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## SOCIAL THOUGHT & COMMENTARY

# Rethinking the Couvade

**Albert Doja**

*University of Limerick &  
University College London*

The need and the necessity to represent the natural process of birth by means of a symbolic action and to organize it ritually as a cultural process of constructing personhood are inherent to all human groups, which have always sought to transmit their collective experience through their cultural system as a whole. The very continuity of the community depends on these events in which social organization and individual existence meet. To mark these important times, all societies have worked out a multitude of different collective representations and symbolic forms.

The beliefs, rites and practices, the many genres and the other symbolic forms and collective representations of the traditions surrounding birth must be considered as a social strategy that serves to confer a symbolic value of recognition to the process of the construction of the person and the socialization of the individual as well as a way to formulate models of behavior for varying groups in society, in this case pregnant women, newborns, new mothers, fathers, and kin. Pregnancy and childbirth, like birth, child development and upbringing, have always been the occasion of such individual “crises,” critical periods, whose outcome is constantly invested with a strategic value for the group. These biological

processes must be worked out symbolically so as to bring the child, the new mother, sometimes the father too, back into their social, family and kin group.

As a rule, the birth of the child takes place in a special climate of prohibition, prevention and eviction, which demonstrate that these rituals are ways by which individuals construct and constitute identity and gender, ways that inscribe, enact and reproduce social relations and identities in a complex society with a strong basis in patriarchy. They define the positive and negative characteristics of each person's ritual behavior, especially the various behaviors of the child's parents. An abundance of examples in the anthropological literature attest to the universality and the multiplicity of these prohibitions. Yet, in classic ethnography, most accounts of practices and rituals associated with pregnancy and birth, observed by both parents in many different cultures, have been primarily devoted to the active participation of the father in the birth process rather than the variety of maternal restrictions, as if the mother's ritual behaviors were natural and matter-of-fact (Rival 1998: 630). By contrast, there is ample ethnographic evidence recorded, in particular, in remote rural areas, that, throughout Albanian communities, these processes included countless different positive or negative rites and ritual practices involving particular restrictions above all to the mother.<sup>1</sup> The taboos an Albanian woman must observe during pregnancy are extremely numerous. And her husband, too, is subjected to taboos. These apply to a large extent to foods, but also to behavior.

## The Couvade Problem

During the gestation period, not only the mother but the father, too, must observe a series of obligations and prohibitions. Both must abstain from certain foods, certain activities and certain behaviors traditionally thought of as being detrimental to the survival of their common offspring. In effect the child is not only part of the mother but part of the father also. The father usually shares the prohibitions observed by the mother, or at least he is subjected to others that correspond to those imposed on the mother. These behaviors are now most familiar under the heading of the category known in anthropological literature as the couvade, after Tylor (1865) who first coined the term. The couvade is classically defined as the custom by which "the father, on the birth of his child, makes a ceremonial pretence of being the mother, being nursed and taken care of, and performing other rites such as fasting and abstaining from certain kinds of food or occupa-

tions, lest the new-born should suffer thereby" (Tylor 1889:254). In virtue of this custom, it is the father who is supposed to experience the symptoms of fatigue and disability that follow the birth, while the woman goes about her daily occupations.

Even though the *couvade*, or the way the father adopts the role of the new mother, appears among peoples far distant from each other in basically identical forms, again the restrictions imposed on the father vary to a great extent in number, form and content. If we look at the areas where the fatherhood rites summed up under the term *couvade* are still practiced, we see that they are now found only in South America and Southeast Asia. Generally speaking, there is hardly a South American indigenous group in which there have not been reports of restrictions or prohibitions on the activity, diet and sex life of the parents at the time of birth (Métraux 1949).

Early reports on Carib childbirths, which describe the father undergoing *couvade* restrictions, compare them to a supposedly similar old French peasant custom. However, a pretended existence of the practice of *couvade* in Béarn and among the Basques appears to be merely the echo of a statement of Strabo as to the ancient Celiberians, loosely repeated by one compiler after another as a commonplace of history, finding the way even into the writings of one of the most known French ethnographer (Van Gennep 1943:121). Such practices of "man-childbed" are still believed to be observed in many other countries, including those of Europe.

Among Albanians too, there are claims of the existence of the *couvade*. It appears that the British anthropologist Margaret Hasluck had witnessed a case of *couvade* that she claims might have occurred in the town of Elbasan in January 28th, 1928. It concerned a man from the Catholic lineages of the North, who had come to work in Elbasan and had married a young Orthodox woman from there. At the birth of their first child, when a family friend came to congratulate the mother, to her horror she found the husband in bed with his wife beside him on the floor... *Na erdh shum turp*, "we felt very ashamed," she said .... The mother-in-law, sufficiently scandalized herself, explained that he had followed the custom of his remote tribe (Hasluck 1939:20).

