

The Rainbow Serpent

World Anthropology

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The Rainbow Serpent

A Chromatic Piece

Editors

IRA R. BUCHLER
KENNETH MADDOCK

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General Editor's Preface

This remarkable book owes its origin to Charles P. Mountford, who submitted to the Congress his essay on the rainbow-serpent myths of Australia. It was clearly an important contribution by a senior field-worker. The paper was reproduced by the Congress and sent to registrants all over the world who wished to read it in preparation for its discussion in Chicago. Illness prevented Dr. Mountford himself from making the long journey from South Australia to the Congress; but the paper was discussed by others in his absence.

All agreed that the paper should be published in the series to emerge from the Congress. But there was a problem. The paper was of a length (167 pages of typescript and photographs) between a monograph and an article. We were publishing William Bascom's *African dilemma tales* as a separate book in the series, but it was twice this length. It happened that no other papers submitted to the Congress were of an appropriate subject matter to be paired with Mountford's. Then came a most timely coincidence. On June 1, 1974 came word from Alan Dundes, who was editing a book of short Congress papers, *Varia folklorica*, that he had recently been sent a stimulating, monograph-length exegesis of this very rainbow-serpent myth, prepared by Ira Buchler for a seminar only two months earlier! He suggested that if it and the Mountford piece were published together they would make "a rather neat package which could well become a classic source/reference in the mythology literature." I wrote to Buchler at once, sending him a copy of the Mountford paper and receiving in turn his own. We quickly agreed; I wrote to Mountford who agreed happily (under date of August 19, 1974) adding that "Dr. Buchler's worldwide approach to the Rainbow Serpent Myth, coupled with my local approach to the subject should make a considerable contribution."

The problem of finding a perfect Editor for the volume was solved when Buchler suggested Dr. Kenneth Maddock, Macquarie University in

Australia, who eventually agreed to include his own paper, to write the Introduction, and to help to edit the book.

Unfortunately Charles Mountford did not live to see this book in print. His widow wrote that "Monty . . . had put so much of himself into the preparation of his paper on the 'Rainbow Serpent Myth' and his dreams of attending the Congress at Chicago that the world had become a wonderful dream place" (February 27, 1978). Indeed, "Monty" would have enjoyed a unique Congress which made a lasting impression on those who came.

Like most contemporary sciences, anthropology is a product of the European tradition. Some argue that it is a product of colonialism, with one small and self-interested part of the species dominating the study of the whole. If we are to understand the species, our science needs substantial input from scholars who represent a variety of the world's cultures. It was a deliberate purpose of the IXth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences to provide impetus in this direction. The *World Anthropology* volumes, therefore, offer a first glimpse of a human science in which members from all societies have played an active role. Each of the books is designed to be self-contained; each is an attempt to update its particular sector of scientific knowledge and is written by specialists from all parts of the world. Each volume should be read and reviewed individually as a separate volume on its own given subject. The set as a whole will indicate what changes are in store for anthropology as scholars from the developing countries join in studying the species of which we are all a part.

The IXth Congress was planned from the beginning not only to include as many of the scholars from every part of the world as possible, but also with a view toward the eventual publication of the papers in high-quality volumes. At previous Congresses scholars were invited to bring papers which were then read out loud. They were necessarily limited in length; many were only summarized; there was little time for discussion; and the sparse discussion could only be in one language. The IXth Congress was an experiment aimed at changing this. Papers were written with the intention of exchanging them before the Congress, particularly in extensive pre-Congress sessions; they were not intended to be read aloud at the Congress, that time being devoted to discussions—discussions which were simultaneously and professionally translated into five languages. The method for eliciting the papers was structured to make as representative a sample as was allowable when scholarly creativity—hence self-selection—was critically important. Scholars were asked both to propose papers of their own and to suggest topics for sessions of the Congress which they might edit into volumes. All were then informed of the suggestions and encouraged to re-think their own papers and the topics. The process, therefore, was a continuous one of feedback and exchange

and it has continued to be so even after the Congress. The some two thousand papers comprising *World Anthropology* certainly then offer a substantial sample of world anthropology. It has been said that anthropology is at a turning point; if this is so, these volumes will be the historical direction-markers.

