

Chapter Three



Bearing the Inconceivable

Shelley: So, how do you believe, what do you believe makes the baby?
How is the baby made?

Mona: How is the baby made?

Shelley: Hmm. How does it come into the mother's stomach?

Mona: That we don't know. Our Father only knows. Our Father is to make the baby. We just our blood with that. You already know, uh? That's our difference—like this we are ladies and this ladies' children and this our children—our blood is coming . . . [unintelligible on the tape]

Shelley: So, in the past did people believe that the man and the woman made the baby or just the woman?

Mona: No, mainly the man and the woman. So was doing this, not ourselves [not just women], it formed. If we are staying ourselves we can't have a baby. Woman with a man, they will have a baby. Like this if we're single, like a young girl, that one nothing.

Not more than three weeks after Roger and I arrived on Nuakata, Mona and I found ourselves sitting together in the Asa'ailo church grounds waiting for other women to join us for a Women's Fellowship meeting. As designated leader for that day's events, she was first to arrive. For my part, the church grounds were our temporary home, a liminal place and time, where we stayed until our house was completed.¹ Mona, a woman in her mid-thirties and mother of two sons in their late teens, had taken me under her wing during two prior weekly gatherings.² Able to speak English, she acted as translator and teacher on these occasions, urging me

to learn and use the local language. Where other women were shy and reticent in my presence, she was confident and supportive. I was enormously grateful for her efforts, as I felt quite overwhelmed and exhausted by my failing efforts to understand general conversation, especially the jokes at my expense. Effectively mute at this stage, it was she who gave me a voice, albeit a whisper, and the ability to “hear” these women whose language I could not discern.³ She gave me some hope that eventually these other women would become less timid and embarrassed in my presence. Much later I learned she was from East Cape. Before moving to Nuakata nine years earlier, she had worked for a time as a nurse on the mainland. Although she understood Alina Nu‘ata she rarely spoke it, preferring to use her own language—Tewala. Sitting, waiting with Mona, practicing words, naming things around us like a child might with a parent, I asked her to do an interview with me about childbirth, pregnancy, and conception. The preceding transcript is an excerpt from that interview, my first interview on Nuakata and one of only a handful conducted in English. Barely able to speak Alina Nu‘ata, let alone think or imagine in it, I resorted to my own. While I knew this endeavor was premature, I was anxious to begin my research, to justify my presence, to vindicate people’s act of grace in allowing us to stay. Although committed to a way of understanding that emphasizes lived experience and participant observation, rather than contrived expositions of local belief, I had grown impatient. Wondering how I would ever witness or participate in the activities of birth, let alone conception, I opted for a known path—a formal interview. How ironic that my quest for Nuakatan gendered identity began with a woman from another place—a woman with some experience and training in Western medical thought and practice! Whose ways of knowing about whom, or what, did I elicit?



Talking with Mona, the tape recorder running, I was suddenly confronted with my inability to pose a question that might reveal her way of understanding conception rather than my own.⁴ Even this dilemma reflected an assumption of difference in our beliefs, a *we/they*, Western/Melanesian opposition, that I not only rejected but also wished to subvert. By asking, How is the baby made? I introduced a construction metaphor that was momentarily confusing, if not nonsensical, to her.⁵ In Alina Nu‘ata there are several commonly used words for make: ‘*abi* (to

build), ‘*abilau* (to start or begin to make), ‘*abimamole* (create), and ‘*paihowa* (work, make, or do). Apart from these, many verbs include the idea of making in their semantic field. All are derived from the two verbal prefixes ‘*abi* (to touch, by hand) and ‘*abiye* (to cause an act by your actions; to cause to become by your actions); for example, ‘*abiyemodi‘ini* (to make or cause to become angry). *Paihowa* is used as a more general term (a performance or action metaphor) to denote working, doing, or enacting of any kind, and as such can imply making in its meaning. However, ‘*abi*, used alone or as a verbal prefix, specifically refers to making or building with the hands. It is akin to the word *manufacture* in English, which is derived from the Latin *manus* (hand) and *facere* (to make). While this direct link between making and the hands may now be only implicit in English, it remains explicit in Alina Nu‘ata. Building/making is literally a tangible activity that a person or people “do” by hand. Something is made by the hand of somebody from some thing or things. A visible change in activity or state of something/somebody is caused by the tangible actions of some thing(s) or somebody. Mona was clearly perplexed by my use of the metaphor “to make,” for I could have been literally asking, “By whose hands is the baby made?” or less specifically, By what means or activity is the baby done, made, created? Struggling, and without understanding the basis of her apparent confusion, I tried again, this time inadvertently introducing the idea that an already formed baby is somehow ontologically external to the mother. It comes into the mother’s stomach from another place.

Clearer about my intent or meaning, Mona adapted or expressed her answer in the terms implied by both the word *paihowa* in Alina Nu‘ata and my original use of the metaphor “to make.” In her subsequent responses to questions she used “making” and “doing” interchangeably to convey enacting. She stated that she does not know how the baby is made, how it comes to be inside the mother’s stomach. Not only does she not know but it is not something that can be known, or perhaps not something that she even cares to know. Only God the Father knows. Only God “makes” babies. By our menstrual blood we—Mona and I, and all “ladies”—are the same. But our common menstrual blood also renders us different from those without it—presumably men, children, and girls who have not yet menstruated. This blood goes toward the child. As such, our common menstrual blood truly renders women the same when its purpose is enacted or realized within us. But at that point, she looked at me quizzically, “You already know, uh, [the pur-

pose of menstrual blood, about conception]?” In other words (i.e., the unspoken words of gesture, facial expression, laughter, tone), Why ask these questions when you already know the answers? For what reason or purpose do you want to know? If you already know these things, what do you hope to find by asking me? Are you tricking me, embarrassing me, trying to confirm that we are the same, different? What motivates your inquiry?

Deeming Mona’s question a distraction, I ignored it, only to be confronted by it time and again as I talked with women about conception. Embarrassed, they looked away from me, saying *bada ’uhanapui* (already you know). What I did not understand at that time was that the verb *hanapui* (to know) refers to certain, unequivocal, authoritative knowing/knowledge. *Hanapui* is both a stative and an active verb, a state of knowing and the act of knowing. Daphne Lithgow indicates that it may also be a noun, but in my experience this form was used infrequently in conversation. *Hanapui* is knowing with certainty that an event has transpired, a boat arrived, a story remembered correctly, and so on. It is knowledge of something complete or completed. It is not opinion, understanding, or belief. People may know without understanding or understand without knowing.⁶ *Hanapui* can also refer to knowing/knowledge that may be inherited or offered as a gift; knowing/knowledge selectively and discriminately passed down familial generations to specific family members. Knowledge of this kind, which may include such things as magic, stories, or customary practices, is, in other words, an alienable possession, owned but able to be imparted to selected persons if the knower so chooses. For example, one young woman said that her knowledge of love magic came from her maternal uncle, who had given it to her because she had shown great kindness to him over a number of years. *Hanapui* is also the type and way of knowing that *dimdim* are believed to possess or enact (i.e., knowledge, experiential or inherited, of how things are made or work, knowledge gained from books, be it the Bible, school books, the newspaper). An older man, who spoke with me at length about magic, commented to me one day: “You *dimdim*, your knowledge are in books, but ours are given to us by our ancestors. Some of us know them, some of us do not.” However—and this is most relevant to my interview with Mona—someone does not generally insult others by soliciting knowing/knowledge of this kind when he or she already knows the information or ideas. When one does this, one is said to be *politiki* (politicizing)—seeking knowledge to increase one’s power, wealth, or advan-

tage in a given situation or circumstance. Ignored at the time, Mona's question, You already know, uh?—implicitly, So, why do you ask?—now challenges me from a distance, inviting a response. What did I already know about conception?

Shelley: What part of the baby comes from the woman and what part of the baby comes from the man?

Mona: Because this blood is working toward it, we will stop our blood flowing.

Shelley: Menstruating. Yes, but some people in Papua New Guinea say that the mother's body contributes the blood of the baby and from the father's body contributes the bones. Do you think that here?

Mona: No, that one we can't give our—what?—bones to them one nothing. Only God knows what he's doing, the baby. We can't do any baby, nothing. We just our blood only working, men's blood and our blood its working. Its new blood already with the eggs, the eggs [tape becomes unintelligible] . . . Our Father only making our—what?—person, who makes me. That one makes egg, neck, our shoulders, our arms, make our stomach. Everything he make until nine months he already finish our body. That comes, we give birth. No one in our stomach, we never do anything. Only God makes us.

