

Chapter Two

From the Culture of Nature to the Nature of Culture c. 1825 — c. 1870

“What kind of nature is that which is subjected to decay? Custom is a second nature which destroys the former. But what is nature? For is custom not natural? I am much afraid that nature is itself only a first custom, as custom is a second nature.”

Pascal

It was during the second quarter of the nineteenth century that a significant body of information about the religious beliefs and practices of the Australian Aborigines began to accumulate. Prior to this there had been a few conjectures concerning the religious implications of certain facets of the behaviour of the natives. Ever since Dampier's initial observation that some Aborigines had a front tooth missing, these extractions had been a focus of speculation. Yet, even as late as 1839 Mitchell was forced to guess its significance. 'It would be very difficult to account for a custom so general and so absurd', he said, 'otherwise than by supposing it a typical sacrifice' (1839, vol. 2, p. 345). Another manifestation of initiation was equally puzzling. Matthew Flinders observed that

... the most remarkable circumstance ... [among the Aborigines was] the whole of them appeared to have undergone the Jewish and Mahometan rite of circumcision ... but with what view it may be done, or whence the custom were received, it is not in my power to state (1814, vol. 2, p. 212).

In fact, David Collins had published an account of an initiation ceremony he had partially witnessed at Port Jackson in 1796, but it

seems the above-mentioned authors had not acquainted themselves with his work (1798, pp. 311-318ff.).

Totemic practices had similarly given rise to speculation in the years prior to the 1820s. In a report dated 1815, Governor Macquarie briefly refers to totemic emblems, although understandably he had no idea of their meaning (1916, p. 610). At an even earlier date Collins mentions

An account ... in a pamphlet, or a newspaper, of a native throwing himself in the way of a man who was about to shoot a crow; and the person who wrote the account drew an inference, that the bird was an object of worship (1798, p. 302).

Collins did not accept this conclusion, and he adds that 'it can be with confidence affirmed, that, so far from dreading to see a crow killed, they are fond of eating their flesh' (loc. cit.).

There were also other snippets of information available. One European favourite was that the whites were believed to be dead natives. The earliest published report of this belief that I have come across is the following passage from the *Sydney Gazette* in 1805.

We are but little acquainted with the ideas entertained by these people on futurity, although from common observations it is discernible, that they are strongly infected with superstitious prejudices, which show themselves in an unwillingness to travel in the dark, the application of remedies to diseases, and in many other shapes. One of them, advanced nearer to civilization than the generality of his brethren, interrogated as to his notion of what was to happen after death, replied with some embarrassment, that he did not know positively; but perhaps he might become a white man (20-1-1805, p. 3).

From these and from other similar accounts, it is evident that with minor exceptions, the authors writing before the 1820s were compelled to echo the words of Watkin Tench — 'To their religious rites and opinions I am ... a stranger' (1788, p. 66).

1. The Discovery of Aboriginal Custom

The quality of the reports on the Aborigines and their culture improved markedly in the years following the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century. This was so for at least three reasons. First, exploration into the interior regions of Australia provided opportunities to encounter Aborigines untouched by contact with the colonials. Furthermore, the explorers were dependent upon native guides for their survival, and the long isolated journeys frequently resulted in warm, though somewhat patronizing, friendships with these guides. Those who had Aborigines as friends, and who observed them in their traditional state, spoke out against

the common prejudiced attitudes of the period. These sentiments are aptly illustrated by the words of Dawson.

To know them well it is necessary to see much more of them in their native wilds, and especially in situations where their natural dispositions have been uniformly acted upon by the example of the better part of European contact. In this position I believe no man has ever yet been placed (1830, p. 329f.).

The journals of explorers, such as Sturt, Eyre, Leichhardt and Grey, were extensively used by early ethnologists and anthropologists.

The second factor facilitating an improved understanding of the Aborigines and their culture was the instigation of Christian missions to the natives. This began in 1821 when William Walker was appointed missionary to the Aborigines under the auspices of the Wesleyan Missionary Society. Conscientious missionaries attempted to learn the language of the natives, and to become familiar with the religious beliefs and practices which they hoped to replace with Christian doctrine. These insights further fostered a new appraisal of the Aborigines. L.E. Threlkeld, who was one of the first missionaries, and whose reports are still of considerable anthropological value, is a case in point. Threlkeld's investigations led him to decry the popular notion that the Aborigines were incapable of being civilized. Turning his attack specifically on Baron Field, he said:

Judge Field, like many others, laboured under an erroneous impression in regard to the capabilities of the aborigines of New Holland ... [He was] misled by the reports of others, and gave credence to common fame without due regard to the admonition of him who says: — 'Judge not by appearances, but judge righteous judgement' (1853-5, p. 70).