Unfortunately this information regarding the vestiges allegedly found in the North must be considered as at least dubious, given the serious reservations on the reliability of Mrs. Hasluck's data leveled by her contemporaries (Kastrati 1955). Indeed, her account shows more her Tylorian knowledge of the *couvade* than any real situation among Albanians. For anyone who has a minimal knowledge of Albanian culture, her account would appear made up

in all parts. The only thing certain is in the Mati region of northern Albania, where oral tradition attributes the disappearance of the custom to Skanderbeg, in the fifteenth century, at a time when it was necessary to mobilize the whole population against the Ottoman invasion (Gjergji 1964); just as he is credited with many other legendary feats, for Skanderbeg as Lekë Dukagjini, who took up the battle against the Ottomans after Skanderbeg's death, are both credited by oral tradition with having given the Albanians their first code of customary law.

Generally, wherever the institution exists throughout Amazonia or in other contexts where birth observances fundamentally consist in perinatal dietary and activity restrictions for both parents, there is no necessary native term for 'couvade' (Rival 1998:622). Tylor explicitly writes that it is because of its etymological reference to hatch or brood hens, from the French *couver*, that he upgraded the local term *couvade* to the status of a general concept to define birth customs characterized by the confinement and restriction of the father for a period after the birth of his child. However, there is no evidence that the couvade is emically perceived as a kind of human brooding.

The application of the word in anthropology by Tylor is due to a statement in an old Basque ethnography, where the 'man-childbed' attributed to the Basques and Béarnese, is said to be so called by the latter. Etymological and historical investigations have convincingly shown that this is a traceable mistake, repeated with variations by a sequence of later writers. It is not true that couvade was ever a name for the practice in Béarn, the Béarnese word means simply "a covey of chickens." As applied to men the phrase *faire la couvade*, "rester inactif" in Littré, appears to have been merely derisive. The derogatory use of the term referred to a French satirical expression used to deride the cowardly behavior of men who do not get involved in public affairs or fight, but instead stay at home like "hens crouching down on their eggs" or, in American slang, "chicken-hearted" or "chicken-livered." To fully appreciate the derogatory meaning attached to the comparison of cowardly men with hens, one must contrast it with the sexual connotations of cock symbolism. The Gallic rooster is the symbol of virility and of sexual prowess. As the emblem of the French nation-state, it expresses conquering and victorious patriotism, while Don Juans and Casanovas are called "cocks" in popular French.

It is interesting here to note that the Albanian language possesses another remnant of the custom, the special term *mërkosh*, which means "man in labor" or rather "in couvade." The term is found in the Albanian-Greek dictionary compiled in the second half of the nineteenth century by Kostandin Kristoforidhi, the

celebrated translator of the Testaments into Albanian. The term has been reported in the regions of Dumré and Shpati, near Elbasan in central Albania, with the following definition: *I thonë ati burri që i ka pjellë gruaja, i cili dirgjetë ndë shtrat pos i lehonë dhe pret e përcjell ata që vinë për ta pam*, “it designates the man whose wife has just given birth, who stays in bed like a new mother and receives those who come to pay him the customary visit” (Kristoforidhi 1904:211). Later other authors have noted the term *mërkosh* in the regions of Elbasan, Çermenika, Myzeqe and elsewhere (Mitrushi 1972), while the memory of the custom was still alive in the vicinity of Elbasan, as it was formerly in the region of Himara, in southwestern Albania (Çabej 1935).

Without going into the details of the philological controversy over the term *mërkosh*, which designates in Albanian a man imitating his wife’s “confinement,” it is worth recalling that the Austrian linguist Norbert Jokl forcefully rejected derivations of the meaning of *mërkosh* from Slavic or Rumanian roots connoting such notions as “indisposed,” “tired,” “weak,” “lifeless,” “bothered,” etc. He maintained more than once that the word is very old and is part of the linguistic stuff of the Albanian language, derived by adding the derogatory suffix *-osh* to an ancient root also found in *she-mër*, *she-mërk*, “concubine, second wife alongside the official wife” (Jokl 1923:10–12; 1929), an etymology accepted and adopted by the prominent Albanian linguist Eqrem Çabej (2000).

Given this very meaning of the term *mërkosh*, I think that the relation of the father to the mother of the child, expressed in what is at first sight an absurd way by competition between the paternal and the maternal “confinements”, actually parallels by analogy the hierarchized and competitive relationship of two rival wives in a polygamous system. If Hasluck’s evidence can easily be discarded as a forgery, probably prompted by the term *mërkosh* only, since it was reported within the same area, it can be argued that an institution of couvade cannot have subsisted among Albanians as it is known in anthropological literature. On the other hand, the oral tradition and linguistic evidence may point to a certain representation of birth process, which I will argue in the remainder of this paper, and which cannot be without consequences for the understanding of the couvade in other contexts as a general anthropological problem. Unfortunately, indeed, the interpretation of the presumed couvade has given rise to a number of misunderstandings not only in Albanian ethnography. The category of beliefs and practices considered by anthropologists under the heading of *couvade* has been the focus of much speculation and theory and even some empirical research since the late nineteenth century. But as Peter Rivière aptly denoted, the history of the interpretation of the *couvade* is more the

reflection of the evolution of ideas in anthropology than of the maturation of a solution to the problem (1974:423-426).

