) would perhaps have been placed better as (VI) and (VI) as (I).

While I was writing (II) in early 1960 Professor J. A. Barnes drew my attention to the fact that Professor Lévi-Strauss had already published a brilliant paper on the morphological analysis of myth. I had been unaware of that fact. Rather than consciously straddle two approaches which, though obviously convergent, depended on distinct sets of concepts, I thought it the proper course to continue with the approach stated in (I), which I had believed peculiar to myself. I had developed it in response to three connected matters: a certain disagreement with ‘structuralist’ anthropology, which seemed to me to have become an unclear mixture of false statics and covert dynamics around discrete topics, without any true central or branch-theory; a loss of faith in Durkheim’s dual categories, which had had a stultifying effect on the study of Aboriginal religion; and my inability to ‘make sense’ of the theoretical problems of religious and quasi-religious cults, notably the Melanesian cargo-cults, but including the absence of that type of cult from Aboriginal Australia.

In respect of the first matter, I developed the perceptual model of ‘social transaction’ from Radcliffe Brown’s paradigm of convergent interest and social value and, connected with it as indispensable logical tools, the concepts of ‘transitive operations,’ operations that ‘symbolised transitivity,’ and ‘signed conduct.’ The set made a dynamic schema which promised an escape from the ‘double-headed penny’ which Professor Raymond Firth, in my opinion rightly, identified as a central weakness of structuralism.

My interest therefore lay in the operational structure of transactional life, not in the functional structure of ‘relations’ between ‘points’ in a ‘network.’ In other words, in the composition and structure of observable processes—such as initiation—sufficiently distinct to be identified and followed through from start to finish. The stable character of Aboriginal initiations made them suitable; almost, so to speak, a ready-made statics, because of their ‘denial’ of time or, what is very much the same thing, their compounding of change. Having rejected Durkheim’s dual
categories as logically defective (a point that van Gennep saw clearly in requiring an ‘intermediate’ ground between ‘the profane’ and ‘the sacred’), and also as empirically inadequate (Tjirmumuk seemed neither sacred nor profane), I could find the real point of difference from conventional structuralism: that a *datum* had been made from what seemed to me the essential *problem* of study. That is, the stability and constancy of social and religious institutions.

To postulate that ‘institutions *must* exist if people are to live together’ is to assume everything that historiography takes for granted while investigating nothing that it studies, and to take for granted precisely what anthropology should investigate if it is to illumine historiography at the same time as its own problems.