Since this brief account of the attitudes of missionaries towards the Aborigines is opposed to the opinions of some scholars, I suspect it might be necessary to digress briefly to defend this view before proceeding to the third factor responsible for the re-evaluation of the Aborigines. For instance, D.J. Mulvaney (following in the steps of B. Smith) suggests that the missionaries were largely responsible for hostile reactions to Aborigines. He argues that

Any suggestion that a fallen race awaiting its redemption possessed nobility of character was considered unchristian. Mission organizations stressed the abomination of savage society and spared no thought of investigating its past or recording its present. Along with other Oceanic races, the Australian Aborigines became ignoble (1958, p. 141, cf. B. Smith, 1960, p. 7).

Such a view can only be maintained by citing selective examples, and by misquotation.⁴ To begin with, in this period it was, in fact,

missionaries like Threlkeld, Salvado, Schurmann, Meyer, Teichelmann and Taplin who did the most in investigating the past and recording the present of the Aborigines (see R.M. & C.H. Berndt, 1964, p. 356f.). Once again, while it is quite true that missionaries considered the Aborigines to be a fallen race, it does not follow that they could not maintain a positive evaluation of the character of the natives. In fact, missionary ambitions would be rendered absurdly futile if they did not at least admit that the Aborigines were of a character high enough to fathom the basic tenets of Christianity. This point is aptly expressed by C. Smith, a missionary to the Booandik of South Australia from 1845-1880. She was condescendingly, yet sincerely, concerned for the Aborigines. She strongly believed that 'Jesus Christ died to save this poor degraded son of Adam, that he indeed gave Himself a ransom for his soul' (1880, p. 109). Degraded they might be, but the primary motive of the missionaries was not to dwell on this degradation, but rather to secure for the Aborigines their right to salvation (cf. H.H. Nelson, 1965, p. 65). Finally, I have already demonstrated that it was at the end of the eighteenth century that the Aborigines were rendered ignoble. When viewed in context (and the history of ideas must be kept in context) there can be no doubt that in reality the missionaries were fighting against the extreme racist views current at this time.

The third factor that led to a re-evaluation of the Aborigines was the English humanitarian movement, whose influence was strongly felt in some Australian circles. Evangelical and Quaker philanthropists had publicly opposed the African slave trade and slavery in British colonies. Two men (both of Quaker stock) who were influential in securing the abolition of slavery in 1833 were Thomas Foxwell Buxton and Thomas Hodgkin. Following this victory, Buxton organized the formation of a Parliamentary Select Committee in Britain to determine

... what measures ought to be adopted with respect to Native Inhabitants of Countries where British Settlements are made, and to the Neighbouring Tribes, in order to secure to them the due observance of justice and the protection of their rights; to promote the spread of Civilization among them, and to lead them to the peaceful and voluntary reception of the Christian Religion (quoted in Stocking, 1971, p. 369).

The Rev. J.D. Lang wrote to Buxton and submitted to the Committee a scheme for the establishment of Aborigine Protectors to work in Australia, and to redress injustices done to the Aborigines (in Woolmington ed., 1973, p. 106f.).

By 1837 the Select Committee had done its work. Hodgkin now took the lead and formed the Aborigines Protection Society. On January 31st, 1838, G.A. Robinson was appointed, with four assistants, as chief protector of the Australian Aborigines.

The Aborigines Protection Society had a twofold function. On the one hand there was the Christian-humanist emphasis which focused on protecting native rights and promoting 'The *moral* and *religious* improvement of the Natives, by instructing them in the Elements of the Christian Religion' (ibid. p. 111). No doubt this function had chief priority, but it was necessarily dependent upon another function:

The duties of the Protectors of the Aborigines in New Holland [wrote the Committee] should consist, first, in cultivating a personal knowledge of the natives, and a personal intercourse with them; and with that view these officers should be expected to acquire an adequate familiarity with the native language (ibid., p. 107).

Some consequences of this approach can be seen in the following passage, written by Assistant Protector Edward Parker:

Many erroneous opinions have been entertained respecting the character and habits of the Aborigines of Australia, and it has been commonly asserted that they are totally destitute of any notions worthy of the name of religious opinions. In the early period of my acquaintance with them, I entertained similar views, but further communication has induced a conviction that a traditional mythology exists among them, rude and obscure, indeed, but in all probability the indistinct relics of some older and more complete system. It must be sufficiently obvious to all who have had much intercourse with the native tribes, that they are exceedingly reluctant to speak on these subjects (quoted in Braim, 1846, vol. 2, pp. 241-2).

We could almost say that the role of the Protectors was a combination of ethnography and applied anthropology. This statement is not made flippantly. The Aborigines Protection Society was one of the first institutions having the study of native races as one of its main tenets. Eventually there arose within the society a group of individuals who became primarily interested in the study of natives *per se*, although they never opposed the broader humanitarian goals of the society. In 1843 these individuals formed their own society: the Ethnological Society of London (cf. Stocking, 1971, pp. 370-2ff.). More will be said of the fate of the Ethnological Society later in this chapter. Meanwhile, we must look a little more specifically at what the explorers, missionaries, Protectors, and others, were saying about the Aborigines.