Following Tylor (1865), the couvade restrictions were first interpreted as a form of sympathetic magic (Roth 1893, Crawley 1902, Frazer 1910). The avoidances were “based on the belief that some unfavorable characteristic of the animal or plant could be sympathetically transmitted to the infant,” and for those who practiced it, the couvade was the “expression of the close bond between the father and the infant’s clinging soul” (Métraux 1949:369). Yet, Tylor abandoned his earlier position that the couvade was a form of sympathetic magic and adopted a clearer evolutionist socio-political explanation, following Bachofen’s ideas on *Mutterrecht* (1861), according to which the *couvade* was a remnant of the ancient and hypothetical matriarchal civilization.

In the sequence of stages of cultural development the custom of couvade must have arisen in the transitional period during humankind’s evolution from maternal law to paternal law. The couvade is interpreted as a paternity ritual institutionalizing the father’s right, as a rite of adoption that a woman’s husband performed in order to gain social recognition of his legal rights over her offspring, and finally as an expression of the equal values between mother and father in the procreation of their child. The institutional development of the couvade was in Tylor’s view somewhat modeled on the natural evolution of sexual reproduction from birds to mammals, and the general concept of *couvade* helped him to measure historical development and social progress. In his famous essay “On a method of investigating the development of institutions,” he discarded his earlier theory on the basis of his classification of all societies into categories according to their marital residence pattern, with the couvade found to occur more frequently in matrilocal societies (Tylor 1889).

Although there is of course no evidence to support Tylor’s theory of social evolution, his report of a relationship between residence and couvade anticipated the more functionalist sociological and psychological interpretations. Later, Malinowski (1927) discussed the *couvade* in roughly the same terms, as to legitimize the father’s social role and establish social paternity by symbolic assimilation of the father to the mother. Well after the evolutionary schemes of nineteenth-century anthropologists had been discarded, he defined the function of couvade in the same way as Bachofen and Tylor: “The function of couvade is the establishment of social paternity by the symbolic assimilation of the father to the mother” (Malinowski 1930:631). He rejected the notion that it is a survival trait or vestige, however, seeing it instead as integral to maintaining the institution of the family. In functionalist views,

while the *couvade* is nothing other than the extension of the birth taboo to the father by sympathetic association, its aim is to underscore the indissoluble relationship that is established, with the birth of the child, between the husband and his wife's group (Briffault 1930). The *couvade* acts as a binding force in societies where the marriage link is weak (Douglas 1975).

For sure, the *couvade* concerns primarily the head of the nuclear family. This seems to have been evident to observers, but does not lend itself to a functional interpretation. The *couvade* is neither a rite for legitimizing the father's social role, as Malinowski (1927) maintained, nor a means to strengthen the conjugal bond in societies where marriage is a fragile and unstable institution, as Mary Douglas (1975) argued. The *couvade* is therefore not the sign of the husband's recognition of the child or a sort of "certificate of legitimacy," as was suggested to Hasluck by her learned guide, as he summed up an Albanian myth, of which she published a résumé in English (1939:20). This story, still known by many Albanians today, provides an exemplary summary, in its very simplicity, perhaps, of the crux of the reasoning.

*Një herë e një kohë, grave të kësaj krahine iu duk e pahijshme, ndërkokë që burrat bridhnin lirisht pa pasur asnjë detyrim, ato të shkretat duhet të mbanin edhe barrën e shtatzanisë edhe belanë e rritjes së fëmijëve. Në një kuvend popullor ato vendosën t'i përgjëroheshin shenjtit pa emër të Tomorrit, malit që sundon qytetin e Beratit. Të gjitha sëbashku iu lutën që ta ndante këtë peshë: burrave t'u jepte dhimbjet e lindjes dhe grave rritjen e fëmijëve. Shenjtë pranoi dhe gratë u kthyen në shtëpi shend e verë. S'shkoi shumë kohë kur njerës prej grave na i erdhi ora për të lindur. Po në vend të burrit të saj ishte fqinji ai që filloi të ndjente dhimbjet e lindjes. Pasi një gjë e tillë ndodhi për të tretën herë, burrat u bënë aq të bezdisur sa që për gratë u bë më keq se përpara. Ato u mblodhën përsëri dhe iu lutën shenjtit të rikthente kohët e shkuara. Kështu që gratë vazhdojnë të durojnë, edhe sot e kësaj dite, si dhimbjet e lindjes ashtu edhe kokëçarjet e rritjes së pjellës së tyre.*

Once the women of that district felt that it was unfair that, while men went scot-free, they should have both the pain of bearing children and the trouble of rearing them. At a mass meeting they decided to implore the help of the nameless Saint of Tomorr, the handsome mountain overlooking Berat. All together, they prayed to him to divide the burden, giving the men the pangs of childbirth and leaving the women to rear the

children. The Saint consented and the women left happily for home. Soon afterwards, one's time came. Instead of her husband, however, it was a neighbor who felt labor pains. When this happened a third time, the husbands in general made themselves so unpleasant that the women saw things were worse than before. Again assembling they prayed to the Saint to restore the old ways, and so women continue to endure the pangs of labor as well as the worry of rearing their offspring.