As might have been foreseen in the first post-colonial generation, the large majority of the Congress papers (82 percent) are the work of scholars identified with the industrialized world which fathered our traditional discipline and the institution of the Congress itself: Eastern Europe (15 percent); Western Europe (16 percent); North America (47 percent); Japan, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand (4 percent). Only 18 percent of the papers are from developing areas: Africa (4 percent); Asia-Oceania (9 percent); Latin America (5 percent). Aside from the substantial representation from the U.S.S.R and the nations of Eastern Europe, a significant difference between this corpus of written material and that of other Congresses is the addition of the large proportion of contributions from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. "Only 18 percent" is two to four times as great a proportion as that of other Congresses; moreover, 18 percent of 2,000 papers is 360 papers, 10 times the number of "Third World" papers presented at previous Congresses. In fact, these 360 papers are more than the total of *all* papers published after the last International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences which was held in the United States (Philadelphia, 1956).

The significance of the increase is not simply quantitative. The input of scholars from areas which have until recently been no more than subject matter for anthropology represents both feedback and also long-awaited theoretical contributions from the perspectives of very different cultural, social, and historical traditions. Many who attended the IXth Congress were convinced that anthropology would not be the same in the future. The fact that the next Congress (India, 1978) will be our first in the "Third World" may be symbolic of the change. Meanwhile, sober consideration of the present set of books will show how much, and just where and how, our discipline is being revolutionized.

In addition to the two books casually mentioned (*African dilemma tales* and *Varia folklorica*), there are many others in this series which describe and analyze the works of the mind and of the spirit, from the earliest beginnings and in every part of the world.

Chicago, Illinois
June 20, 1978

SOL TAX

Preface

The book has as its central theme a chromatic image: a mythical being known in aboriginal Australia as the Rainbow Serpent. In the introductory piece to this volume, Kenneth Maddock outlines the history of anthropological concern with this conception, and its relationships to other aspects of Australian art, ritual and mythology.

My concern is limited to the ontogeny of this volume. Many have served who are not mentioned elsewhere, and the contribution that they made needs to be noted. Like the terms that define a riddle, some of the pieces that have been brought within a common frame were initially intended to stand apart. Other essays, in the manner of an arranged marriage, were written with a volume in mind. The design of the volume as a whole is the artifact of a bit of history, described in detail in the General Editor's Preface.

I would like to express my thanks to Karen Tkach, Mouton's World Anthropology Editor, for helping to expedite matters and to Elizabeth Krijgsman whose copy editing helped us sort out a variety of tangles that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. Barbara Buchler has given intellectual and personal support from the first faltering steps in Paris, from the dreaming to the present. More than thanks, this is a confession of gratitude and affection.

The initial conception for the Mountford-Buchler volume was worked out very nearly four years ago. As a novice in matters of Australian mythology, I was honored to participate in a duet with a distinguished Australian naturalist and ethnographer. In the interlude between conception and production, death has taken Charles Mountford from us. I hope that this book serves as a modest token of our respect and admiration for his contributions to anthropology.

A final thought must be offered to the Australian aborigines. Seduced

x *Preface*

by the power and harmony, the emotional depth and ecological fidelity of their mythical thought, we have attempted to offer a bit more in return than program notes. Being in this world of mythology and its logics, at least for a moment it belonged to both of us: where there was no longer anything to either give or to take.

IRA BUCHLER

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Introduction

KENNETH MADDOCK

The papers here published are concerned with the beautiful image of the rainbow serpent which recurs in aboriginal Australian art, myth, and ritual. That belief in such a being is widespread among aborigines and important to them was maintained more than forty years ago by Radcliffe-Brown. I do not know that anyone has disagreed; yet, as the articles in this book show, the nature of the belief remains an open question. Because the papers to follow are diverse in character—Mountford's an illustrated survey, Buchler's a structural analysis after the manner of Lévi-Strauss, mine a local study—it may be useful first to consider conclusions reached by others. These can be reduced essentially to two positions.

There is, on the one hand, the opinion that the rainbow serpent is a clearly delineated figure filling what is normally an important place among the other figures with which aboriginal mythology has populated the world. His properties enable him to be easily distinguished from them. It is characteristic of this position that its exponents speak of rainbow serpents in the singular and with the definite article. There is, on the other hand, the view that what are called rainbow serpents belong amid a host of fleeting forms in and through which a fundamental conception of the world is expressed.

Should it be objected that these approaches differ only as the two sides of a coin, then it can be answered that they take inquiry in different directions. The first leads the student of a society to look for a discrete personage comparable with seemingly similar figures from other

This introduction was written during a sabbatical year spent in Nijmegen. I am indebted to Macquarie University for its grant of leave, to the Instituut voor Culturele en Sociale Antropologie at Nijmegen for the use of its library and other facilities, and to Professors S. Tax and I. R. Buchler for suggesting that I write an introductory piece.

societies. He brings them into relation because they share one or more features: rainbows, but also snakes; in the water, but also in the sky; responsible for female fecundity, but responsible also for destructive forces. It follows from this approach that a figure will be left out of account if it lacks most or all of the features taken to be critical. The second view leads the student to look for complex configurations of thought and imagery in which the different figures are drawn with shifting outlines so that they seem often to merge with one another.