To recapitulate, those individuals writing most authoritatively on the Aborigines, and consequently, those who were most often read and cited by European scholars, showed an increased breadth and depth in their knowledge of the natives. This knowledge formed the basis for a re-estimation of the character of the Aborigines. These authors rarely condoned the primitivistic arguments of the preceding century, but they were equally hesitant

to accept the totally negative views of the majority of the colony. They were prepared to argue that the intelligence of the natives was comparable with that of the white settlers, and that the Aborigines were potentially, if not actually, a decent people. Some went so far as to proclaim that 'in manners and general intelligence, they appear superior to any class of white rustics' (Mitchell, 1839, vol. 2, p. 340). More typically, it was emphasized that they were in need of conversion and the influence of civilization. Nevertheless, they were 'lively, good-humoured, inquisitive, and intelligent' (P. Cunningham, 1827, vol. 2, p. 45).

These last words were written by P. Cunningham. Cunningham was one of the first people to report the existence of an Aboriginal belief in supernatural beings; a benevolent spirit called *Koyan* (later raised to the status of one of Howitt's All-Fathers), and an evil spirit called *Potoyan*. What is relevant here is that despite Cunningham's positive appraisal of the nature of the Aborigines, he is highly critical of their beliefs and customs. Indeed, he went so far as to say that the Aborigines were *culturally* 'at the very zero of civilization, constituting in a measure that connecting link between man and the monkey tribe (ibid., p. 45f.). Here a very important distinction must be identified. Unlike their eighteenth century predecessors, these authors had no interest in the hypothetical construct known as 'natural man', who lived unrestrained by customs. They advocated neither Cook's uncorrupted Noble Savage, nor Tench's savage who was unsoftened by social restraint. Rather, they argued that the Aborigines' downfall was that they were slaves to their 'customs'. (Strictly speaking, we cannot use the word 'culture' here, since it had not been introduced into the English language, cf. Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952.) This theory allowed these early investigators of Aboriginal life to usher these natives back into the common fold of humanity, while simultaneously remaining critical of their society and customs. In the words of Eyre, 'Many of the worst traits in his character are the result of necessity, or the force of custom — the better ones are implanted in him as part of his nature' (1845, vol. 2, p. 155). The sharp line which distinguishes nineteenth- from eighteenth-century attitudes towards the Aborigines is clearly summarized by G. Grey.

No question has, in as far as I can apprehend the subject, been so utterly misunderstood and misinterpreted, as the one relating to the customs and traditional laws of savage races. Deistical writers and philosophers of great note but small experience have built up whole theories, and have either overturned, or striven to overturn, ancient faiths and wholesome laws by arguments deduced, in the first instance, from the consideration of man in his simple and savage stage; ... But to believe that man in a savage state is endowed with freedom either of thought or action is

erroneous in the highest degree. He is in reality subjected to complex laws, which not only deprive him of all free agency of thought, but, at the same time by allowing no scope whatever for the development of intellect, benevolence, or any other great moral qualification, they necessarily bind him down in a hopeless state of barbarism, from which it is impossible for man to emerge, so long as he is enthralled in these customs (1841, vol. 2, p. 217f.).

In the following section I will demonstrate how the religious beliefs of the Aborigines were considered to be instrumental in binding them down in this so-called 'hopeless state of barbarism'.

2. First Impressions of Aboriginal Beliefs

The traditional Christian response to non-Christian religions was to deem them the work of the Devil. We saw that Quiros had offered this explanation, and it was still a popular solution in the nineteenth century. To give but one example, the pious methodist G.A. Robinson (before he had become Chief Protector) said of the Tasmanian Aborigines that:

These devotees of the devil are excessive in their devotions. They continue to chant their devil song and perform their rites at every opportunity (in Plomley ed., 1966, p. 301).

However, there were less conventional and more interesting responses to Aboriginal beliefs. These responses tie in directly with my previous statements about the distinction between the nature of the natives and their customs. Of all their customs, it was their 'superstitions' which had retarded the development of the Aborigines.

Grey's writings are once more revealing here. It should be noted that Grey's works were to become very influential in anthropological theories of the evolution of religion. His fame lies in his discovery of the *Kobong* of the Aborigines, which he was quick to compare with the *Totam* of the American Indians (1941, vol. 2, p. 228). When M'Lennan wrote his articles on 'The Worship of Animals and Plants' in 1869-70, Grey was his only source of information on Australian Totemism. In 1845 Grey was appointed Governor of New Zealand. In his efforts to pacify the natives he learned the Maori language, and translated over 200 pages of *Polynesian Mythology* (1855). This book became a standard source work for mythologists, folklorists and anthropologists. Having read it, Tylor began corresponding with Grey.

The opinions Grey expresses in the preface to *Polynesian Mythology* are identical in essence to his attitudes towards Aboriginal beliefs. Wisely, he realized that it was vital to understand

the mythological traditions of a people in order to govern them (1855, p. x). Nevertheless, he regarded these myths as detrimental to the well-being of these races.