The legitimacy of the father is given by the nature of marriage and not by the physiological theory of conception or by the practices that follow the birth. To be sure, there are some societies in which the genitor's status is validated by the *couvade*, but as a rule the father's legitimacy precedes the birth and does not result from it. As for the symbolism of the conjugal bond, it is unclear how the association of two adults in the creation of a new human being, and the ritual expression of this cooperation over a limited period of time, necessarily results in more durable legitimate marriages. Even so-called prescriptive alliance is always preferential and subject to considerations of choice and the unpredictability of discord (Lévi-Strauss 1967). The *couvade* has to do with a natural phenomenon, i.e. regarded as such, that cannot be modified at will, even if the effects of the violation of rules can be mitigated.

Functionalist theories argue that rituals associated with reproductive events are symbolic indicators of certain structural tensions in a society, particularly the tensions produced by exogamous marriage patterns, which threaten caste purity, disrupt systems of unilineal descent, particularly matrilineal descent, or create the potential for disputes with the in-marrying group. Some functionalists argue that the significance of reproductive events depends on the authority relationship between spouses so that the degree to which a woman's husband or her own kin can exert authority over her and use her as a pawn leads to differences in beliefs and practices pertaining to her reproductive capacity. Yet for others, sexual antagonism is produced by a sexual division of labor that requires equal but separate participation by both sexes in subsistence activities, thereby giving women a potential power over men that men wish to deny them. Likewise, the Van Gennep's theory of transition rites (1909) assumed that all societies share at least the latent ritual sequence of true rites de passage, even if they do not dramatize each stage with equal intensity. It is clear that the pattern of the rites of passage is at once too formalistic and too mechanical to account for this series of rituals as a whole. At best it permits a periodization of some of the rites.

A special functionalist explanation of birth practices and the couvade involves the connection between the performance of ritual activities and anxiety reduction. According to Malinowski (1948:17-92), individuals perform rituals to reduce anxiety produced by uncertainty about the outcomes of certain acts or events. Radcliffe-Brown (1952:133-152), to illustrate the superiority of his own theory over Malinowski's, referred specifically to couvade in arguing that rituals produce anxiety. He used the example of adherence to food taboos by Andamanese men during their wives' pregnancy to illustrate his point that individuals worry about whether they are performing the ritual properly according to social expectations. Although Malinowski's theory as applied to couvade suggests that a man feels anxious about the birth of his child and that certain rituals, if he performs them correctly, help reduce this anxiety or at least keep it latent, while Radcliffe-Brown's argument adds that if the rituals are performed incorrectly or not at all, the individual continues to be anxious to the extent that improper performance of couvade may itself create anxiety (Homans 1941), it is nevertheless not clear how the practice retains its original purpose of reducing male anxiety about the uncertainties of birth.

More recently, Sperber (1996) has tried to amount a critique of the interpretations of the couvade which does little more than re-examine a synthesis of Malinowski's and Radcliffe-Brown's positions on ritual and anxiety from the viewpoint of evolutionary psychology. His interest in the end is not to understand the couvade in whatever context but to criticize what he sees as the arbitrary nature of most anthropology. For Sperber, anthropologists do not explain socio-cultural phenomena, but merely interpret them. As an alternative he focuses on the cognitive mechanisms by which such a potentially harmful fasting ritual as the couvade is selected and transmitted over generations. His hypothesis is that the man undergoing the rite believes that the precautions he takes do prevent the dangers and risks associated with the transmission of life. This leads him to identify some "just-so" psycho-social reasons underpinning the magical belief, which do nothing more than explain the sympathetic magic of couvade restriction from a still Frazerian starting point, but now wrapped in evolutionary-psychological terms as an epidemiologically communicated cultural representation relating to perinatal risks.