Radcliffe-Brown is undoubtedly in the leading position among defenders of the first view, and many writers on the subject have followed in his footsteps. Even when there was information pointing in other directions, they failed to reassess the orientation he had given.¹ Attempts to show the “deeper” significance of rainbow serpents have admittedly introduced considerations unmentioned by Radcliffe-Brown, but this has not stopped these beings from continuing to be conceived of just as he did.

Thus, for Ronald Berndt (1951: 12–13, 31), the rainbow serpent symbolizes “the Penis” and is the male counterpart of the All-Mother, who symbolizes “the Uterus” (see also Berndt and Berndt 1951: 128–129). For Elkin (1951: 9), commenting on the Berndts’ data, “no deep analysis is needed to show that the mythical Snake is a sexual symbol”; and for Schmidt (1953: 909), discussing the same data, the rainbow serpent represents “the male element (*membrum virile*)” or, which is perhaps not quite the same, “the male idea of the penis.” For Triebels (1958: 129–130), in his unjustly neglected comparative study, the rainbow serpent symbolizes, in its snake aspect, the spirally formed cosmic power that lay in the world’s virgin waters (*het oerwater*), and it is, in its rainbow aspect, an emanation of the snake; in the course of time the rainbow serpent, depicted more or less anthropomorphically, gained in prominence over the spirally formed cosmic power. For Eliade (1973: 115–116), the rainbow serpent is no more a rainbow than it is a snake; it is a “religious structure” that unites opposites in a totality. For Hiatt (1975: 158), writing on male rainbow serpents, the rainbow serpent is “an appropriate symbol for intimidating neophytes and for representing cosmic power because real fathers, especially in their phallic aspects, may seem intimidating and powerful to their small sons.”

Differences are evident among these and other explanations, and this, allowing that some writers have had regional or otherwise specific rather than continental or universal phenomena in mind, shows how interesting their subject is. It is striking, however, that a wide measure of agreement exists on the exterior of the beast to be explained. The differences are about the significance of rainbow serpents, and the main dividing line is between those who favor a psychosexual and those who favor a metaphys-

¹ Radcliffe-Brown’s influence on rainbow-serpent studies has thus been analogous to his effect on studies of kinship (see Rose 1976) and local organization (see Hiatt 1962; 1966).

ical meaning. But what is said in the ethnographic reports shows that identity, too, poses difficult questions, and it is open to doubt that there can be a satisfactory general explanation, as distinct from plausible partial explanations, while the identity problem is left neglected. Let us, then, turn from explanation back to identification. This, of course, means turning back to Radcliffe-Brown, with whom it all began.

According to Radcliffe-Brown's first paper on the subject, "the rainbow-serpent is not confined in Australia to any particular ethnological province, but is very widespread and may very possibly be practically universal. In other words it is characteristic of Australian culture as a whole and not of any one part or stratum of it" (1926: 24). His second paper attaches still greater importance to this being: "The rainbow-serpent as it appears in Australian belief may with some justification be described as occupying the position of a deity" (1930: 342). Radcliffe-Brown used to speak as if there were one rainbow serpent, despite contrary indications in some of the reports on which he relied.² This tendency was less pronounced in his first paper, where one may read, for example, that "In the tribes around Perth it is called *wogal*, and certain water-holes are pointed out as being each the abode of a *wogal*" (1926: 22), and "the rainbow-serpent, whether regarded as a rainbow or as a serpent, or species of serpent . . ." (1926: 24). One notices that Radcliffe-Brown vacillated between singular and plural in referring to *wogal*.

The treatment Radcliffe-Brown's second paper gave to some southeast Australian data shows his fondness for reducing many to one. Thus he identified *kurree*, a Euahlayi word reported by Mrs. Parker and translated as "crocodile" by her, as "really the rainbow-serpent" (1930: 343). From Mrs. Parker's observations it appears that a medicine man keeps a tiny *kurree* within himself, that crocodiles (rainbow serpents in Radcliffe-Brown's interpretation) swallowed Baiame's wife, and that *kurree* who swallow their victims whole live in some waterholes. There are, in short, many rainbow serpents (assuming the crocodile=rainbow serpent identification to be correct) and they are of different sorts. Radcliffe-Brown thought that the *kurree* Mrs. Parker reported from the Euahlayi and Mathews from the Kamilaroi "is identical with the *wawi* of the Weilwan and other tribes" (1930: 343). If these beings are indeed many in number and sort, is it likely that there should be identity, as distinct from some broad resemblances, among the *kurree* and *wawi* of a number of different peoples? Of a being called Myndie or Mindii in his sources and reported there to be controlled by the men of a certain group,

² Goudsblom (1974: 104–111) has commented critically on the common preference for the singular above the plural in sociological writings. One speaks, for example, of "the family today" rather than of "families today." Of those who would dismiss this distinction as pedantry, Goudsblom observes that they would never allow themselves a like nonchalance in the use of statistics.