[T]he purity of these traditions and barbarous mythological systems [he said], by no means diminishes their importance as regards their influence upon the human race (*ibid.*, p. xiii).

Indeed, it was the beliefs of the Aborigines which had kept them in a sub-civilized condition. Grey believed the Aborigines 'are as apt and intelligent as any other race of men' (1841, vol. 2, p. 374), and that they 'might gradually be brought to a knowledge of Christianity and civilization' (*ibid.*, p. 377). However, he said (echoing Critias in the fifth century B.C.), what had hindered their progress was the fact that

The whole tendency of their superstitions and traditional regulations, is to produce the effect of depriving certain classes of benefits which are enjoyed by others (*ibid.*, p. 218).

This view that the traditional beliefs of the Aborigines were responsible for all the evils of their society was shared by Eyre, who said:

Superstitious to a degree they are taught from earliest infancy to dread they know not what evil or punishment, if they infringe upon obligations they have been told to consider as sacred. All the better feelings or impulses implanted in the human heart by nature, are trampled upon by customs, which, as long as they remain unchanged, must for ever prevent them from rising in the scale of civilization (1845, vol. 2, p. 384).

It should be noted that these authors said it was the 'customs' or 'superstitions' or 'myths' of the Aborigines that had hindered their progress, not their 'religion'. The simple explanation for this is that it was denied that the Aborigines possessed anything worthy of the name 'religion'.⁵ This conclusion was not reached due to lack of knowledge of phenomena nowadays embraced by the word 'religion'. Rather, 'religion' then had a different meaning. Prior to the formulation of the theories of the evolution of religion, 'religion' was reserved for a rational and articulate belief in a moral Supreme Being. In the remainder of this section I will consider the effects of this implicit definition on the reactions towards Aboriginal religious beliefs.

To begin with, these authors were untouched by the efforts of Schleiermacher and the romantic movement to re-emphasize the non-intellectual side of religious life. They saw religion primarily as a corpus of beliefs. We can see that Eyre, for instance, adopted this position. Eyre gives an account of a healing ceremony performed late at night and culminating in the removal of the culprit spirit in the

form of a stone. The whole scene vibrated with 'numinosity'. He continues:

It was a long time before I lost a vivid impression of this ceremony; the still hour of the night, the naked savages, with their fancifully painted forms; their wild but solemn dirge, their uncouth gestures, and unnatural noises, all tended to keep up an illusion of an unearthly character, and contributed to produce a thrilling and imposing effect upon the mind (1845, vol. 2, p. 364).

Nevertheless, Eyre was quite insistent that 'The natives of New Holland, as far as yet can be ascertained, have no religious beliefs or ceremonies (ibid., p. 355). Furthermore, Eyre was aware of sacred objects, witchcraft and sorcery, initiation ceremonies, burial practice, a belief in a soul, and certain creation myths. But of course, none of this was religious. They were merely vague and indistinct superstitious imaginings.

The ceremonies and superstitions of the natives [he said] are both numerous and involved in much obscurity; indeed it is very questionable if any of them are understood even by themselves (ibid., p. 332).

For Eyre, nothing less than a rational conception of a great First Cause which was the object of worship sufficed as 'religion'.

David Collins had arrived at much the same conclusion. Collins referred to the 'mystical rites' of initiation and the belief in spirits. This was not religious. He boldly attacks those who uphold religious universality, and states:

It has been asserted ... that no country has yet been discovered where some traces of religion was not to be found. From every observation and inquiry that could be made among these people, they appear to be an exception to this opinion (1798, p. 301).

Once again an intellectualistic orientation has led to the demand for a rational belief in a Sovereign Deity as a prerequisite of 'religion'. These authors agreed with Lord Herbert of Cherbury's definition of religion. They differed from him in denying that this belief was universal.

There was another respect in which these authors agreed with Lord Herbert. His third common religious notion was that religion was not merely ritual, but the practice of virtue and piety. This doctrine was particularly influential in Australia where one of the primary functions of religious officials was the uplifting of morality in a penal settlement. C.M.H. Clark suggests that early Australian officials were 'desperately anxious to use any faith which encouraged subordination and all behaviour or moral qualities conducive to subordination, such as sabbath observance, sobriety, respect for the marriage tie and the family' (1962a, p. 78). This ethical

interpretation of religion added weight to the view that the Aborigines were without religion, since their 'superstitions' had no positive moral repercussions. The beliefs of the Aborigines, said Cunningham,

... can scarcely be called religion, since it neither influenced them to the commission of good actions nor deters them from the perpetration of bad (1827, vol. 2, p. 40).

The missionary C.G. Teichelmann offered a variation on this theme. He says that since the sky beings believed in by the Aborigines were merely men and animals who have departed this earth, they have no idea of superior supernatural beings. Consequently, the natives are materialists claiming to have full control over the world, but having no recourse to a final morality (1841, p. 10f.). Such a belief retarded their true nature and kept them 'almost upon a lower stage than beasts' (ibid. p. 5).