Already psychoanalytic theories have presented the most comprehensive framework for explanations of reproductive rituals as "protective" rites, arguing that they are behavioral consequences of inherent psychodynamics within either sex that produce conflicts about castration, penis envy, womb envy, cross-sex identity, or unconscious sexual hostility and aggression toward the

opposite sex. Basing the interpretations to a large extent on Freud's theory of taboo and the ambivalence of emotions outlined in *Totem and Taboo* (1918:26-97), most psychoanalytic speculation and research on birth practices have focused on couvade. Male observance of food taboos and seclusion surrounding childbirth are rituals believed to repress unconscious aggressive impulses toward both mother and child. Imitations of labor and post-delivery recuperation are attempts to force the newborn to fixate on the father instead of the mother, thereby preventing it from developing Oedipal conflicts. As the husband in his unconscious fantasies also equates the newborn with his own feared authoritarian father, paternal fasting must be an attempt to suppress the urge to devour the child and an expiation for being guilty of this urge (Reik 1931:27-89). The couvade, like circumcision and practices associated with female genital bleeding, reflects men's unconscious desire to actualize the feminine aspects of their bisexual nature (Bettelheim 1962:109-113). The Neo-Freudian ingenuity of the status envy theory of identification also explains couvade as an expression of male identification with the female role (Munroe, Munroe, and Whiting 1973).

Well after Tylor's (1889) report of a relationship between matrilocal residence and couvade had been discarded in anthropology, Whiting and his associates claimed that societies in which structural conditions lead to both primary and secondary identification with females, that is, societies with both exclusive mother-child sleeping arrangements and matrilocal residence, should be most likely to practice rituals like couvade which enable men to act out the female role. But despite many efforts to revitalize this tradition, the validity of these assumptions continues at the very least to be regarded with skepticism (Parker, Smith & Ginat 1975).

Within each of the functionalist or psychoanalytic frameworks, then, the couvade like all reproductive rituals are caused by basic invariant psychological processes shared by all individuals in all societies. They are indicators or consequences of structurally and psychologically produced tensions rather than attempts to resolve such conflicts. Because these rituals vary considerably cross-culturally, researchers using psychoanalytic principles have modified orthodox theory by arguing that psychodynamic conflicts may vary in their intensity from one society to the next. The original transition-rite theory has also been modified by later empirical researchers, who suggest that the cross-cultural variability in reproductive rituals may be explained by differences in the need for dramatic role at critical reproductive events rather than differences in the expression of a universal latent structure shared by all societies.

More than anything else, however, the different interpretations of the couvade, proposed in the course of the last 150 years, have moved from the typically functionalist view, which saw the practice as establishing social paternity for the child, to the typically opposite view, which gave primacy, after Mauss (1936), to the idea of human individuation, fostered and protected sympathetically by couvade restrictions. The challenge of explaining the couvade as both a rite of parenthood and the expression of a strong spiritual connection between a father and his child has been taken up in two influential contributions to the debate (Rivière 1974, Menget 1979). Rivière's explanation stresses the dual (body/mind) constitution of the human person, while Menget defines couvade observances in relation to incest taboos, in terms of a general structural and symbolic grammar of strong (hot) and weak (cold) substances.

It is clear, however, as Rival (1998:628) points out, that the different positions in the interpretation of the couvade are kept as irreconcilable alternatives as long as we maintain the entrenched view that the social is grafted onto the biological, with the corollary proposition that biology is woman's destiny (DeBeauvoir 1949), or that female is to male as nature is to culture (Ortner 1974). Already in Crawley's exceptional insight for his time, each of the explanations of the couvade "really errs in not taking into account the woman's side of the question. They show a sympathy with the father and the child, but forget the mother, and are thus a modern document, illustrating the history of woman's treatment by man" (Crawley 1902:II.182-183). All past anthropological interpretations offered so far, oscillating between irreconcilable positions, have naturalized the mother-child bond by thinking of the couvade as primarily the father's concern, and by taking the reasons for the mother's precautionary observations before, during and just after childbirth to be obvious, and have either ignored or misrepresented the joint effort through which the husband-wife pair transfers life onto a new human person.

The naturalization of the mother-child bond and the neglect of the husband-wife pair in transferring life is particularly obvious in the early reports on Carib childbirths, which all reveal the (male) European astonishment at and disapproval of the father's 'sickly behavior', aptly coined by the derogatory term of *couvade*. He is seen as passive, cowardly and shocking, especially when contrasted with the swift recovery of the mother, who, far from convalescing as a European woman would, resumes her domestic work immediately after delivery. The father's lying-in subverts not only the order of culture, but also the order of nature, as it seemed not a pre-civilized but an anticipi-

lized practice. The ways in which sixteenth-century European myth-makers spread stories about Amerindian male breast feeding, Amazon warriors and other aberrant sexual inversions supposedly observed in the West Indies, above all show the political implications of Western colonial fantasies about sexual difference, rooted as they were and still are in the fear of and cultural anxiety about the confusion of the sexes (Lionetti 1984).