Radcliffe-Brown stated, “This was evidently the horde to whose territory the chief home of the rainbow-serpent belonged, and therefore the men of the horde had power over it” (1930: 347). It is typical that he did not speak of “the home of the chief rainbow-serpent” or of “the (chief) home of a rainbow-serpent.”

The 1930 paper introduced a small symposium to which Elkin, Piddington, and McConnel were the other contributors. Elkin and Piddington covered some of the same ground, and it is instructive to compare their accounts. According to Elkin (1930b: 351), the Karadjeri call their rainbow serpent *Maiangara* and identify him with a mythical water snake named *Pulang*. According to Piddington (1930: 354), the Karadjeri explain rainbows by a myth about *maiangara* [rainbow, death adder] and deny that he is in any way connected with *bulaing*. Although *bulaing* (presumably Elkin’s *Pulang*) “apparently corresponds to the rainbow-serpent elsewhere in Australia (he) is in no way connected with the rainbow” (1930: 352). McConnel (1930: 348) thanked Radcliffe-Brown for pointing out a connection between a northern Queensland being called *yero* and the rainbows that appear in the spray of waterfalls. Is the implication that the connection was so little obvious to her that she had to be prompted to make it?

A clear lesson of the 1930 symposium is that large differences exist among the beings identified as rainbow serpents and that a certain freedom enters into their identification. The same conclusion can be drawn from Mountford’s paper in the present volume. One might try to get out of these difficulties by appealing to Wittgenstein’s concept of family resemblances, which he used to explicate games; but that would only create another problem, for one speaks of family resemblances only in cases in which the persons who resemble one another are related to one another. Otherwise one speaks simply of resemblances. Is it right to assume that rainbow-serpent beliefs have an ancestral belief in common?

It is curious that rainbow serpents, in spite of the auspicious start they had in Australian anthropology, are usually referred to perfunctorily and rarely receive the attention due an important deity.³ The comparative study by Triebels (1958) has been ignored by Australianists, and the field studies by Lommel (1952) and Petri (1954) have fared little better. In 1961, at a Canberra conference foreshadowing the foundation of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Marie Reay suggested that it

³ Compare the fate of rainbow serpents with that of the All-Fathers reported from southeast Australia. Debates flourished around the latter late in the last century and early in this. The first round of controversy was followed by a substantial review of the earlier theories and an original reassessment of the data by Schmidt (1926: 134–487). Fahrenfort (1927: 169–241, 289–306) replied lengthily and polemically, only to be criticized in his turn by Bellon (1948: 233–304). More recently still, the issues have once again been canvassed by Eliade (1973: 2–41). Rainbow serpents have never had such analysis and interpretation devoted to them.

was time to restudy the distribution of the rainbow-snake theme as part of a wider study of current themes in mythology (Shiels 1963: 279), but who has responded?

This lack of interest in really searching studies results, I think, from a combination of two factors. The field data cannot be accommodated within Radcliffe-Brown's terms of reference, and there is a reluctance to break decisively with his terms. They may once have stimulated inquiry, but now they stultify it. Any modern inquiry must traverse three problem areas, and it is accordingly to them that the remainder of this introduction will be devoted: first, ambiguities in aboriginal depictions of rainbow serpents; second, likenesses between rainbow serpents and other mythical beings; and third, rainbow serpents as forms picturing fundamentals of existence.

AMBIGUITIES IN ABORIGINAL DEPICTIONS OF RAINBOW SERPENTS

A paper by Stanner on the Murinbata of the northern Northern Territory shows how hard it is to do justice to aboriginal imagery if working within Radcliffe-Brown's conception of the rainbow serpent. Stanner found that Radcliffe-Brown's "more essential" features⁴ are secondary with the Murinbata and useful mainly for taxonomic purposes (1961: 235), but he weakened this concession, if not withdrawing it altogether, by observing that the Murinbata rainbow serpent is obscured and loses its unity when account is taken of contextual information to enlarge upon myth narratives (1961: 247). In what, then, can the usefulness of the criteria of classification consist?