At this point it may help if the ground covered so far in this chapter is briefly summarized. Explorers, missionaries, Aborigine Protectors and others provided qualitatively superior accounts of the Aborigines and their customs. They acknowledged that the natives were fully human, good-humoured and intelligent. However, it was simultaneously held that the progress of this race had been retarded by their customs — in particular, by their superstitions. Furthermore, these 'superstitions' were sharply distinguished from 'religious' beliefs, the latter being understood as the rational comprehension of a Supreme Being, who induced moral virtue in his worshippers. Few observers (there were exceptions — see below) found such beliefs amongst the Aborigines, and so they were deemed to be destitute of religion. The obvious solution was to replace native 'superstition' with the true 'religion'; thus saving not only their souls, but also their bodies from a life without civilization.

3. Race and Religion

At this point we must leave the Australian field, and examine instead some of the ethnological and anthropological uses of the Australian Aboriginal evidence. I have already referred to the role the Aborigines Protection Society had played in facilitating a re-evaluation of the nature and culture of the Aborigines. It was also mentioned that although all the members of the society had philanthropic concerns, some individuals became increasingly interested in 'savage' societies *per se*. Eventually, in 1843 these individuals broke away to form the Ethnological Society of London.

This new society was by no means opposed to the Aborigines Protection Society, and Hodgkin himself took an active interest in

both societies. The motto of the Protection Society had been *Ab Uno Sanguine* ('of one blood'). The Ethnologicals accepted this proposition, although they couched it in more scientific terms. They saw their function as inquiring

... into the distinguishing characteristics, physical and moral, of the varieties of Mankind which inhabit, or have inhabited, the Earth, and to ascertain the causes of such characteristics (quoted in Stocking, 1971, p. 372).

In practice, this meant documenting the unity of mankind using diffusionary theory. There is no better illustration of this method than that to be found in the works of the society's brightest star, J.C. Prichard, who like so many early anthropologists, was of Quaker stock. Since Prichard had published his *Researches Into The Physical History of Man* in 1813, his ethnological interests had obviously developed before the formation of these societies dedicated to the study of native races. It is, in fact, Prichard, and not Tylor, who should be accorded the title 'father of anthropology' (cf. idem., 1973).

That Prichard had begun his studies before there were any societies devoted to this task, indicates that an attempt to classify and analyse the ever increasing corpus of information about preliterate societies was a need that was being simultaneously felt in several quarters. In Kuhnian terminology, while pre-scientific 'fact-collecting has been essential to the origin of many significant sciences ... it produces a morass' (Kuhn, 1962, p. 16). What was needed was a 'paradigm' for the study of man,⁶ since

No natural history can be interpreted in the absence of at least some implicit body of intertwined theoretical and methodological belief that permits selection, evaluation and criticism (ibid., p. 16f.).

Initially, however, no anthropological model for the study of man achieved the status of Kuhn's paradigms (*viz.* a virtually uncontested model which defines and co-ordinates the day-to-day puzzle-solving activity of 'normal science'). The diffusionary and ultimately biblical approach of the ethnologists never reached a position of supremacy. Fierce opposition was soon to arise.

For various reasons, the Ethnological Society went into a decline after the mid-1850s. It emerged metamorphosed at the end of that decade. The resulting Ethnological Society was now dominated by physical anthropological methods rather than the old philological ones. Simultaneously, individuals outside the Society, notably John Knox, who published his *The Races of Men* in 1850, were questioning the proposition that all men were 'of one blood'. Knox said:

Already, in a few years, we have cleared Van Dieman's Land of every HUMAN aboriginal; Australia of course follows, and New Zealand next: there is no denying the fact that the Saxon, call him by what name you will, has a perfect horror for his darker brethren. Hence the folly of the war carried on by the philanthropists of Britain against nature: of these persons some are honest, some not (1850, p. 153).

In 1863 one of Knox's disciples, James Hunt, headed an offshoot of the Ethnological Society. This was the Anthropological Society of London.

The field of the study of man strongly divided. One of Prichard's followers defined their basic difference as follows:

The natural history of man is chiefly divided between two subjects, anthropology and ethnology ... Anthropology determines the relations of man to the other mammalia ... Ethnology, the relations of the different varieties of mankind to each other (Latham, 1850, p. 559f.).

Broadly speaking, the Anthropologicals saw races as permanently fixed and separate species. They were thus restating the polygenist argument, enjoying an attack on orthodox Christianity in the process. Now partially freed of its heretical offspring, the Ethnological Society once more revealed its Christian philanthropic roots. The Ethnologists were usually monogenists, and maintained their anti-slavery policy.