Dissatisfied with Mona's explanation of how the baby comes into the mother's stomach, I then focused my questions on the contribution of men and women to conception. By querying whether men and women contribute different parts to the developing fetus I signaled my interest in gender difference and identity, inviting Mona to reveal local beliefs about the essential, substantive differences between men and women. My questions to Mona shifted between "how," "what," and "from whom," between the process and the substance or constituent parts of conception. They inadvertently invited a materialist understanding of conception, conflating "the conceived" with "the individual person," and, in so doing, suggested that he or she is, quite literally, a confluence of substances or substantive forces (e.g., eggs, sperm, spirit, God). Substance, so imagined, comprises immutable and essential matter—matter fundamental to human existence, natural matter that underpins culture. Knauff writes:

Our own individualism and personal atomism are so ingrained that the independence of the single body as a biological entity goes without saying; the conceptual isolation of the body and its identity with an individualistic self seem as natural to us as they do foreign in other cultures. Consider, in contrast, societies in which the body is at heart socially and collectively constituted. Its physical make-up, including its gender, is not deep-sealed at the moment of conception, but arises sequentially depending on the actions and thoughts of relatives, spirits and the person him or herself. (1989, 201)

At the most basic level these questions assumed that the people of Nuakata think about conception—that ideas about conception matter in everyday life. Not only did the questions posed imply what mattered (i.e., the confluence of substances), but, more to the point, they implied how it mattered. They were founded on the assumption that, when dissected and analyzed, conception beliefs would reveal aspects of the constitutive, gendered ingredients, be they literal or symbolic, of Nuakatan personal identity and, more broadly, Nuakatan sociality. Therefore, not only did I anticipate the content and form of these beliefs, I also anticipated their purpose and/or significance.

With the benefit of hindsight—born of distance and time—it is perhaps too easy to criticize the loaded nature of these questions. However, I believe it is important to examine my underlying assumptions, for not only do they show that Mona's answers were constrained by the questions posed but they also reveal aspects of what I already "knew," without listening, about Nuakatan conception beliefs. My assumptions, both conscious and unconscious, were not without precedent or their own convoluted past. It is a past that includes Western definitions of conception, my prefield reading of Massim ethnographies, and broader anthropological debate of conception beliefs. As conception is increasingly understood in scientific terms in the West, new dilemmas arise for anthropologists exploring conception across varying cultural contexts. In speaking about the "concepts, the words, and the methods that the 'profession' [of sociology or equally anthropology] employs to speak about, and to think the social world," Bourdieu indicates that "language poses a particularly dramatic problem for the sociologist: it is in effect an immense repository of naturalized preconstructions, and thus of preconstructions that are ignored as such and which can function as unconscious instruments of construction" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 241).

In English, conception is understood as both the act of conceiving an entity or thought, as well as the entity or thought itself.⁷ It is both a state of being and the state of coming into being, a noun incorporating its verb, a state and a state of action. Conception carries with it notions of joining together and taking in—a taking into the womb, or a taking into the mind. But the meaning of conception in Western thought has not remained static over the centuries. Use of this term across a variety of texts dating from the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries (detailed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*) reveals an understanding of conception as simply a beginning, or the womb's reception and embrace of the seed. In contrast, contemporary English definitions reflect an understanding dominated by a medicoscientific metaphor that details the constituent substances (the ovum and sperm) and the end point of the process (the fertilized egg) from which the physical (sexed) individual is formed.⁸ Hence, at one level, we (in the metaphorical West) have come to attribute our individual existence to the coalescence of biological substance—a coalescence arising and completed during a single act of sexual intercourse. Our essential biological identity, conceived as the very ground of our being, is founded on the unique conjunction of both maternal and paternal substance—sexed substances that are different. Moreover, as feminist writers such as Martin (1987, 1991) and Haraway (1990, 1991) argue, the metaphors employed by Western biomedical discourses to describe these sexed substances and the processes by which they unite are founded on culturally specific and phallogocentric definitions of male and female.

This emphasis on substance has recently been made even more explicit by the proliferation of new reproductive technologies that disconnect the substance of conception from its usual process, bypassing sexual intercourse as the means by which ovum and sperm unite and subsequently divide. As Western medical science moves from a macroscopic to a microscopic vision of human life, especially human procreation, it takes its fetish for dissection of lifeless or fragmentary, disconnected bodies to ever new depths.⁹ This quest to categorize and map the invisible substrata fundamental to human conception, collected and isolated in a petri dish, is underpinned by the broader scientific premise that in reducing matter (including human matter) to its smallest component parts we may better understand and control it. However, by focusing on substance, the context and process of human conception is both deemed and rendered less significant to human identity and sociality. Scientific explanations of

conception have reduced it to a potentially discernible moment—distilled time—distinct from the gestation process that ensues. Imagined as somehow separate from conception, gestation is rendered a time of development—a time bounded or completed by birth, itself a distinct event. Exploration and understanding of conception within Western medical science is therefore occurring in ever-contracting visual, temporal, and spatial fields, with inevitable consequences for our understanding of both conception and human life. For example, in discussing the implications of the new reproductive technologies for kinship in contemporary Euro-American society, M. Strathern comments that

however one looks at it procreation can now be *thought about* as subject to personal preference and choice in a way that has never before been conceivable. The child is literally . . . the embodiment of the act of choice. . . . [S]o also those not born by them, and . . . those not born at all. (1992, 34, emphasis in original)

In the West, knowledge of our substantive constitution, our actual maternal and paternal inheritance, is generally considered important, if not pivotal, to individual identity. Among other ways, we give expression to this belief when we look for resemblances between ourselves and our parents; when the adopted child searches for its “natural,” “biological” parents; or when the older child or adolescent declares to a stepparent that they have diminished parenting rights because they are not a “real” parent.¹⁰ Current research in human genetics is advancing this belief through its efforts to list, categorize, and map the human genetic template upon which individual variations, representing a confluence of maternal and paternal genetic characteristics, are inscribed. There is a sense in which knowledge or awareness of our substantive maternal and paternal inheritance is considered the foundation, the substrate upon which our identity or multiple identities are elaborated and thought (Rapp 1995; M. Strathern 1992).

Perhaps this belief in the relationship between knowing our substantive inheritance and formulating our identity should come as no surprise given that an analogical link between conception as thought and conception as the biological creation of the child/person is present in the English definition itself. Is it stretching this point too far to argue, then, that in the post-Enlightenment West Descartes’s *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am), formulated in response to a journey through and beyond exis-

tential doubt and uncertainty, has a contemporary elaboration, namely, “I think and know the substantive facts of my conception, therefore I am truly conceived”?

Intrigued, if not seduced, by Descartes’s legacy, anthropologists have long sought to understand and categorize knowledge and cultural practices. Such a project has been part of a broader, often implicit, agenda to define what is human—to define the person and/or dismantle the concept of the subject. In Melanesian anthropology many of these issues came into focus through the debates surrounding the (anthropological) doctrine of the Virgin Birth, perhaps more accurately termed the doctrine of insubstantial paternity. This doctrine first emerged around the beginning of this century when anthropologists documented beliefs that detailed the “possibility of conception taking place without insemination” (Leach 1967, 39).

Noted by Roth¹¹ in the Australian aboriginal context, and later seized upon and elaborated by Hartland and Frazer, this doctrine, by equating scientific knowledge with civilization, asserted that ignorance of the so-called facts of physiological paternity necessarily signified primitivism. Championed by early anthropological cultural evolutionists eager to trace a developmental continuum between the civilized and native/savages, defective scientific knowledge of paternity was presumed to be a feature of matrilineal societies, regarded at the time as the earliest, most natural, and therefore most primitive form of kinship organization (Jorgenson 1983a, 2). At the other end of the evolutionary scale, civilized cultures were defined by patrilineal kinship in which a scientific knowledge of paternity was seen as central. Malinowski’s (1932, 1948) dogmatic assertion that the matrilineal Trobriand islanders believe there was no biological connection between father and child further substantiated these ideas. He wrote that “without doubt or reserve . . . the child is of the same substance as its mother, [whereas] . . . between the father and the child there is no bond of physical union” (1932, 3).¹² Preoccupied with the sociological significance and meaning of indigenous knowledge and beliefs, Malinowski later actively dissociated himself from these ideas:

In future we should have neither affirmation nor denials, in an empty wholesale verbal fashion, of native “ignorance” or “knowledge,” but instead, full concrete descriptions of what they know, how they interpret it, and how it is all connected with their conduct and their institutions. (1932, xxviii)

Leach (1967) reignited this debate in the 1960s with the publication of his celebrated article “Virgin Birth.” At stake in the furor that subsequently erupted were epistemological issues central to the anthropological project. Earlier opposition to the doctrine of the Virgin Birth focused on the accuracy of the supportive empirical accounts (Leach 1967, 46 n. 1; *History of Anthropology Newsletter* 1996, 3–11).¹³ Leach, while sharing this skepticism about the empirical claims (1967, 41), focused instead on the ideological significance of conception beliefs, both for the anthropologists and the societies they studied. In repudiating evolutionist arguments, he directed his invective at Spiro and “all the neo-Tylorians who think like him” (1967, 40). According to Spiro, native accounts of procreation that do not accord with the scientific facts of life should be accepted as empirical evidence of native ignorance of paternity, rather than, as Leach suggested, “formulations of structural relationships” (Spiro 1966, in Jorgenson 1983a, 2–3). Spiro (1968) believed science to be the arbiter of truth and by implication a higher form of knowledge. He used it as a yardstick by which all cultural ideas (which he believed were founded on empirical knowledge) could be compared. For his part, Leach, not unlike the mature Malinowski (1932), claimed that, as ideologies or social dogmas, conception beliefs pertain to a structured cultural whole.¹⁴ They are internally motivated cultural facts that fit together; they reveal social relationships. For this reason, their meaning and internal connections must be understood in their own cultural context, and not in relation to an externally imposed scientific schema that postulates “causes and ultimate origins for the facts under observation” (Leach 1967, 39). To do otherwise is to impose ethnocentric explanations from the outside, bolstering the identity of the anthropologist and the society to which she belongs by representing native knowledge and, by implication, native people as something less, as defective or simple.