A bare outline of the long and brilliant myth reported by Stanner (1961: 240–246) is that the bat forced himself sexually upon his two sisters, daughters of the rainbow serpent. The girls had their revenge when they made him fall down a cliff, but he recovered from his injuries and speared his father, the rainbow serpent, who then entered the water. Although the rainbow serpent is one of the two main characters in this myth, the Murinbata are uncertain of his name, number, gender, outward appearance, and family relationships, and Stanner had to conclude that there is a throng of visionary shapes of unknown age of which each telling of the myth is a partial attempt at systematization (1961: 247–251).

As to the rainbow serpent's name, Kunmanggur and Kanamgek are used interchangeably. Sometimes he is called Kulaitj, ordinarily an adjective meaning "older" or "eldest" (hence he can be thought of as The

⁴ The features are that the rainbow snake is a huge serpent, associated with rain and the making of rain and with quartz crystals and mother-of-pearl, who lives in deep, permanent waters (Radcliffe-Brown 1926: 24–25).

Oldest One). As to number, sometimes it is said that there were two brothers Kunmanggur, and that Kanamgek was Kunmanggur's son. As to gender, the name Kulaitj sometimes seems to refer instead to a female or, if referring to Kunmanggur, to mean that "he" was bisexual. Even those Murinbata who affirm Kunmanggur's maleness say that he had woman's breasts. Different versions make him look like a huge snake with a hooked tail, a scorpion, a huge person, and a figure reminiscent of the northwest-Australian *wondjina* images. There is no unanimity about his relation to rainbows: thus the darkest band is variously identified as Kunmanggur, Kulaitj, Kirindilyin, and Ngamur; and sometimes the top and bottom bands are distinguished as Kunmanggur and Kanamgek. As to family relationships, Kulaitj, Kirindilyin, Ngamur, and Walumuma are given as names of Kunmanggur's wives, but there is no agreement on how many he had or what all their names were; Walumuma, furthermore, is given sometimes as his daughter (compare the ambiguous Kanamgek).

It is evident from this that Murinbata data alone will not convey much that is certain about the rainbow serpent. To take but one doubtful point, is Kulaitj Kunmanggur or Kunmanggur's wife or Kunmanggur's female other self? And, above all, what significance is to be accorded to the fact that a character who is apparently the same has differing identities? It is therefore fortunate that Stanner was able to collect fragmentary rainbow-serpent myths among the neighbors of the Murinbata (1961: 238–240), since they, in spite of their incomplete state, are sufficient to demonstrate some invariant relational properties of rainbow-serpent ideology in the region.

In a Marithiel myth, the rainbow serpent, who had no wife, stole one from the flying fox, who had two. The flying fox speared him and he went down into the water while the flying fox flew up into the sky. A Wagaman myth is similar, except that the rainbow serpent stole both wives from the flying fox. A Nangiomeri myth tells that two women whom the rainbow serpent had given to the flying fox ran back to him, which is why the flying fox speared him. The Nangiomeri, like the Murinbata, impute bisexuality to the rainbow serpent. In the Wagaman and Nangiomeri myths, the rainbow serpent and the flying fox are in the wife's–brother/sister's–husband relationship, whereas with the Murinbata they are father and son ("flying fox" is, according to Stanner, used incorrectly by aborigines for creatures that are bats, but I shall use "flying fox" because of its widespread acceptance in aboriginal English in the northern areas of the Northern Territory).

These comparative considerations establish that the rainbow serpent stands in opposition to the flying fox. The incidents of their antagonism are such that the additional oppositions of sky and water, above and below, upward movement and downward movement may also be accepted as invariant. Sexual trouble having to do with a pair of women is

always the basis of antagonism. When the relation between the opponents is one of alliance, the rainbow serpent is sexually at fault, since he takes or receives another's wives; when their relation is one of descent, it is the flying fox who is at fault. (Their relation is not given in the Marithiel myth, but one may hazard the conjecture that it is an alliance relation.) How widespread these associations are has yet to be established, but they are not confined to the four peoples whose rainbow-serpent myths are reported by Stanner.