There were other factors distinguishing the two societies, but the issue of monogenism versus polygenism was a central one (cf. Haller, 1970; Gossett, 1963, chaps. 3 & 4). Of course, these were not new issues. The polygenist ideas of La Peyrère have been previously discussed. There had also been scientific refutations of polygenism, by Buffon and Blumenbach in particular. Blumenbach's doctoral thesis *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind* divided the human species into five races, and in the third edition of 1795 he had classified the Australian Aborigines amongst the Malayan race. However, Blumenbach maintained that all five races were of at least potentially equal mental ability. It is interesting that his ideas received a rather ill-informed twist in the hands of Baron Field, who said

The skull, the genius, the habits, of the Australians appear to me, as far as I have been able to investigate the subject, to have, in all of them, a degenerate Ethiopian character (1825, p. 197; cf. Mulvaney, 1966, p. 299f.).

Unlike Blumenbach, Field believed that the Ethiopians, and thus the Aborigines, were incapable of being civilized.

Yet while the monogenist/polygenist issue was not new in the mid-nineteenth century, it was then that the respective positions received the patronage of the Ethnological and Anthropological

societies, and thus became institutionally recognized approaches to the study of human diversity.

How was all this relevant to the study of Aboriginal religion? The individuals involved in these debates did not confine their researches to comparing languages, examining artefacts and measuring skulls. They were also concerned with man's intellectual faculties, and in particular with the moral and religious development of the various races of man. Both parties agreed that religion was a distinguishing factor of the human species. They disagreed as to whether all men were capable of living the religious life.

At one extreme, Prichard was advocating a relatively orthodox Christian version of revealed monotheism which diffused throughout the world following the Flood. While this monotheism had been corrupted over time, its essential structure was still discernible beneath the barnacles of superstition. According to Prichard,

all mankind sympathise in deeply impressed feelings and sentiments, which are as mysterious in their nature as in their origin. These are among the most striking and remarkable of the psychical phenomena ... which are peculiar to man; and if they are to be traced among races of men which differ physically from each other, it will follow that all mankind partake of a common moral nature, and therefore ... constitute a single tribe (1813, vol. 1, p. 176).

In Prichard's estimate, proof of the universality of religion and morality was sufficient to render the monogenist position incontestable.

The history of moral sentiments among different nations and of their religion and traditional and peculiar metaphysics [he said], if it could be collected from the data everywhere correct, would bring us very near to a satisfactory conclusion on the subject of these inquiries (loc. cit.).

As was later to be the case for social evolutionists, the ethnographers saw the psychic unity of mankind as being closely related to religion. But, as Stocking says,

whereas Tylor used psychic unity as a premise in tracing a uniform sequence in evolution of religion, Prichard used observed uniformities of religion as a basis for establishing the psychic unity of man (1973, p. xci).

The polygenists were willing to take up the gauntlet. G. Pouchet said:

The religious or moral systems of a people being the highest manifestation of its intellectual tendencies, we see that the study of religions enters quite naturally into anthropology; it is a part of this comparative study of the human mind, unfortunately much neglected, but which begins to take a place worthy of its importance in the world of science (1864, p. 65).

However, while Pouchet accepted religion as a test for the unity of the human species, he hoped to arrive at very different conclusions from those of his monogenist opponents.

What will become of the unity of the human species [he said], if we can prove that certain races are not a whit more intelligent than certain animals, and have no more idea of a moral world or a religion than they themselves do? (ibid, p. 16).

Since the infancy of polygenist thought, the Australian Aborigines had been a prime instance of what humans were not. It is consequently not surprising to find the early ethnographers and anthropologists citing evidence from Australia to support their respective theories. From the brief overview that I have given of the attitudes of early 'field-workers' towards Aboriginal religion, it might appear that the evidence was distinctly favouring the polygenists. Given the implicit definition of 'religion' of the period, what Prichard and his followers would require was evidence for an Aboriginal Supreme Being. Was this evidence available? In a word, the answer was 'yes'. Although reports of an Aboriginal Supreme Deity were, at this stage, decidedly rare, they were nonetheless in existence. In the following section I will examine the earliest reports of such a Deity, and after this I will analyse the significance of this information for early anthropological debates. It will be seen that what amounts to an anthropological dispute about Australian 'High-Gods' had in fact begun almost half a century before Lang wrote *The Making of Religion* (1898).

4. Aboriginal Supreme Beings

There has been a certain amount of inaccuracy in the search for the earliest reports of an Aboriginal Supreme Being. For example, Ehrlich has said that

An original, definite belief in a Supreme Being had been observed among the natives of Australia by Eyre, Henderson, and others from 1845 onwards (1922, p. 12).

This is quite incorrect. While Eyre refers to *Biam*, who was later equated with the 'High-God' *Baiame*, he distinctly maintains that 'A Deity, or great First Cause, can hardly be said to be acknowledged, and certainly is not worshipped by this people' (1845, vol. 2, p. 355). Henderson was of a similar opinion. Although he wrote in 1832 that '*Piame* is the name of the God of the black people of New South Wales' (1832, p. 147), he later said that 'The natives appear to have no religion whatever. They have no idea of a Supreme Being' (1851, vol. 2, p. 156). What we need in order to determine the date of the

earliest reports of a Supreme Deity is a positive statement that the Aborigines have such a belief, and not merely references to beings which we identify by hindsight, as 'All-Fathers'.