Where Spiro believed science to be the liberator of the inviolable, universal facts of nature, the discoverer and custodian of truth, Leach reified the internal structural coherence of culture, of cultural facts. Facts themselves were not at issue between Leach and Spiro, the principal protagonists in this far-reaching debate. Rather, it was the nature, interpretation, and status of facts that proved contentious.¹⁵ Leach suggested that what was “really at issue is the technique of anthropological comparison which depends in turn upon the kind of ‘meaning’ which we are prepared to attribute to ethnographical evidence” (1967, 40). Believing in the possibility that anthropologists can understand another culture from within,

he implored anthropologists to “remain skeptical and positivist,” to resist the temptation to “inject magical causal explanations from outside” (1967, 46). For Leach it was imperative to understand the cultural context for beliefs as much as the beliefs themselves. In this sense, he, like Malinowski before him, sought to explore both the similarities and the differences between people’s lived experiences. Accordingly, he argued, all beliefs, including those of the anthropologist, should be subjected to scrutiny and understood in terms of their social meaning and significance. Among other things, Leach concluded from this debate that “anthropological theories often tell us more about the anthropologist than about their subject matter” (1967, 46).

Leach’s claim that it is possible for the ethnographer to understand another culture from within has been rendered highly contentious and problematic by postmodernist and postcolonial debates within and beyond anthropology.¹⁶ However, his exhortation to ethnographers to scrutinize their own assumptions surely remains salutary advice for the discipline.¹⁷ It remains especially pertinent to contemporary analyses of conception beliefs, for it seems that—with the exception of writers such as Wagner (1983, 75)—basic assumptions about conception and the way conception beliefs are collected and analyzed (who asks what, when, where, and with what interpretative purpose in mind) remain underexplored in ethnographic texts.

For example, the link between the confluence of substances and identity or, more specifically, between knowledge of substantive constitution and identity has been a recurring theme in contemporary discussions about conception within Melanesian anthropology (Jorgenson 1983a; Knauft 1989, 204–11; M. Strathern 1988). Ethnographers, including myself, have often blithely assumed that the substance(s) of indigenous conception beliefs are significant primarily because they reveal the foundations of identity, whether that identity be biological, spiritual, or based on gender or kinship. Not only is knowledge of conception beliefs assumed to be constitutive of identity and difference, but ethnographic accounts have frequently implied that this knowledge is widely and uniformly held throughout the community studied. As Knauft (1989) observes, if we combine Jorgenson’s (1983b) discussion of the differing views of conception offered by Telefol men and women, with Wagner’s (1972, 1981, 1983) claim that beliefs do not remain uniform or static, but are always changing as they are used, we can quite reasonably assume that multiple conception beliefs may exist within a given community.

It seems, then, that if we are to challenge our most basic assumptions about conception, a number of questions must be leveled at our analyses. Do the detailed expositions of the meaning and significance of the substance(s) integral to conception beliefs reflect local or Western assumptions about the relationship between sexed substances and identity? Do our analyses privilege substance because the meaning of conception in Western cultures is pervaded by an increasingly detailed medicoscientific metaphor (i.e., the formation of a viable zygote by the fertilization of the ovum by the sperm)? Does the form our analyses take (i.e., dissection of the component parts of conception beliefs) reflect the increasingly specific content of contemporary English definitions of conception? By dissecting these beliefs in and beyond the field and making them the object of intense scrutiny, are we enhancing or depleting their local meaning and significance? Finally, could analyses that focus on the place or the process integral to conception, or the context in which conception beliefs are culturally elaborated, be equally pertinent to a shared understanding of the local meanings of conception beliefs?

While these assumptions, implicit to my own culture, no doubt affected the questions I posed to Mona, they did not directly influence the content and composition of my inquiries. My prefield reading of Massim ethnographies not only influenced my choice of questions, but it also led me to anticipate the form and content of Mona's responses. For example, Battaglia writes that the people of Sabarl believe that "human beings are conceived when 'white blood' (father's blood) co-mingles with 'red blood' (mother's blood) in the heat of sexual intercourse" (1990, 38). Eventually these bloods descend into the womb, where they separate into white and red, masculine and feminine body parts. The skeleton is formed first, thereby acting as a "support for the red flesh and organs." Later, grease or fat is added, and this is said to "thicken the watery, fishlike infant blood," strengthening the bones and generating heat. It is said by some people that this grease is derived from "subsequent acts of intercourse, supplementing or completing the fetal body." Battaglia (1990, 50) argues that Sabarl conception and gestation beliefs "reiterate" M. Strathern's contention that, for Melanesian gift-based societies, "relations between opposites produce an object (such as a child) which in being neither of them is also their relationship objectified and thus both of them. The product appears as an addition to their identity" (M. Strathern 1987b). Battaglia adds that "the child in this model is only half of the 'relationship objectified'. The other half is the *self sufficient* [and,

for the duration of pregnancy, ‘androgynous’] mother” (1990, 50). Throughout gestation a mother is “both parents,” substituting natural substances for semen, rendering them masculine and “therefore compatible with the masculine components” of the fetal body: “She is Creator . . . the agent of her own and her child’s creation” (1990, 50).

Alternatively, Macintyre writes of Tubetube that “until recently, conception was equated with quickening and was deemed to be the soul or life-force entering a congealed but unformed accumulation of maternal secretions in a woman’s womb” (1988, 51). It is unclear from Macintyre’s account what precipitates the movement of the soul or life force into the womb. She notes that the relationship between mother and child is pivotal on Tubetube, for it is the maternal body that was believed to provide

the essential substances for the formation of bones and flesh, thereby forming an inalienable relationship based on shared substance. . . . The mother/child relationship created an essential identity which, in a literal sense, was perceived to inhere in the individual’s bones from the time they were formed *in utero*. (51)

As with the documented beliefs held on Sabarl and Vanatinai (Lepowsky 1993, 84–87), on Tubetube it is repeated acts of sexual intercourse that ensure the growth of the fetus into a fat and healthy baby at birth. Thus, intercourse between a man and a pregnant woman was considered the active force or relationship creating fetal growth. Despite the reported importance of such a relationship in this matrilineal community, a father’s relationship to his child was considered “tenuous” and contingent upon the marital relationship. Both Fortune ([1932] 1989, 43–56) and Thune (1980, 81–89) emphasize the marginal status of fathers in relation to their children, attributing this in part to their questioned paternity. Thune (1980) posits maternal blood as the primary source of *susu* identity on Duau.

Blood is inherited from one’s mother at conception, being identical to her blood and hence necessarily identical to that of any of her *susu* mates . . . [Blood] alone is acquired from another person, and in the case of a woman, it alone can be transmitted to another person. Identity of blood within the *susu* implies . . . a physiological unity. [T]he possibility of bilateral inheritance of blood [is rarely considered]. (1980, 81–89)

While these anthropologists do not necessarily ignore the process of conception, substances rather than processes act as the prism through which both the acts of conception and the relationship between conception beliefs and identity (be it gender, kin, or spiritual) are analyzed. Following their example, I pursued descriptions of substantively constituted gender identities and consciously sought to compare Nuakatan conception beliefs with those documented for these other southern Massim communities. On reflection, though, the question most needing to be asked is, What are the implications of using substance as a prism through which the process of conception is considered, rather than the inverse? More specifically, is this emphasis relevant to Nuakatan understandings and beliefs?

When asked what body parts were contributed by both man and woman to the baby, Mona responded with a seemingly oblique reference to the work of menstrual blood and women's actions to ensure this work is realized. Mona specified that a woman's blood, her period, will sense the arrival of the child and respond by moving toward it. Because menstrual blood directs its work toward the baby—this is its purpose, its reason for existence, its labor—a pregnant woman stops her blood from flowing. When menstrual blood moves upward, a woman will definitely know she has a child within her body. The concealed child's presence is therefore known by its effect on/in the mother's body. The presence of the child causes its mother's menstrual blood (and parents' co-mingled blood) to work on its behalf. But a woman does not consciously or knowingly direct her menstrual blood toward the child. In this sense the pregnant woman does not cause her own actions on behalf of the child, although she may be considered, in M. Strathern's terms, an agent. Strathern argues that in the Melanesian context "an agent is one who acts with another in mind, and that other may in fact coerce the agent into so acting" (1988, 272). "Agents do not cause their own actions; they are not the authors of their own acts. They simply do them. Agency and cause are split" (1988, 273). Strathern also differentiates between agent and person. A person is defined by the "relations that constitute him or her." In objectifying those relations he or she is revealed as a person. An agent, in contrast, "is construed as the one who acts because of those relationships and is revealed in his or her actions." Accordingly, a person is an agent when his or her relationships with others cause him or her to act. An agent is a person who acts with those relations in view. "In this, the agent constitutes a 'self'" (1988, 273).