For example, in the *Gunabibi*, further to the east in Arnhem Land, rainbow-serpent imagery is predominant and flying foxes appear to women at a moment when bull-roarers (rainbow-serpent symbols) are sounding in concealment (hence unseen by women) nearby. There are rock paintings in which rainbow serpent and flying fox are associated (Maddock 1970: 447, 452). The blue-tongue lizard has an important part to play in the *Gunabibi*: Walumuma, Kunmanggur's wife or daughter, is said to have been a blue-tongue lizard (Stanner 1961: 248)!⁵

In Stanner's myths the rainbow serpent and the flying fox become polarized in relation to each other. The terms "water," "below," and "downward movement" form a cluster around one opponent and the terms "sky," "above," and "upward movement" a cluster around the other. The middle ground, on which human life is played out and which the opponents shared until trouble over women led them to separate vertically, is abandoned. The myths thus sketch a tripartite cosmos. It needs no special acumen to see that rainbow serpents are at home in a world so divided, for a being who lives below in the water but shows above as a rainbow embodies the polarities between which the middle ground is framed.

The polarization theme common to Stanner's myths is presented inversely in a myth from the northwest-Australian Garad'are (Worms 1940: 239–244), in which a rainbow serpent separates other characters instead of being one of the characters who becomes separated. Two sisters went out to gather food, but the elder left behind a snake she used to carry about with her. The younger sister returned to fetch the snake but could not find it, for in their absence it "had crawled as deeply into the earth as the rainbow stands above the earth"! When the younger sister tried to rejoin the elder she found that there was water lying about the bush that before had been dry. Everywhere there was water, to her right and to her left, until at last she arrived at a river, not present earlier, that was too wide to cross. The elder sister was standing on the other bank. A rainbow bridged the water, but the elder knew it to be the snake and called out to her younger sister to stay where she was. The snake can be seen in the sky before sunrise with a sister to each side. The Bād, a little to the north, have a cognate myth (see Worms 1940: 244).

⁵ For additional data on flying foxes and blue-tongue lizards, rainbow serpents and rainbow-serpent-like water snakes, see Berndt (1951) and Warner (1937).

A basic contrast between Stanner's myths and Worms's is that, whereas the former group displays definitive polarization vertically (rainbow serpent down in the water, flying fox up in the sky), the latter group displays it horizontally (a sister to each side of the river or snake). A tripartite division is thus common to the two groups, but they work it out complementarily. Another basic contrast is that whereas the former group shows the rainbow serpent as polarized in relation to the flying fox, the latter group shows him polarizing the sisters. The pair of women in Stanner's myths are therefore functionally equivalent to the serpent in Worms's myths, for they remain in the middle and separate others; the pair of women in Worms's myths are functionally equivalent to the rainbow serpent and the flying fox in Stanner's myth, for they become separated.

That the serpent has no male opponent in the northwest-Australian myths can be seen as compression rather than impoverishment. A flying fox who goes up into the sky is the other self of a serpent who goes down into the water: a rainbow serpent is in essence a split representation, since it shows in the sky above but lives in the water below. The snake in the Garad'are myth "crawled as deeply into the earth as the rainbow stands above the earth"; later he appeared to the sisters as a rainbow over a river. The Garad'are myth knows how to convey a split representation in the person of one character;⁶ the myths of the Murinbata and their neighbors divide the representation along its line of cleavage into two characters.

The conclusion to be drawn from these data is, accordingly, that a unity is conveyed in rainbow-serpent ideologies. The ambiguities and inconsistencies in the Murinbata depiction of Kunmanggur do not stand in the way of acceptance of this conclusion, for the unity is one of opposites held together in a split representation. If anything, the ambiguities and inconsistencies (is Kunmanggur one *or* more than one? male *or* female? anthropomorphic *or* zoomorphic?) are confirmations of unity.

This conclusion bears some resemblance to interpretations to be found in other writers. Van der Leeden, for example, remarked of the Nungubuyu of eastern Arnhem Land that

Rainbow Serpent strikes one as the logical extension of all other symbols relating to contacts between males and females; to be both male and female . . . ; to be associated with both fire and water; . . . to combine an "inner truth" (men's secret) with an outer (natural) appearance; . . . to be both benignant and malicious (1975: 92).

The volume in which Van der Leeden published his observations contains an article by Hiatt (1975: 143–162), in which he discusses the common

⁶ The snake in the Bād myth is not expressly mentioned as a rainbow serpent, but his role in relation to the two sisters is virtually the same as that of the snake in the Garad'are myth.

Australian association of swallowing and regurgitation by (rainbow) snakes with initiatory rituals that withdraw youths from the company of women and introduce them to an exclusively masculine circle. Rainbow-serpent ideology thus functions in ritual episodes organized around such pairs of opposites as entry and exit, separation and aggregation, death and rebirth; as in the myths reported by Worms, a snake polarizes other characters. According to Eliade, the Ungarinyin rainbow serpent described by Elkin “represents the mythological expression of the effort to unite the opposites, to articulate the polarities in a single paradoxical unity” (1973: 79).