Tylor's theoretical hesitation between mystical contagion and paternal function is ultimately due to the same biased opposition between mother-child (biological) bond and father-child (spiritual) connection. In opposing the nature of the mother-child and father-child contagion, Tylor takes the former to be real, while he finds the latter to be the result of the savage mind's confusion between imaginary and real relations and, as such, purely mystical and derivative (Tylor 1865:293). The distance from opposing real, natural mother-child contagion and artificial, cultural father-child contagion, to arguing that the function of the couvade is to assert and realize the primacy of father right is, indeed, minimal (Rival 1998:629).

No less problematic is, however, the figuring of the practice of couvade in more recent post-feminist debates on gender and reproduction, where it is cited to support the point that women have no monopoly on birth (Moore 1988:29-30), or to conceptualize the category of gender as performative (Butler 1993). At first sight, it seems that many recent ethnographic accounts have presented "a large number of cases where it is the performance of particular kinds of activities or tasks which guarantees gender identity rather than simply the possession of the appropriate genitalia" (Moore 1994:39). After all, while in such birth practice as the couvade, if men describe themselves or are described by others as 'mothers', then, one might reason, this must mean that being a 'mother' can have little to do with biology. An analysis in the fashionable post-feminist tradition, mimicking the performative theory of gender in the interpretation of the couvade could present expectant fathers as parodying birthing mothers in an excess of ironical consciousness used to deflect the compulsive character of sexual reproduction by imitation. This, however, would be doing equal violence to the ethnographic material and to the anthropological analytical insights.

Let me take, among many others, but just one example in the literature. What is common to the 'maternity' of both husband and mother's brother, in the case of the Karembola of Madagascar studied by Middleton (2000), is that each seeks to encompass birth and life-making in his own person by express-

ing a close identity between his body and the body of his wife or sister respectively. Neither the disembodied mothering of the mother's brother, so crucial to the debt he claims upon the groom, nor the performance of the husband in the couvade would make sense without a sexed body newly delivered of a baby within the house. Thus, while the couvade is cited as cross-cultural evidence to show that women have no necessary monopoly on birth, Middleton recalls it is worth reflecting upon the fact that it is invariably practiced in relation to a sexed body giving birth. If it is not exactly an illusion that men make babies, there is at least some problem in understanding the agency or power that men actually expend in birth, claiming to be as 'mothers' at the root of growth and birth relative to women. Men strive to grasp and to incorporate mothering, yet both sexes know that men cannot perform as mothers even if they try, and to this extent they know that the invisible agency or power that men claim must always partner 'the indisputable fact that it is women who give birth'. It is this common fastening in a sexed body that, in Karembola culture, gives meaning to the interplay between the mothering power of the mother's brother and the couvade of the husband.

The most recent studies present the couvade as a rite corresponding to the process by which human sexuality is conceptualized as the channel through which a new human person is brought to life, parenthood is created and new intimate relationships are formed, thus remodeling the configuration of affinal and consanguineal ties within the social group (Rival 1998, Middleton 2000). If procreation is a quintessentially creative act, the birth of a child represents an essential moment of the life transfer process, which involves the recognition of both a new person and the web of relationships without which she or he would not exist as a full social being. What is more, the creation of a new life, which is an important component of adult identity formation, is a joint project, transcending gender difference. The greatest failure of past interpretations of the couvade has been to overlook the fact that procreative life-giving is always represented as involving the complementary participation of the two sexes, often implying the constitution of what Rival calls "some kind of androgynous agency," a kind of sexual isomorphism in the reproductive power of both husband and wife (1998:633). The birth process in many societies should be analyzed from the viewpoint of its transformative effect on the procreative couple and, in particular, on the father. The unit of analysis is not the individual materializing through hegemonic discourse, but the conjugal body giving birth to a third body.

## Childbirth Complex

Most ethnographic accounts of couvade insist that both parents are protecting the infant's vigor and assisting its fast growth through fasting. But it is important to stress that violations of the taboo not only harm the child but can also turn against the father or mother. It is therefore not the infant's feeble state that is the mystical "cause" of the parents' precautions, but, as Patrick Menget pointed out (1979:254), also the state of the parents themselves. Both father's and mother's fasting and inactivity strongly identify them with the newborn with whom they form a community of substance, suggesting that relatedness may result from consuming together or avoiding food together.

As such, the couvade is not a male rite but a rite of a couple. When analyzed in its South American regional context, the couvade appears clearly for what it is, i.e. a rite of co-parenthood. Already Métraux, in his short article on the couvade written for the *Handbook of South American Indians* (1949), emphatically stressed that the Amazonian couvade was not motivated by a male desire to imitate childbirth, and that perinatal food and activity restrictions applied to both parents. Indeed, when asked why they restrict their diet and daily occupations before and after childbirth, men invariably answer that, first, they do so because their wives do, and secondly that the newborn, who 'is one flesh' with its mother and father, must be protected from wasting away. It is also worth mentioning that if not all young fathers observe the couvade today, those who do not are not acting differently from their wives. In other words, there is no case of women dieting and giving up ordinary activities while their husbands do not, or, for that matter, of husbands respecting couvade rites when their wives do not (Rival 1998:622-623).