Mona commented that only a woman, together with a man, may have or possess a baby. When a man and woman come together in sexual intercourse, God “does” a baby. Their combined blood works or labors toward the baby, making new blood, growing the egg. The egg, by Mona’s account, is the starting point for the baby and made by God alone. Blood works for and grows the baby, but the baby is not a direct consequence of that co-mingling blood. Mona’s discussion of blood emphasized growing the baby rather than the baby’s growth. Growing does not inhere in the baby (fetus) but occurs through the combined labor of maternal and paternal, cross-sex blood. Sexual intercourse is the crucial context for and enactment of this labor. Blood, specifically menstrual blood and semen, does not provide the substantive identity nor, indeed, the form of the baby, but it does grow the child within the womb. Without stating it, Mona implied that the mother’s womb provides or acts as the necessary context for this growing to occur.

Mona stated emphatically that women or men alone or together cannot “do” the baby; they cannot do anything to create the baby. They cannot bring it to pass, contribute parts to it, or complete it. Men and women cannot make something from nothing; they cannot make matter. While the child remains in the womb their actions merely anticipate—prepare the ground for—and grow the child. “Only God knows what He’s doing, the baby.” God forms the baby. Because He does the baby, only He knows what He is doing. He starts, makes, and completes the body, the baby; the baby is a consequence of His doing. Mona’s use of the performance metaphor “doing” is instructive. Implied here is an integral, dialectical relationship between knowing and doing. Without knowledge of the “what” of doing, doing cannot occur. Inversely, without doing the “what” of knowing, knowing cannot be fully realized. Knowing is the effect of doing, as doing is the effect of knowing.¹⁸ Perhaps it follows that because a man and woman alone or together cannot “do” the baby, they cannot know (about) conception. Mona implied that their knowledge of conception extends only to what they do to create the context for conception and growth of the baby to occur.

Shelley: God makes us. Umm . . . is that what you’ve always believed?

Mona: Yes.

Shelley: Always? Is that what you were told when you were a little girl? Or did your mother believe something different about how you were formed? Or did she believe what you told me?

Mona: I told you that's how the baby is started growing like that, inside our stomach. God made earth and from there he made Adam . . . [tape unintelligible]—Adam only man he will stay, woman talking with him nothing. But what he do only himself. No one to stay with him. So God made—what?—girl or woman to stay with him. He made her from one rib there, so he took from man's rib, that one he put it, so man he has eleven ribs so always girls like mens because the one part they got it and they put it two. [Laughter] So ladies they want men and men they want ladies. So everything we never made, only God made us.

Frustrated by my resistance to her answers and conscious that I was seeking some other explanation for conception, Mona, her voice bespeaking exasperation, finally gave me what she believed I wanted to hear, what she knew I knew: an account of the (second) biblical creation story. Waiting together in the church grounds for the beginning of the Women's Fellowship meeting, it was a fitting time and place to recount this story. In her telling Mona emphasized neither Adam's creation, the garden of Eden, nor woman's role as Adam's helper in the garden. Rather, she drew attention to Adam's state of aloneness. Because Adam is alone, God makes woman "to stay with him." Because woman is created from man's rib, men and women are by themselves incomplete. For this reason they want each other—indeed, need each other. Perhaps it is not surprising that in a community where loneliness and being alone is anathema, an undesirable state, Mona emphasizes both Adam's need for a woman, and woman and man's mutual need and desire for each other. This mutual need of, or interdependence between, man and woman is a recurring theme expressed throughout all aspects of Nuakatan sociality.¹⁹

However strategically motivated, Mona's responses to my questions about past beliefs nonetheless reflected her current beliefs.²⁰ In telling the biblical creation story she not only demonstrated her biblical knowledge—knowledge that is generally assumed to impress *dimdim*—but, more important, she offered an account that would bring us together, render us similar, an account we could share. Sensing my feeling of dislocation or marginality, perhaps she sought in this and other conversations around that time to highlight the similarities between us by rendering potentially strange or different beliefs and practices familiar, commonplace. While these gestures were gratefully accepted by me in

other contexts, in this particular conversation they were received with great ambivalence if not obvious disappointment. Unbeknownst to her, in those tentative days early in my fieldwork, expressions of difference provided purpose, confidence. Unsure of my place in the community, my way forward as an ethnographer, expressions of difference provided activity as it begged to be documented. It relieved the waiting, made tiresome, at times, by my own impatient expectations.

While clearly motivated by contradictory political and epistemological assumptions—some conscious, others not—my appeal to Mona's inherited beliefs, to cultural difference, was in part a sincere attempt to further understand the historical context of her present beliefs and practices. It was an attempt to consider how past beliefs impinge upon present ones, and the inverse, how the present influences and interprets the past. I sought to contextualize and understand current beliefs about conception as a starting point in a process of intersubjective, dialectical knowing.

Reflecting upon the “conditions of possibility of intersubjective knowledge,” Fabian contends that “somehow we must be able to share each other's past in order to be knowingly in each other's present” (1983, 92). Taken literally this statement implies several things: people's past influences their present; in order to be knowingly in each other's present, people must share aspects of their past with one another; and, perhaps most significant, intersubjective or dialectical knowledge is made possible when ethnographer and interlocutor experience a shared past and present.²¹ Fabian writes:

Time is . . . needed for the ethnographer to become part of his interlocutor's past. . . . If it is true that ethnography, in order to be productive, must be dialogical and therefore to a certain degree reciprocal, then we begin to appreciate the epistemological significance of Time. (1983, 90)

But the question still remains, What does it mean to *share* in Mona's past? In this particular conversation I assumed that to elicit her cultural inheritance was to invite her to remember it, if only in fragments, in spoken, narrative form. I overlooked the idea that this inheritance may exist only as it is enacted or performed (see Denning 1996; Turner 1986). And, at one level, I denied the possibility that our pasts may be linked through shared religious ideas and practices. Also, although sincere, my attempt to understand Mona's inherited beliefs was neither naive nor innocent,

for, as earlier indicated, the “past” I attempted to solicit was already prefigured by my reading of Massim ethnographies. Thus, while Mona and I shared the present, our knowledge of each other was constrained by the intrusion of my past—a past glimpsed by her only through the questions that sought to conjure her “present” beliefs.

The object’s present is founded in the writer’s past. In that sense, facticity itself, that cornerstone of scientific thought, is autobiographic. This, incidentally, is why in anthropology objectivity can never be defined in opposition to subjectivity, especially if one does not want to abandon the notion of facts. (Fabian 1983, 89)

Mona could not possibly know that, in asking those questions about conception, I was being haunted by the ghosts of an anthropological past, assailed by the phantoms of a “postcolonial” present. While eager to elicit Mona’s understanding of Nuakatan conception beliefs, spoken as it were “in her own voice”—a voice that renders colonialism mute—I was unable to “hear” her responses. Listening for difference, I was deaf to the familiar. I dismissed Mona’s God as a mere Western contrivance, a vestige of colonialism imposed upon core conception beliefs. In so doing, I was trying to both distance and distinguish myself from colonial enterprises, past and present, and invoke a postcolonial present purged of imperialist influence and power. Living at that time in the shadow of the church, hostage to its subsuming evangelical rhetoric, I took refuge in the subversive, if not, redemptive, idea of the traditional. While I knew this intellectual shelter to be temporary, unstable, exclusive and excluding, the prospect of comfort, albeit ephemeral, was difficult to resist. Suspending my disbelief in the unitary person, I tried to resuscitate true Nuakatan identity by appealing to a nonspecific past; an imagined “real time” in which unified beliefs existed as a cohesive force, binding a community of believers who lived in a pure, undefiled space/time. Despite my disavowal of notions of culture with a capital C (i.e., culture as a core set of overarching, “superorganic” ideas [Jackson 1989, 121], shared meanings or organizing principles [Fabian 1983; Keesing 1974, 1990]) I was seduced by their legacy. In anticipating Mona’s voice, unique, pure, and strong, I inadvertently invoked an-other echo of my own (see Carrier 1992).

Keesing states that “the invention and evocation of radical alterity”—cultural difference and the exotic “radical other”—have been, and

remain in veiled guises, central to the anthropological project (1990, 46). Whether proving that “cultural conceptions of personhood, of emotions, of agency, of gender, of the body are culturally constructed” (as “symbolist/interpretive modes of anthropology” attempt), or refuting the ethnocentric presumptions of Western thought (as postmodernist anthropology presumes to do), “non-logocentric alterity”—difference, in other words—is invoked (1990, 47). Keesing suggests that this dubious project is advanced by “reified” notions of culture as “a culture,” “an agent,” “a collectivity of people” who are in essence a unity (1990, 48). A key element of this idea of “culture” is the assumption that it exists in a distinct spatiotemporal realm—a realm diversely embodied by its participants.