It is evident, however, that the conception of a unity of opposites, of a split representation, can be conveyed in contrasting ways. This came out in the comparison of myths reported by Stanner and Worms and may be enlarged upon by referring briefly to papers by De Josselin de Jong and Radcliffe-Brown. In his classic contribution to the subject of the divine trickster (*goddelijke bedrieger*), De Josselin de Jong (1929) argued in response to Kristensen (1928) that it is the essence of this figure to be a divided unity (*twee-eenheid*). He combines contraries—masculinity and femininity, beneficence and maleficence, life and death, and so on—as aspects of his total character and not as chance results of syncretism or degeneration in religious thought. The fruits of this way of thinking are clearly to be seen in Van der Leeden’s 1975 paper.

Radcliffe-Brown (1951) speaks of the unity of opposites, but he has another possibility in mind. For him, this relation exists between clearly delineated characters, as in Australian myths about social dualism in which white cockatoo and black, or eaglehawk and crow, are opponents. There is at once a similarity and a contrariety between the members of such pairs, just as there is between the moieties in a dual social organization. It is interesting to notice that De Josselin de Jong’s commemorative article (1956) on Radcliffe-Brown drew attention to the latter’s principle of the unity of opposites, but not to the difference that exists in the ways in which it may be conceived, even though the alternative conception had long before been set out by De Josselin de Jong himself.

That the principle of unity of opposites should be worked out in contrasting ways sheds a clarifying light on Stanner’s data. The rainbow serpent in the myths of the Murinbata and their neighbors is a member of a pair of opposites of which the flying fox is the other member; he is one half and the flying fox the other half of a split representation. This is the unity of opposites as conceived by Radcliffe-Brown. But in the discursive thought of the Murinbata, Kunmanggur is a pair of opposites, he is the totality of a split representation, for he is no longer defined in opposition to another. He can keep the properties ascribed to him in each telling of a myth and add to them their opposites. This is the unity of opposites as conceived by De Josselin de Jong.

These alternative portraits of ostensibly the same person result, or so it may be conjectured, from contrasting imperatives to which aborigines are subject. He who tells a myth subjects himself to what may be termed a narrative imperative. He must depict characters in relation to one another, which may most economically be achieved by putting them at opposed poles. A complicated criss-cross emerges in which, for example, rainbow serpent and flying fox are opposed as water and sky, below and above, downward movement and upward, but in which they are united against a pair of women as male to female.

He who thinks discursively about the world subjects himself to what may be termed a metaphysical imperative. In trying to grasp the essence of things he may unite contraries, for he need not portray character concretely. Combinations of qualities take the place of casts of characters, and he may unite the poles; for, in the world he is trying to depict, an endless number of oppositions are present. Thus a parade of beings passes before us who are male but have a womb or female breasts, who are down in the water but up in the sky, who are one but father and son or brothers, who, to borrow examples from the Berndts, look like a snake but also like a woman (1951: 113) or are the "good Mother" but also the "bad Mother" (1970: 229).

It is a distinctive feature of aboriginal thought that the same words can function as names of characters in narrative and as metaphysical terms. The one word is twice a focus of attention. This difference correlates with the contrast between the narrative and metaphysical modes and accounts for the apparent confusion that results from attempts to explore the character of such a rainbow serpent as Kunmanggur. He is both a person in a story and a symbol in a system of thought.

Yet, if this conjecture about the state in which rainbow-serpent materials come to us were to be confirmed by further inquiry, there would remain a serious difficulty.

LIKENESSES BETWEEN RAINBOW SERPENTS AND OTHER MYTHICAL BEINGS

There exist striking resemblances between rainbow serpents and beings which are not called rainbow serpents or which are stated not to be rainbow serpents. Piddington denied that the Karadjeri *bulaing* was associated with rainbows in spite of its other resemblances to the rainbow serpents described in the 1930 symposium. Warner (1937: 248–259) gave a myth in which a huge water snake plays a decisive role, but he did not mention rainbows in connection with it. Berndt (1951: 16) and Hiatt (1975: 147) have identified Warner's snake as a rainbow serpent, but their opinion rests on later or circumstantial evidence. The snake in

Worms's Bād myth plays a part similar to that of the snake in his Garad'are myth, but there is no mention of any rainbow associations. An even more noteworthy practice is to identify as rainbow serpents beings that are not snakes. Examples are to be found in Mountford's paper in the present volume: for example, lizards in Groote Eylandt mythology (the 1975 paper by Van der Leeden, who worked on the mainland opposite Groote Eylandt, may be consulted with reference to this part of Mountford's survey).