It can be argued that the real focus of attention during childbirth is not the newborn but the parents and that the ritual activities of both spouses before and after delivery are a sort of parental social initiation into the larger community of relatives (Young 1965:111-121). To account for cross-cultural variation in the extent to which parenthood is in this way dramatized, the explanatory variable is the solidarity of the larger family unit or corporate domestic group. It is assessed by the political organization of the society, whether organized or not into exogamous or clan communities. When children are born, it is in a solidary community's best interest to integrate the nuclear family into the larger group since children are important for the survival of the group as a whole. The intensity of parenthood dramatization rites is measured with the most elaborate dramatization indicated by postpartum rituals

involving both husband and wife, i.e. as much the seclusion of mothers at or after delivery as the practice of *couvade* restrictions by fathers.

The *couvade* thus seems to prolong and amplify the dietary restrictions imposed on the mother during her pregnancy. A close analysis of these notions and prescriptions would clearly show that the system of the *couvade* is not an autonomous reality. Most ethnographers have paid more attention to food restrictions than to behavioral ones, but have invariably stressed that the prohibitions are essentially similar to those observed on many other liminal occasions, such as a girl's first menses, initiation, illness or death. Indeed, birth is a striking time of ritual within a sequence of altogether comparable acts and precautions that mark gradual or sudden biological changes of state. Pregnancy, birth, growth, sickness, murder, natural death form a series that engenders rites of the same nature, which follow the same logic.

Birth practices involve a system of taboos whose social extension broadly overlaps that of other systems. The taboos respected seem even to extend to a fairly wide circle of close kin. They are not restricted to the mother and the father, even if they are often the most visible subject of the taboos. It is not a collection of rules affecting one individual's status, but a system of rites and conceptions that is both consistent and subject to cultural variations and bears on a social group. As Peter Rivière suggested, it is with respect to such a system that psychosomatic phenomena may come to be explained and not the other way around. "The explication of such institutions as the *couvade* does not exist at the level of the institutions themselves for they are merely the manifestations of deeper and more intractable problems" (Rivière 1974:434).

Therefore, the presumed *couvade* found among Albanians should not be interpreted psychosomatically as a simple imitation of the young mother's confinement in bed following the birth of the child. The remnants of the custom must be seen as based effectively on beliefs about or collective representations of an essential bond between the newborn child and its father. Thus, taking the prohibitions and evictions practiced during gestation as a whole, it would be possible to identify a sort of constant symbolic logic revealed throughout a whole system of collective representations, which are not necessarily considered in the literature as being part of the *couvade*.

To begin with, let me consider here a category of ritual prescriptions observed by the mother in order to forestall difficulties during childbirth. The pregnant woman must not step over objects lying on the ground. If she did, it was believed that she would have a much harder time giving birth. To avoid any such obstacle caused by accidentally stepping over different objects dur-

ing pregnancy, the pregnant woman, just before giving birth, must *me shkapërcye*, “unstep,” to coin an expression built on the Albanian model, i.e. step back over the objects in the other direction, with the intention of ridding herself of them and opening the way for the coming child. Reversing the process would thus make it possible to be delivered of these cumbersome objects. She must not only “unstep” certain objects, but if she has stepped over a person, this person must also come to be “unstepped.” No doubt, one of the first people she must step back over, in any case, is her husband.

When it comes to the husband, many other even more complicated practices can be mentioned. For instance the woman must drink a little water from the cup of his hand, or in extreme cases, from his shoe. The water must be let run from the crotch of the husband’s trousers down to the shoe, which the woman must pick up and empty in one swallow. Similar practices are cited in Europe, in which expectant mothers dress in the father’s clothes, with the idea that in so doing they will go through the labor pains together. In specific cases, women in labor wrap their husband’s trousers around their own neck, hoping in this way to ease the pains (Reik 1931:57).

One might see in this custom the evocation of a second symbolic fertilization of the woman by the water that has run down from the crotch of the husband’s trousers, as though it were excreted urine, which she drinks so as to give birth to the child. Since men cannot give birth, Nicole Belmont suggests that this eventuality, evoked at the mythological level, can sometimes be related to the excremental function. The unborn child is a hidden child, and must therefore go through a symbolic birth. But a second birth, with the help of the father, would be the birth of an excremental child (Belmont 1971:98–112). It follows that the child will detach itself all the more easily from the mother’s body when it comes time to be born. In myths, the same view can be taken, but sometimes from the standpoint of the father’s body as well. This custom, found in several different regions of Albania, is often interpreted, like the *couvade*, as a dietary and prophylactic means for the father to influence the child and its future, in other words as the expression of an implicit relationship between father and child.