This view of culture has been questioned by many Pacific historians, notably Thomas (1991, 1994), Carrier (1992), Denig (1980; 1996), and Neumann (1992). Denig, following Wagner, observes that “culture is a stranger’s invention: it is the sense of wholeness and integration an outside-outsider or an inside-outsider develops” (1996, 57). Carrier is critical of anthropologists’ “tendency to hypostasize the Other, to bestow upon the alien society a timeless concreteness [and to] see the societies . . . [studied] in terms of [essentialist] states of being rather than in terms of contingencies and historical processes” (1992, 13). He writes that this “tendency to essentialization can produce in anthropologists an unwillingness to focus on aspects of society that are recent innovations, under the assumption that because they have not been present for a very long period of time, they must be transient and illegitimate, inauthentic” (1992, 14). Keesing and Jolly concur with this critique, similarly urging anthropologists to

take a more processual, dynamic view of how human populations create order and meaning, a view that focuses on internal contradictions and cleavages as well as on coherence and consensus, and on the production and reproduction of symbols, then the engagement of contemporary Melanesians with capitalism, the world system, postcolonial states, and Christianity. (1992, 227)

Aware that my interview with Mona was constrained by my inability to formulate appropriate open-ended questions, I sought Wycliffe’s help to translate my questions on conception and birth into Alina Nu’ata. His response was telling. Though happy enough to assist me, he remained skeptical about the responses I would elicit. “People do not think about

conception; they do not know about these things,” he suggested. Without hearing or discussing Mona’s words, Wycliffe echoed their sentiment; conception is not known or thought, therefore explanations or understandings of conception are rarely and/or reluctantly given. As if to confirm this disinterested knowledge, Wycliffe sought clarification of the names of some body parts from his mother, father, and big father, including the word for conception.

Despite his cautionary words I determined to substantiate the assertion that “people do not know (about) conception” by posing similar questions to other women. Searching for appropriate, neutral questions for Wycliffe to translate, I suggested: How does the baby happen? How does it come to be inside the mother’s stomach? Can you tell me about how a baby is formed? Is it formed from the mother, the father, or how? Wycliffe’s translations literally asked: Can to me you say how baby it starts/begins? How your understanding when child, its mother, her stomach (womb) it starts/begins? How the child it is placed inside? How your understanding this? Father from him, or maybe mother from her, or how your understanding?

Anxious to respond to several women who had offered to talk with me about childbirth, and having only two months of language learning behind me, I paid little attention to the form or meaning of Wycliffe’s translations. I simply transcribed them into my notebook for easy reference. Many months later, frustrated by my inability to formulate open-ended questions (e.g., Can you tell me about . . . ?), I reexamined my original conception questions and Wycliffe’s translations, looking for clues. Only then did I appreciate the subtle shifts in meaning between the two. Where I spoke of forming in the sense of shaping or fashioning, Wycliffe translated this as placing or putting inside. Also, where I used the expression “tell me about,” Wycliffe translated this as “how your understanding when . . .” “To speak about, or of, something” implies a temporal and, especially, spatial distance/distinction between the speaker and the spoken, the knower and the known. When questioned, Wycliffe indicated that in Alina Nu’ata there is no equivalent form of “to talk, think, speak, know *about*.” Perhaps the closest equivalent is encapsulated in the expression *yanuwawanuwuine*, which may be translated as “I thinking-feeling it,” or “I thinking that one/that thing.” When this particular expression is used there is a sense that the subject’s thinking goes toward something. However, Wycliffe did not use this expression in his translations. Instead he invited the listener to locate or contextualize her under-

standing in the time and place of conception. Where I sought authoritative knowledge, Wycliffe's questions sought understanding born of experience, of doing.

Wycliffe used the word *nuwamasele* to denote understanding. In other contexts *nuwamasele* can also mean something like opinion, attitude, or meaning. While Wycliffe's translation was appropriate in this context, it is important to note that the English "understanding" and the Alina Nu'ata *nuwa* are founded on different metaphors—metaphors that express semantically significant differences. Pelz states that, in English, "understanding" means to stand under or place yourself below the thing that you are trying to comprehend; in German, *verstehen* (to understand) means "to stand in the place of, put oneself in place of" (1974, 84; personal communication, 1996). Used as either a verb or noun *nuwamasele* is derived from two words: the stem *nuwa-* and *masele*, which means light, outside, to bring out into the open, visible. For example, *'abiye-masele*, which combines the verbal prefix *'abiye* with *masele*, means to explain, to make clear, to make visible, to sweep or clean around. In this context the term *masele* implies that when the "to be discerned" is brought out into the open or becomes visible, then it becomes clear, discernible. Once outside, things become visibly appreciated or understood. The stem *nuwa-*, however, proved more difficult to translate. My efforts to understand its meanings and uses sparked some lengthy conversations with Wycliffe, his birth father, Noah, and his highly respected big father, Antiya.

A man in his sixties, Antiya was locally renowned for his efforts, some twenty years earlier, in eliminating all the wild pigs on the island. His hunting exploits and subsequent dissection of the pigs gave him widely recognized knowledge of pig and—by association—human body parts. At first he, together with Wycliffe, translated *nuwa* as the heart organ. As an example, they added that just after a pig has been killed and the fat is cut away from its flesh its pumping heart (*nuwapo*) is clearly visible. The translation of *nuwa* as heart initially caused me some confusion, for people on Nuakata also use the term *'ate* for this part of the body. Wycliffe explained that when David Lithgow began work on the translation of the Bible into Auhelawa he, together with local assistant Bible translators, decided that "heart" would be better translated as *'ate*—as it is in the Dobuan Bible. Lithgow concluded that, like the term "heart" in the English Bible, *'ate* denotes a center of emotions or feelings. In making this decision to replace *nuwa* with *'ate* the translators chose to ignore the fact

that ‘*ate*’ means liver in Auhelawa and Alina Nu‘ata! Indeed, ‘*ate*’ denotes feelings—emotions that arise from the liver (and not the heart), embodied feelings.²² For example, ‘*atemuyamuya*’ (liver/feelings paining) is used to mean empathy, pity, care for someone in trouble, the ability to feel and identify with another human being’s pain. *Atehawawali* (liver, reddish) is used to describe rashes and skin diseases that occur when someone is fearful, and the embodied feelings of fear and/or anxiety.²³

This translation of ‘*ate*’ as liver and embodied feelings is by no means unique to Nuakata. Macintyre notes that on Misima island ‘*atil’ate*’ means

emotion; compassion; the ability to imagine and thereby identify with other human beings; by association with the idea of individual response it approximates the concept “personality” in English. The word is from the Proto-Oceanic word meaning “liver” and until recently referred to that organ as well as the abstract meanings. Largely because of mission teachings that located emotional response in the heart, the majority of Misimans now think of ‘*ati*’ as meaning the heart. The same shift in meaning has occurred in Dobuan and Ware languages in the Massim region. (1990, 91)

Antiya, Noah, and Wycliffe later elaborated upon their initial translation of *nuwa*, stating that it means the place where the thinking combined with feeling arises, the place from which wanting, wishing, and longing (desire) stem. It is also a general term meaning the inside of the body. For example, *nuwatuwudawani* is a noun meaning, quite literally, the thinking-feeling/wanting hidden from family elders. It is akin to lust. The words for chest (*nuwa‘epo*) and kidney (*nuwamagi*) both take *nuwa* as their stem, as do the words for thinking (*nuwatuwui*) and a multiplicity of nouns and verbs that denote feeling/living states—for example, *nuwavitai* (heavy heart), *nuwadaumwali* (calm heart), *nuwanuwapuyo* (virginity/chastity)—and characteristic personal styles or ways, such as *nuwadobi* (humble), *nuwapotapota* (stubborn).

Common to many languages throughout the Massim, the term *nuwa/nua/nuatu* has been previously discussed by several Massim ethnographers. Commenting on the meaning of *nua* on Tubetube, Macintyre notes that “the *nua* . . . [or the mind] is thought to be physically located in the body” (1987, 208), and more specifically “in the heart” (1987, 209). Elsewhere she notes that in Tubetube “heart” is *nuwapou*, literally,

“thought egg.” She suggests that the meaning of *nua* overlaps or correlates with like terms in other Papua New Guinea languages and cites as an example the word *noman* found in the language of the Kawelka (Hagen) people (see A. Strathern 1972, 143–44; M. Strathern 1968). *Noman*, like *nua*, means “both will and social consciousness” (M. Strathern 1987a, 208). Reflecting on the term *nuatu* which is used on Misima, Macintyre states that it means “mind; will; capacity for thought and intention” (1990, 91). She adds:

This term now incorporates the Western concept of the “brain” and is one which has definitely altered over time. In normal everyday speech it refers only to abstract, mental processes. One elderly informant suggested to me that in former days, before Europeans taught people about brains, Misimans believed that the heart was the seat of thought. . . . I cannot confirm this. He did suggest however, that consciousness was not deemed to have anything to do with the brain/mind, but was a sensory capacity of the body, usually explained with reference to the eyes. (1990, 91)

In writing about Sabarl, Battaglia (1990) points to the distinction between *nuwa-* and *nuwo-* in the local language. *Nuwo-* means “mind/cognition,” a “capacity for ordered thought.” The root of *nuwotu* (thought) is “understood as an organizing experience—of ‘focusing’ or ‘assembling’ distinct perceptions and ideas and gathering them together into one homeplace.” In contrast, *nuwa-* means “a capacity for feeling” (1990, 55). She suggests that “as the life of the mind invokes images of convergent thinking, divergent images predominate in the realm of ‘feeling’ and ‘emotions’ (*nuwa*)” (1990, 56).