If the equation of snake and rainbow is taken as the criterion for selection of material, then many myths telling of characters and actions like those in rainbow-serpent myths will have to be left out of account. Why treat an association with rainbows as critical? That it can be arbitrary to limit study to cases in which a snake is identified or otherwise associated with rainbows may be shown by comparing a myth reported by Stanner (1960: 260–262) with other Arnhem Land materials.

Mutjingga, the Old Woman, swallowed children left in her care. She fled along a river but was overtaken and killed. The children were taken alive from her belly and painted as initiated novices are. Characters named Left Hand and Right Hand played a prominent part in these events.

According to Stanner (1960: 260), the Mutjingga myth is central to a ceremony called *Punj* or *Karwadi*. The ceremony initiates youths to manly status, and its rites include a putative swallowing by the Old Woman, whose material symbol is the bull-roarer (1959: 112–115). A bird made the first bull-roarer after Mutjingga's death and its sound is her voice (1960: 263, n. 22). She is an All-Mother and can be conceived of as like a snake (1959: 110, 112; 1960: 259, n. 17). Although her ceremony is a cognate of the *Gunabibi*, in which water or rainbow snakes are important (see Warner 1937; Berndt 1951), the Old Woman appears not to be connected with rainbows; and Stanner did not mention her name in his 1961 paper on the rainbow serpent except to show structural congruences between her myth and that of Kunmanggur and to state that a pristine female named Kulaitj Mutjingga [literally, "the oldest woman"] is associated with sea-mist. Kulaitj, we have seen, is used sometimes as a name for Kunmanggur himself or one of his wives or the darkest band of the rainbow, but Stanner did not suggest an identity of this being with the Mutjingga of the swallowing myth.

If an association with rainbows is critical, then the Mutjingga myth will have to be omitted from consideration, despite its likeness to myths to the east in which rainbow serpents play parts strongly reminiscent of Mutjingga's. I have collected a Dalabon myth in which Jingana, a snakelike All-Mother, had all life within her but would not let it out. She had to be speared by a left-hander before the beings within her could come forth. Jingana is a rainbow serpent. Another Dalabon myth has it that

Lumaluma, a snakelike All-Mother who is Jingana or a version of her, used to swallow *Gunabibi* actors until at last a father-son pair decided that thenceforth they would celebrate the ceremony without her. A bull-roarer was made by a bird to substitute for Lumaluma and its sound is her voice. During *Gunabibi* performances the novices are putatively swallowed by her (see Maddock 1976: 166–167).

The Mutjingga, Jingana, and Lumaluma myths group together like incidents. Mutjingga and Lumaluma play cognate ritual roles, but some of the mythical events associated with Mutjingga are to be found in the Jingana instead of the Lumaluma myth: for example, a spearing, a left-hander, a freeing of life. It would be contrived to treat the Dalabon myths as belonging to the rainbow-serpent corpus and the Murinbata myth not, merely because Mutjingga, unlike Jingana and Lumaluma, is not expressly said to be associated with rainbows.

The suspicion that there must be close historical connections between these myths is strengthened by information published by the Berndts. According to Ronald Berndt (1951: 12–13, 24–25, 31), Kunapipi in northeast Arnhem Land expresses the dual concept of fertility mother(s) and rainbow serpent(s). It was from the former that life came forth, but she was acting together with the latter. Here mother and rainbow serpent are separate figures expressing the opposition of female and male, uterus and penis; but, as there are female as well as male rainbow serpents, the way stands open for the conception of a snake-like All-Mother. The Mutjingga, Jingana, and Lumaluma myths may accordingly be thought to coalesce notions that Berndt's informants separated. Information published jointly by Ronald and Catherine Berndt (1970: 20, 117, 229) is even more to the point: Maung predominantly view the rainbow serpent as masculine, but their Gunwinggu neighbors use the feminine suffix for the rainbow serpent and their creation myth has her giving birth to the first people. The *Ubar*, *Maraian*, and *Gunabibi* ceremonies are dominated by "the Mother," known also as "the Old Woman," who appears sometimes as Ngaljod, the rainbow serpent. Comparable data were reported in an earlier work (see Berndt and Berndt 1951: 113, 127–128, 131–132, 136–137).

There is, then, a set of permutations stretching across Arnhem Land eastward from the Murinbata, in which the primary configurations result from a play with a few equations and their negations:

snake = rainbow	snake ≠ rainbow
rainbow = female	rainbow ≠ female
female = snake	female ≠ snake

The proper subject of study, at least in this part of Australia, must surely be the set and not an arbitrary rainbow-serpent isolate.