Having said this, I must now confess that I am not at all confident that I have found the earliest references to an Aboriginal Supreme Being, and I suspect further research would in all probability turn up some very interesting material relevant to this issue. Nonetheless, I can offer a fairly complete account of those reports that were most often utilized by European scholars.⁷

There were at least two lines of descent through which evidence of an Aboriginal Supreme Being found its way into anthropological literature. Firstly, the Benedictine Bishop Salvado had discovered a belief in an all-powerful being named *Motogon* amongst the Aborigines of New Norcia in Western Australia. *Motogon* had died of old age, and thus, although he had created the heavens and the earth, he was no longer an object of veneration or worship (1851, p. 126). Max Müller happened upon Salvado's report in an article by C.H.E. Carmichael (Müller, 1878, p. 16f. & p. 98). Ironically enough, Andrew Lang, who opposed Müller for his reluctance to use anthropological evidence (Lang, 1897, *passim.*), was introduced to his defence of Australian Gods through reading Müller's Hibbert lectures for 1878. Lang's initial response to Müller's account of Salvado's findings was to suspect the Benedictine bishop was in error.

But later [he says], when I began to notice the coincidence of testimony from many quarters, in many ages, then I could not conceal from myself that this chapter must be read (quoted in Sharpe, no date, p. 19).

The other line of descent by which evidence of an Aboriginal Supreme Deity entered anthropological circles was more important, influential and immediate, since it was utilized in the early debates about the unity of the human species. In 1839 Archdeacon Günther had written:

There is no doubt in my mind that the name *Baiamai* refers to the Supreme Being, and the ideas entertained by some of the more thoughtful aborigines concerning Him are a remnant of original traditions prevalent among the ancients about the Deity (quoted in Thomas, 1905a, p. 51).

Günther went on to say that *Baiame* was eternal ('never dies'), omnipotent ('He can do what he likes'), benevolent ('He is very good'), and perhaps even worshipped. Günther was hesitant about the last of these attributes since some of their ceremonies had been kept secret from him. Apparently Günther's work found its way into Müller's hands (cf. Manning, 1882, p. 158), although, to my knowledge, Müller never refers to the passage about *Baiame*.

The next reference to *Baiame* is to be found in the reports from the United States Exploring Expedition, conducted from 1838 to 1842. Commander Wilkes published an account of the voyage in 1845. In the following year Horatio Hale published a volume on 'Ethnography and Philology' based on his findings whilst on the expedition. Prichard's chief disciple R.G. Latham said this volume was 'the greatest mass of philological data ever accumulated by a single enquirer' (quoted in Gruber, 1967, p. 37). The work was also extensively utilized by Müller in *The Science of Language*.

Hale devoted eleven pages to an account of the natives in the Wellington district which included a brief section entitled 'religion'. Although he makes no reference to Günther or to his book, it seems from the contents of his section on 'religion' that he had access to the same sources of information. It seems probable that his informant was Threlkeld, to whom he does refer, although it remains a curious fact that Threlkeld never mentions *Baiame* in his publications. Whatever his sources, Hale could conclude:

it is not true ... as has been frequently asserted, that the natives have no idea of a supreme being, although they do not allow this idea to influence their actions. The Wellington tribe, at least, believe in the existence of a deity called *Baiamai*, who lives on an island beyond the great sea to the east (1845, p. 110).

Hale's writings are particularly relevant, since he had not only collected ethnographic evidence from throughout the Pacific, but was also involved in comparative and theoretical studies in ethnography and anthropology in America. Like Prichard and his followers, Hale was fighting against polygenist theories — in particular those of the Americans Morton, Nott and Gliddon. Again, like the British ethnographers, he relied on philological diffusionary techniques to argue his case. Hale was the first theoretical anthropologist to have first-hand acquaintance with the Aborigines. However, in the final analysis, Hale's greatest contribution to anthropology, monogenism and the fight against racism was his extensive training and patronage of his pupil, who has been said to have done 'more to combat race prejudice than any other person in history' (Gossett, 1965, p. 418). In return this pupil, Franz Boas, said Hale had 'contributed more to our knowledge of the human race than perhaps any other single student' (quoted in Gruber, 1967, p. 34).

It is thus both fitting and inevitable that the British monogenists should have made extensive use of Hale's reports. Thus, Latham cites evidence from the United States Exploring Expedition in refuting the notion that the Aborigines were so debased as to be incapable of entertaining even a superstition. Latham says:

The lowest form of humanity has been sought for in Australia, whilst the physical conditions of the country and the absence of those animals and herbs that supply human food, have made it a likely quarter to exhibit it. Whether, however, so low a rank in scale of human development be, upon the whole, a fact or exaggeration, it is certain that, upon several points, there has been considerable overstatement. One sample of this sort is the accredited opinion as to the absolute incapacity of the Australians of forming even the rudest elements of a mythology — an opinion which engenders the notion that their intellects are too sluggish for even the evolution of a superstition (1850, p. 233).