While Wycliffe and Antiya stated that *nuwa* could denote the mind—described by me as a place where thinking occurs—they claimed that in the past, if not the present, the people of Nuakata did not associate the mind or thinking with the brain (*‘uto*). Wycliffe was well aware of the *dimdim* belief that knowledge and thinking stem from the brain. He gained this awareness through his involvement in primary and, especially, secondary education as well as Bible translation work. Moreover, he readily accepted this idea as fact. But in Nuakatan thought, thinking—which is considered inseparable from feeling and emotion—is not clearly linked to a specific body part. Rather, it is, as Macintyre has recorded for Tubetube and Misima, thought to occur within the body as a whole. On

the basis of these discussions and references to other Massim ethnographies, *nuwamasele* can be considered both the state and the process where concealed, inner, or undisclosed thinking-feeling is brought out into the open, made visible. Accordingly, understanding may be possessed and enacted. It passes from within the body to outside it and is directed toward or “situated in” the space of the thing or event understood. On the threshold between the inside and outside of the body, or moving between the two, understanding may be possessed as a semi-alienable or alienable form/process. It is not indissociable, and therefore it is not fundamentally constitutive of the one who possesses it.

Satisfied that I was able to express my basic conception questions in Alina Nu’ata, I was less than confident about my ability to understand people’s replies. When I asked Wycliffe to assist me with some early interviews, he agreed, but his subsequent absence on these planned occasions confirmed my suspicion that this was a culturally inappropriate request. Much later he explained that men and women do not generally “speak together [of] these things,” and, by implication, I should not speak (of) these things with other men. “This [is] our custom, our way.” Indicating that his presence could cause embarrassment and disrespect to the women concerned, he then commented, “I already know about conception and birth. I learned about the ovum and the sperm, and the process of fertilization in science classes at secondary school.” He added that if I wished to learn customary understandings of conception, gestation, and birth, I should speak with women who have been pregnant and given birth in their village, for “they understand these things.” Other people—girls, childless women, men—“do not know [and therefore cannot speak of] these things, for they have not done them.”

Here again the relationship between knowing and doing, and understanding and doing, was highlighted. Many other people subsequently drew this to my attention. For example, one young woman of fifteen, Roda, laughed when I asked her about conception, pregnancy, and birth. Embarrassed, she stated that she was too young to know about these things, even though she had witnessed several of her mother’s pregnancies and births. Another person poured scorn on a young woman who had spoken with me about pregnancy and birth, with words to the effect, What would she know, she has only one child! And so it became clear that if I wished to elicit Nuakatan ideas about conception I needed to speak with women who had given birth many times.

Over time and through experiences such as these I came to better understand what it means to think, know, and understand on Nuakata. Only those with personal experience gain a legitimate right to speak with authority about an event, practice, or belief. Understanding arises from doing or participating. Although *nuwamasele* rather than *hanapui* best describes understanding derived from lived experience, in practice people often use either word interchangeably to refer to this form of knowing/understanding. Almost without exception, however, *hanapui* is used to refer to inherited or acquired knowledge, which is known but not necessarily understood. Most important, in the context of my research I learned that without my own personal experience of conception, gestation, and birth, I could only hope to know Nuakatan beliefs and practices without understanding them.

Some time later, still seeking an exposition of conception beliefs similar to those documented by other Massim ethnographers, I questioned Wycliffe about the meaning of the word for conception. As our conversation unfolded it emerged that the word for conception, *lagahi*, is derived from the verb *laga*, which means “to go up inland, away from the sea.” This was a revelation to me. Expressed in these terms, conception refers not to substance, but rather to activity or process—doing or social action; the journey of the unnamed, undisclosed, to an inland place. It is movement of an already “assumed” (person? baby? mother? thing? spirit?) away from the exposed reaches of the sea toward the enclosed, concealed realms of the bush. For local people “inland” has many tangible associations. The inland is generally familiar, known, or possessed clan land. While by day it is a friendly, if not benevolent place, nightfall can render it hostile—a realm to be feared. Not only do ill-disposed, ancestral spirits linger in the bush at night but so do witches, who lay invisible traps for unsuspecting night wanderers. “Up inland, away from the sea” is also the place where most gardens are located on the island. And people may steal away during the day into their garden or the bush to engage in sexual intercourse (*apali*), in secret. As in other Massim island communities of the past (Lepowsky 1993; Munn 1986), people retreated inland for safety during times of warfare, for there they were hidden from the stranger’s view. Indeed, it can be dangerous for strangers to venture inland into the bush without first rendering themselves familiar to Silopan, the custodial spirit of the island’s central peak, Mount Tanalabwa. Strangers can make themselves identifiable to Silopan by eat-

ing a particular leafy vegetable that grows on the island. People should show due deference to Silopan by speaking quietly when deep in the bush.

Understood thus, the inland is both a place of refuge, privacy, growth, and sustenance and also a realm where an attitude of caution and respect should prevail. The suggestion that conception is imagined, not as a confluence of substances, but rather as the movement of the “assumed” from without to within, from outside to inland, from open space to a concealed place, is reinforced by the words associated with pregnancy and birth. The verb for pregnancy, *hiuma*, means they plant in the ground. By Mona’s account, menstrual blood stops flowing to signal the baby’s arrival and works toward the baby to grow it within the womb. Known as *heda yana* ‘*abaeno* (literally, child, its sleeping place) or ‘*abanatu* (literally, child’s place), the womb is an enclosed and enveloping space, a sealed place where the child sleeps and is grown until completion. The large clamshell (*godugodu*) is used both in popular speech and also in stories and legends to denote the womb. *Godu* means “to break, snap.” The word for abortion or miscarriage, *goduyoi*, uses the stem of this word, thereby likening miscarriage and abortion to the irrevocable breaking or snapping apart of the tightly sealed halves of the clamshell.

Elaborated in these terms, conception is associated with a journey inland, a journey and a place familiar to those who make daily treks inland to, among other things, tend gardens. Perhaps this journey signifies the journey of the baby inland into the womb. The suggested relationship between the beginnings of the baby and the journey to a concealed place of growth and sustenance points to the broader significance of metaphor to thinking and understanding. Considered by Jackson to be a pivotal aspect of thinking about self, person, or people, anthropomorphic metaphor is a “verbal correlate” of patterns of bodily use and social interaction within the habitus (1989, 145–49). Following Bourdieu (1977), Mauss (1973, 73), and Dewey (1929), Jackson understands habitus as patterns of body use generated and informed by both intentional and unintentional habits that are “instilled within a shared environment” of everyday practical activities (1989, 128). Interactional, these habits are linked to the immediate world of people and things. Accordingly, metaphors express the distinct habits, rhythms, structures, material features, landscape, and relationships of everyday life in the particular social and linguistic contexts from which they arise. As such, metaphors are

“situated” and “socially constituted” (1989, 141). They may simultaneously express bodily, social, economic, political, gender, spatial/geographic relationships, without exhausting other possible meanings.

Jackson contends that metaphor is not a “way of saying something ‘in terms of’ or ‘by way of’ something else” (1989, 142). Not “merely a figure of speech, drawing on an analogy”—itself denoting resemblance or similarity—metaphors must, instead, be apprehended “nondualistically,” not as an “arbitrary or rhetorical synthesis of two terms—subject and object . . . which can be defined more realistically apart from each other, but [as] a true interdependency, [and identity] of mind and body, Self and World,” body and landscape. “Metaphor reveals unities; it is not a figurative way of denying dualities. Metaphor reveals, not the ‘thisness of a that’ but rather that ‘this is that’” (1989, 142)—that mind is body, conception is to go up inland. “Means of saying things,” metaphors are also “means of doing things”; they are instrumental—means to an end rather than ends in and of themselves.

According to Jackson, metaphor is “a part of all thought” (1989, 145). However, in everyday communication in “both literate and nonliterate societies,” the real connection between what he—adopting philosophical metaphors—terms *domains of being* (e.g., the human body and the landscape, or animals and human beings) generally remains implicit (1989, 143). It is passive and quiescent rather than active and explicit. In other words, people do not draw attention to the link between the domains. Although ordinarily quiescent, mundane metaphors may be activated under certain conditions or in certain contexts—particularly in times of crisis—to effect and mediate change in people’s behavior and relationships (1989, 144).

Although the literal translation of conception as *lagahi* came as a revelation to me, Wycliffe cautioned that this meaning holds little significance for local people. He commented to the effect that “people do not think the word like that, they only speak it, use it.” I wondered what he meant by this statement. Was he suggesting that the people of Nuakata did not think or enact the relationship between conception and *lagahi* (going up inland)? Was he saying that there is no such relationship between conceiving and going inland? Perhaps he was suggesting that the relationship should be understood as an analogy, or figuratively? Perhaps, like Wittgenstein (1953), he was advising me to look for the use of a word rather than its meaning. Or was he simply stating that, in pragmatic terms, an understanding of this relationship is irrelevant for the

purposes of communicating (about) or doing conception? While I did not solicit answers to these questions, some clues lay in the conversation that ensued.

As I recall, Wycliffe's initial statement was followed by discussion of our early language learning sessions. Laughing, he indicated that I always wanted to learn the meaning of single words, together with the rules and laws of language. My way, he suggested, was not the best way to learn or understand Alina Nu'ata. It was only by making mistakes, by listening, speaking, and doing it that I would learn it properly, that I would speak as others do. Reflecting upon his comments and upon the word for conception, which sparked this conversation, I realized that neither I nor those to whom I spoke used the word *lagahi* when speaking about how the baby begins. Indeed, people did not ordinarily speak of conception. Rather, conception was known or understood by its effect—pregnancy.

If my conversation with Mona stood out as an important moment, one in which I was confronted by my own assumptions, then these brief comments made by Wycliffe constituted another moment of equivalent and related significance, as they made me examine the value I placed on the analysis of language, specifically metaphor, as a means of cultural translation. This conversation made me scrutinize how I was interpreting life on Nuakata. Preoccupied by the task of learning to speak, I was seduced, charmed by the power of words. Perplexed, even disappointed by the absence of distinctive Nuakatan conception beliefs, I had attempted to excavate the seemingly dormant, if not fossilized, word for conception in the hope of extracting a deeper metaphorical meaning. Following in the spirit of anthropologists, such as M. Rosaldo (1980) and Lutz (1982), and cognitive linguists, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) among others, I had set out to trace the ontology of conception, to identify a central conceptual schema underlying it, by mapping the semantic fields of related metaphors. While I believed then, and continue to believe now, that this is a potentially fruitful, although not unproblematic, way of elucidating cultural meanings, Wycliffe's statement warned me against privileging the meaning of single words removed from their social, pragmatic, and linguistic contexts. Although a useful heuristic device, interpretation of this kind risks mistranslation and misreading. Words become reified as the repositories of static meaning—"instruments of reflection," a "mirror of nature" (Rorty 1979) rather than, as Malinowski suggested, "a mode of action and not an instrument of reflection" (1922, 312). Wycliffe's

comments acted as a restraint to my impulse to privilege elaborations of difference and revelations of the exotic.

Of course these reflections in the field were not without precedent for me or anthropological debate. Mindful of both the potential and actuality of cultural mistranslation born of linguistic incompetence, and fueled by the quest for the exotic, Keesing (1989b) urges anthropologists to be cautious with their necessarily fragmentary and limited linguistic data or evidence. He directs his strongest cautionary refrain to fieldworkers who seek to document, understand, and interpret “cultural symbolism, cosmological systems, or cultural constructions of ‘self’ and ‘person’” (460). At issue here is the analysis of what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) term “conventional metaphor”—metaphors that “are not creative extrapolations from literal use” but are embedded within both the semantics and the grammatical form of the language (Keesing 1985, 205–8; 1989b, 463). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) assert that conventional metaphors are systematic; they underpin our language, our speaking and our thinking. Whether employing “body parts,” “spatial imagery or physical acts or states,” one domain of experience (the source domain) is used to represent another (target domain), be it “temporal relationships, social relationships, [or] inner states” (1980, 463). Keesing (1985) warns that metaphors may be so deeply conventional that we need to carefully consider whether or not they are constitutive of experience or thinking. Rather than the “frozen residues of old belief” (1985, 208) they may be semantically irrelevant, effectively dead or at least unrecognizably transformed. Therefore, we need to adopt an attitude of caution or skepticism in reading cosmological or metaphysical significance into conventional metaphors. This should not, however, be interpreted as a call to abandon such projects. Keesing calls for the mapping of metaphorical schemata in non-Western languages in the way elaborated in Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Lakoff (1989, 473).

The metaphoric systems of particular peoples are *expressions* of their culturally constructed worlds as well as the reverse. . . . [D]ifferent metaphoric schemes in a particular language may themselves be connected in systematic ways reflective of cultural-conceptual systems that underlie them. Metaphors, that is, are constructed in terms of, as well as themselves being constitutive of, a people’s view of the world. But that does not mean that we can easily infer from the metaphoric usages

the systems of cultural assumption—if any—that underlie them. Nor does it mean that all native actors necessarily share assumptions about how the world works, despite being able to use the linguistic coin of the community. (Keesing 1989b, 463, emphasis in original)

Jackson (1989) recognizes that we may misread active meaning in the merely conventional, but also says because it was once there, it can always be revitalized or enlivened. Fernandez (1989) is also less interested or persuaded by the “dead metaphor trapped in convention” idea. Responding to Keesing’s words of caution, Fernandez stresses the “pragmatics of metaphor” and the need

for an enduring anthropological interest in human playfulness and human capacity to create or enliven metaphors and to build universes on such grains of sand. . . . [T]he study of the conventional structures of dead metaphors should be enlivened by the field study of the “play of tropes.” . . . [We should] complement the cognitive enterprise and its attention to those recurrent cultural moments and cultural movements in which something new and lively and colourful is created out of—to use the linguist’s metaphor he evokes—the “bleached bones” of the past. (1989, 470–71)

The Conceived, Borne

One day, two months or so after our arrival on Nuakata, I summoned the courage to visit Emma in her hamlet on the Bolime side of the island. Nervous about my language skills, I put my list of questions about conception, pregnancy, and birth, my language notebook, and my tape recorder in my backpack and set off alone to talk with her. The well-defined path to Bolime passes through several hamlets before tracing its way up a short steep rise, through dense bush filled with towering rosewood trees and other splendid tropical hardwoods. At the top of this rise, which marks the border between Yalasi and Bolime, you can see in the foreground the densely forested island of Boirama and, in the distance, on the horizon, the outline of Tubetube—where Martha Macintyre did her fieldwork. Looking out to sea on this day, catching my breath, I thought first of Martha going before me to Tubetube, and then of the small stream of ethnographers that had previously journeyed to other

islands in Milne Bay Province. I remembered accounts and photos of Martha's friendships on Tubetube, her fictive kin, her house and village, her boat journeys. Standing there, scanning the horizon, my memories of her Tubetube pictures and stories were enlivened just as my Nuakata friendships and stories were now unfolding, taking shape, finding words. Malinowski's words, "Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village" (1962, 4), came to mind. I realized, then, that a transition had occurred without me really knowing or noticing it. I was no longer imagining the field, but living it, living on Nuakata. I was no longer imagining myself as a fieldworker through the texts and testimonies of my anthropological forebears. I was doing fieldwork. Running down the slope to Emma's place, my arms and legs barely in control, my backpack straining against its harness, I felt once again what a privilege it was to stay in this place, to share this time with people. If, as anthropologists say, fieldwork is a rite of passage, then this journey to Emma's village marked a moment in my own conception as a person who does ethnography—a person privileged to hear, see, and create stories with other people.

My arrival in Emma's village was announced by barking dogs. I can barely bring myself to classify them as such, for dogs on Nuakata are miserable, mangy, dispirited creatures—mere shadows of their (comparatively) pampered Western cousins. Seated outside under her house, with her mother and several small children, Emma welcomed me warmly. In her late twenties, divorced, she had recently given birth to her fifth child, Reni, a daughter (see chap. 2). Like Mona, Emma had made discreet efforts to befriend me during Women's Fellowship meetings. She too spoke English, but used it with me sparingly, to explain unfamiliar Alina Nu'ata words.

Before long Emma, Reni, and I retreated inside the house where we talked together about a range of things, including conception, pregnancy, birth, marriage, and my own marriage ceremony. During the conversation I asked her, "How do you understand the baby starts?" Emma replied:

A baby begins when a man and woman marry. If a man and woman go together, then a child will arrive. The woman's period will sense the baby and go up to the baby. Then the woman will know. She will feel the baby within her. Then the woman has found the baby.

Emma did not offer an explanation for the creation of the baby, stating in this and subsequent conversations that she didn't know or understand these things. However, she did speak of the "arrival" of the baby. The word she chose, *mahalava*, is used to describe a person, spirit, or thing coming to a hamlet or place from outside, or someone arriving from another island or place. *Mahalava* means to happen, to occur, to become present—although not necessarily, to materialize—in a place. At first the baby arrives without the mother's knowledge. It is for her to discover its presence (*lobai*) by its effect within her own body. Emma's use of the term *lobai*, meaning "to discover or find," is revealing, for it makes the point (reinforced by other women) that she does not cause the baby, nor make herself pregnant, but, rather, discovers its concealed presence within her.

Like Mona, Emma stated that a child "arrives" when a man and woman marry and come together in sexual intercourse. Her reference to marriage was knowing, and strategic. She wanted me to understand that, although her relationship with Reni's father could not be publicly acknowledged, this was only a temporary situation. For at that time she and Reni's father, Apolosa, were privately preparing for their noncustomary church marriage, planned to coincide with the visit of the regional United Church minister from Bunama on Normanby Island, later in the year. Unlike usual Nuakatan marriages, which occur outside and without reference to the church, Apolosa and Emma—both church members—intended to have a marriage sanctioned and officiated by the United Church. Not only would this legitimate and consolidate their status before the church, but it would also reinforce Apolosa's and, by implication, Emma's standing within the community. This and subsequent conversations about her wedding plans were only possible because I was an outsider in the community without familial or clan ties—a *dimdim* who was assumed to be associated with, and supportive of, the church and its activities.

According to Emma, then, this active coming together of man and woman creates the conditions of possibility for the baby's arrival without necessarily creating the baby. Captivated by Reni lying between us I did not think, at the time, to ask how a baby arrives/arises inside the mother, or where it comes from. Nuakatan beliefs about the cause or means of human procreation were rendered irrelevant to me by the presence of a child already conceived and born. The present, undeniable needs of the conceived—in this case a tiny, weeks-old baby girl—overshadowed spec-

ulative discussion about how she was formed. For the first time I understood a prevailing form of pragmatism, that the ever-presence of the effects of conception (babies, children, adults) rendered questions about their cause unimportant. Such pragmatism is sustained by the knowledge that the creation of babies occurs, but cannot be known. It is only when the conceived is brought into the open, made visible, borne that the constitutive conjugal relations and acts that prepared the ground for it are revealed (see M. Strathern 1988, 316–17).