Latham then goes on to quote Hale's evidence that refuted the notion that the Aborigines had no notion of a Supreme Being.

Prichard likewise makes extensive use of the reports of Wilkes and Hale (in 1813, vol. 5, pp. 264ff.). While Prichard was all too aware of the inadequacy of available information about the Aborigines, he nevertheless expressed his firm conviction that future discoveries would confirm the reports which had suggested that the Australian natives believed in life after death and rites for the dead, good and evil spirits, the worship of gods, and in a world governed by providence.

The Australians as yet remain of all nations the least known, since scarcely anyone has yet been able to converse with them, or to understand the expression of their thoughts [said Prichard]. But fresh evidence is every day collected tending to raise the low estimate which has been formed, and long maintained, of their extreme mental degradation ... The opinion of the extreme stupidity of the race has been shown to be unfounded, and the latest and most authentic statements enable us to recognise among them the same principle of a moral and intellectual nature, which, in more cultivated tribes, constitute the highest endowments of humanity (1855, p. 713).

The polygenists either ignored or sought to refute references to Aboriginal Deities. Pouchet, who believed that monotheism was the exclusive possession of Semitic races, said the Aborigines were totally devoid of religion. He quoted with approval the opinion that

The natives of Australia ... are deficient in the idea of a Creator or Moral Governor of the world, and all attempts to instruct them terminate in a sudden break up of the conversation (1864, p. 66n.).

Turning now on Latham's use of evidence from the United States Exploring Expedition, Pouchet maintained that the supposed Supreme Being of the Wellington natives had been introduced by Christians or Buddhists. If Prichard and Latham had to some extent anticipated Lang, then Pouchet — as if to leave us with the feeling that no argument is ever completely original — was anticipating Tylor's opinion that the Australian All-Fathers had been borrowed from missionaries (see below). Pouchet retorted:

It is certainly true that, in the American expedition under Captain Gray [sic Grey (sic Wilkes)], it was thought that some religious ideas could be perceived among them; but it appears from the same account that the song [to *Baiame*] which constituted all this apparent religion, had been brought from far by strangers, and adopted by the natives — doubtless, by other Australians, who had already been influenced by the Christian ideas of the white men, or the Buddhist principles of the Malays. To relate the history of the introduction of an idea among a people is, in reality, to declare and prove that this idea did not exist there before (ibid., p. 67).

Pouchet thus discredited Wilkes and Hale, and instead opted for the more common notion that the Aborigines

have no idea of a Divine Being ... They appear to have no comprehension of the things they commit to memory, I mean especially as regards religious subjects (loc. cit.).

And so the two schools continued to lock their horns in combat. Neither school was ever to win the victory. Rather, in the true Hegelian fashion, a synthesis emerged which transcended thesis and antithesis. This synthesis arose from within the monogenist camp, but it took the polygenist insistence of permanent racial differences seriously. The ultimate statement of this new position was, of course, the theory of evolution. However, the idea of the 'evolution' of human races was not without precedent, as can be seen in the following passage from William Lawrence's controversial *Lectures* ... (1st edition 1813). Lawrence's book is important in that it not only shows that the idea of racial progress (and virtually the theory of natural selection) was common before Darwin, but also it corrects my necessarily oversimplified caricature of the monogenist position. In fact, Prichard and Latham represent only one extreme of this stance. At the other extreme were individuals like Lawrence who believed that, although all men belonged to a common stock, some races had failed to develop to the level of others. To all intents and purposes, these monogenists were every bit as racially prejudiced as the polygenists. This is clearly reflected in Lawrence's description of the Aborigines.

Their remorseless cruelty, their unfeeling barbarity to women and children, their immoderate revenge for the most trivial affronts, their want of natural affection, are hardly redeemed by the slightest traits of goodness. When we add, that they are quite insensible to distinctions of right and wrong, destitute of religion, without any idea of a Supreme Being, and with the feeblest notion, if there be any at all, of a future state, the revolting picture is complete in all its features (1819, p. 308).

The evolutionary anthropologists leaned towards this extreme of the monogenist position.

For reasons that cannot detain us here, the Anthropological Society went into decline. Huxley took this opportunity to try to reunite the two societies (cf. Stocking, 1971, pp. 381-387ff.). In 1871 the Anthropological Institute was born, with Lubbock as its president. 'Anthropological' in name, it was principally the old 'Ethnologicals' in spirit. Yet the ethnological tradition had not emerged unchanged. In 1880 Tylor (then president of the Anthropological Institute) recollected that

the Polygenist theory was effective in preparing the way for the doctrine of Evolution now so widely prevailing, which, by regarding races as divergent varieties settled into comparative permanence, meets the problem of the existence of different races more rationally than could be done by the old Monogenist theory (1880, p. 444).

An analysis of evolutionary anthropological attitudes towards the Aborigines and their religion will be given in the next three chapters.