Following her own account of conception, Emma asked me to explain how the baby starts. Aware that I was a married woman, thirty-three years old, and without children, she did not attempt to elicit understanding born of my lived experience of conception, gestation, and birth. Rather, she appealed to my learned knowledge *about* these issues. Reluctant to be positioned as an authority, or to reinforce the view that this knowledge should be privileged as fact or truth, I prefaced my reply with, “Some *dimdim* understand that the baby starts when . . .” While unsure whether or not this preface achieved its desired effect, I was confident that the ensuing explanation did not reinforce Emma’s presumptions about the status of my *dimdim* knowledge of conception. Launching into a description of sexual intercourse, the journey of the sperm to the egg, fertilization, and implantation, in broken Alina Nu’ata, I was forced to resort to indecipherable diagrams and gestures, before we both abandoned the exercise in fits of laughter. But I was not yet off the hook. Clearly relaxed and feeling more confident in my presence, Emma carefully scanned my face as she asked, “Why do you have no children?” Still laughing, I offered an obvious, easy answer—‘*ai ‘auhi, ya paihowai* (I use contraception). But this did not satisfy her, for it failed to explain why I chose to study women’s stories of conception, pregnancy, and birth and did not become pregnant myself. Specifically, it did not explain why I sought an understanding of these issues through others’ experiences rather than my own. It also failed to acknowledge the implications of this choice for Roger and me, and our families. A lengthier conversation ensued!

Bearing the Inconceivable

As I was preparing to leave Emma’s hamlet, I noticed a basket lying on a mat under the house. Like the bags used by women to carry garden produce it was woven from coconut palm leaves, but in a different style. Rec-

tangular in shape, its weave was more pleasing to the eye. Taken by its appearance, I asked Emma what it was used for. She told me that it was a carrying basket for Reni. Her mother made it when Reni was born. Although primarily used for carrying new babies, this type of basket can also be used by women to carry yams from the garden at harvest time. She added that some, but not all women on the island, continue to use these bags for carrying babies or yams.

While interested to learn that freshly harvested yams and new babies may be carried in this style of basket, and intrigued by the possible significance of this practice, this did not occupy my thoughts on the journey home. Nor did I focus on Emma's claim that she did not know (about) conception—a claim that, as Wycliffe had anticipated, was repeated by every woman I subsequently asked about these things. Instead, my thoughts centered on the familiar and recurring image of women returning home from their gardens bearing heavy baskets of food on top of, or slung from, their heads. This image, combined with that of Emma carrying Reni in her basket, caused me to reflect on the Alina Nu'ata word *'avala* (to give birth). Used to describe a women's bearing during pregnancy, *'avala* is also used more widely to mean "carry" or "bear." While men carry things (their personal bags, bush knives, wood for canoes or houses, fish, pigs, children, and particularly older infants), they do not generally, or routinely, carry newborn babies, garden produce, or weighty bags or parcels. And, of course, they do not bear unborn babies within them. These "bearings" are carried by women alone. A woman carries the conceived baby—inside her womb. After birth women continue to carry their babies until they can stand alone, just as women continue to carry food from their gardens that nourishes and sustains their growing children. For women, then, bearing a baby is not confined to labor and giving birth, but is an ongoing activity that precedes and extends well beyond birth—and for women, too, it is bearing rather than conceiving that can be enacted and, therefore, known and understood.

But these musings still left me puzzled by Emma's use of the word *mahalava* (arrival) to describe how the baby begins. Several weeks later, I'unia, the adoptive mother of Emma's fourth child—a woman in her mid-forties, who came to Nuakata from Duau (on Normanby Island) in her early twenties—took me aside to tell me that many people on Nuakata do not understand conception properly. She indicated that because people on Nuakata, particularly the younger generations, are disinterested in customary knowledge, they are forgetting what people on

Duau still know to be true: “Babies’ spirits are sent by the spirits of the mother’s maternal ancestors.” The spirit of the baby “arrives” within the woman after she and her husband have intercourse.

I’unia’s comments were consistent with A. Weiner’s (1976) totalizing description of conception beliefs on the Trobriand Islands. Accordingly, the spirits of maternal ancestors implant the baby’s spirit within the body of its mother. Like Emma and Mona before her, I’unia also implied that sexual intercourse creates the possibility for the baby to arrive, but it does not create or cause the baby. A man and woman do not decide to “do” and therefore have a baby—(the spirit of) the baby comes to them from another source.

Her comments and my earlier musings on women’s multiple and related “bearings” brought to mind the story of Bulelala, told to me by Wycliffe as an aside in an earlier conversation about women and witchcraft.

Bulelala is a spiritual belief that all people on Nuakata believe to be true. Bulelala is a legendary flying woman, a spiritual woman. She used to carry a basket of food, which meant that it was going to be a good harvest. When Bulelala flies (at night), it is really bright across all of Nuakata. She flies two times a year—every harvest when the yams are growing and starting to mature. If she flies south, [i.e.,] north to south, it won’t be a good harvest. She flies like shooting stars—but shooting stars are not bright. She flies in a long line over the top of Yalasi, Bwauli, Bomatu. She will fly and then go down for two or three seconds and stop. If you stay (and listen) for a minute you will hear her put her basket of yams on the ground. It sounds like thunder. This year she came two times, but mainly to Duau and not Nuakata. Last year when there was a drought she did not come. It’s a sign, *mahuli*, of a good harvest. Her basket is as big as this house. She carries two baskets, one a bit bigger and one a bit smaller, one on her head and one on back. All the spirits of the yams, she takes them down this way. Now it doesn’t happen often, but before she often used to fly.

In telling this story Wycliffe had explained that “yams are like children.” Like people “yams have spirit.” Yams are the “most important” food grown in the garden. Men and women together usually plant their seed yams. Later when they have grown they are generally harvested by women. They can be stored to eat or given to people. “People give their

best and their first harvested yams to the church as *mulolo*—a love gift, an offering—just as Abraham offered up Isaac, his first-born son, to God.” Wycliffe also added:

The story of Bulelala is a legend, but a true legend because people believe. Those who do not believe do not hear her. Those who know the story of Bulelala to be true have heard her and seen the night sky lit up. They have seen that a good harvest has followed. Bulelala comes from Duau, where custom continues to be strong. Because most people on Duau continue to believe in her, she comes to them more often.

While told in a different context, the story of Bulelala, together with Wycliffe’s accompanying explanation, resonated with and unified key aspects of the explanations of conception given by I’unia, Emma, Mona, and Wycliffe. If, as Wycliffe suggests, yams and children are understood as analogous, then the story of Bulelala arguably highlights the significance of women’s bearing, carrying, and supporting roles in relation to growing yams and “en-wombed” or unborn children. Wycliffe’s comments also reinforced the idea that it is men and women together who “prepare the ground,” make a place, for growing yam seeds and unborn babies. Buried within the soil, the yam seed divides and multiplies when the spirit woman Bulelala arrives, carrying the spirits of the yams on her back. When she deposits her bags on the ground, the yam spirits enter the concealed seeds or growing yams, causing them to multiply, ensuring a bountiful harvest. Just as spirit is vital to the yam so it is, by I’unia’s and Mona’s accounts, vital to the baby concealed within the womb of its mother. The story of Bulelala also reinforces the idea that the yam/baby spirit is ontologically distinct and detachable from, if not prior to, the growing yam/baby. This view was consistent with Mona’s, I’unia’s, and Emma’s descriptions of conception, suggesting that, like contemporary Tubetube ideas described by Macintyre (1995), Nuakatan ideas of the person express physical/metaphysical, body/spirit, mortal/immortal dualisms, consistent with Christian ideas of body and soul.

This physical/metaphysical divide sits easily with Christian ideas of body and soul that are today spoken of in church sermons, or in any context where human mortality is an issue. Perhaps they reflect a century of missionisation and the acceptance of Christianity. . . . [T]his

dualism of body and soul, which we consider to be a hallmark of Western thought, is now claimed by Tubetube Christians as “something we always had,” entirely consonant with what they think of as precolonial ideas of human mortality and the eternal existence of spirits of the dead. (1995, 41)

But the story of Bulelala also highlights an important distinction between I‘unia’s and Mona’s understandings of conception. Mona suggested that God the Father makes the egg from which the baby is made. In so doing she revealed the influence of both Christian cosmology and Western medical teaching in her thinking on the person. I‘unia, though, implied that this was not a proper customary understanding of conception. Just as the spirit woman Bulelala brings spirit to the yams, it is the maternal ancestors, and not a single paternal God, who brings spirit to the “en-wombed” baby.

I‘unia clearly believed in, and sought to retain, an original, authentic, if not static and essentialist, Nuakatan understanding of conception—customary understanding that, like the story of Bulelala, stemmed from Duau. Far from obfuscating what is, can be, and has been known about conception, I‘unia’s essentialist thinking arguably added another perspective to the multiple, dynamic, and syncretic knowledge of conception on Nuakata.²⁴