Another category that would perhaps be worth mentioning is the absence of formal prohibitions on sexual intercourse between the future parents during pregnancy. This might be regarded as a way for the father to lay claim to the conception and gestation of the child, which is consistent with the general belief reported in many other societies that repeated sexual intercourse before and throughout pregnancy is necessary for the foetus to develop and

grow. In Albanian culture this modality of belief may lend itself with the child conceived of as the product of paternal and maternal influences. In this sense, the child results from the complementarity of shape and substance, and of two substances such as blood and milk.

Alternatively, the father is supposed to abstain, during this time, from all of his normal activities that require the use of force or violence, the use of sharp or percussive tools, and other similar activities, since such activities can be defined as detrimental to the child. The father therefore will often shun the place of childbirth in favor of the place that in Albanian culture is more in keeping with his status of father and family head, as it happens, seated next to the fireplace or stretched out beside it, which is also a spot more suited to offering the appropriate hospitality for the occasion. The custom of allowing the husband to laze beside the fireplace in reality creates considerable additional work for the woman. In effect the mother must resume her everyday activities as soon as she is able. A famous poem, entitled *Fshati im*, “In My Village,” written by Çajupi, one of the greatest Albanian poets at the end of the nineteenth century, is quite significant:

<i>Burrat nënë hije lozin, kuvendojnë pika që s'u bije se nga gratë rrojnë.</i>	The men sit in the shade They play and they chat, Misfortune strikes them not For they live off their wives
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(Transl. Elsie 1995: 351)

Men can try to point up their contribution to procreation in a positive or in a negative manner. In the positive approach, they can claim directly or symbolically to give birth to human beings. As Lévi-Strauss stressed, “men may not have babies, but may, in societies that practice the *couvade*, act as if they do” (1956:80[51]). The negative approach, on the other hand, consists either in playing down the woman’s contribution or in convincing oneself that it is negligible. The custom of the *couvade*, in particular, directs attention away from the birth process itself and towards the man.

According to Bettelheim (1962), men may actually envy women’s ability to have children and one of the purposes of initiation rites is to claim that men too can give birth. In later anthropological research male initiation rituals are actually very often shown to promote the symbolic appropriation of female reproductive powers by men (Hugh-Jones 1979, Godelier 1982). Men want to know how it feels to give birth or to be able to tell themselves they are capable of pro-

creative power. Yet, in making such a claim, men do not have any “sympathy” for the woman and try to belittle her importance. Simulated childbirth by men both emphasizes men’s contribution to childbearing and minimizes women’s contribution. It represents an extreme form of empathy in which the husband identifies so closely with the maternal role that he creates within himself the need for the special care that should rightfully be given the woman, but which he denies her. She is expected, when not actually forced, to go straight back to work, even if she is exhausted from the labor and the physiological consequences of birth. Nevertheless men can only imitate the insignificant external features, not the essential ones, which they are effectively incapable of replicating. As Bettelheim suggests, “such an aping of the superficials only emphasizes the more how much the real, essential powers are envied” by men who “enact couvade to fill the emotional vacuum created by their inability to bear children” (1962:111).

Women are emotionally satisfied by having given birth, ensured of their ability to create life, and can therefore accept the *couvade*. It seems indeed that the positive correlation between the couvade and the maternal restrictions during pregnancy is matched by a negative correlation between the couvade and the maternal attitudes after childbirth. Some reports actually emphasize that, among those groups that observe *couvade* rites, as a rule the woman’s “confinement” is relatively unknown or completely minored (Reik 1931:51). It can be argued that this latter attitude, which can abundantly be attested by Albanian evidence, may parallel the presumed existence of such customs headed under the category of the *couvade*. Among Albanians, the period of confinement refers effectively only to an idea of time, forty days after the birth, and does not necessarily entail the actual obligation for the new mother to keep to her bed for the full period.

According to observations going back at least to the first decades of the nineteenth century, “Albanian women make no change whatsoever in their daily routine during pregnancy. They work right up to the time of birth and often deliver in the mountains or in the fields. In this case, they carry their baby home in their apron. In most cases they give birth unassisted and painlessly. They often go back to work a few days later with the baby on their back” (Boué 1840:497). Traditionally the new mother leaves her bed after three, five or seven days. Among the Catholics of northern Albania, she stays in bed three days for a boy and six for a girl (Degrand 1901:43). Generally, as far as ceremonies go, the birth is a fairly discrete event. Comparable information is published in the appendix to Weigand’s Albanian-German dictionary (1914:47). Among the Albanians of Italy, at Frascineto-Ejanina, the pregnant woman used

to go on working in the fields up to the moment of birth, which was believed to be “a way of easing the birth process itself” (Giordano 1976:14). These attitudes are often expressed in poems through a series of leitmotifs using ceremonial forms, sung at birth celebrations in praise of the new mother:

*Mori re, mori, djegsore...  
Nafkmadhe kake kanë,  
djergsi shumë nuk ke lanë,  
se pa u ba mirë e shtata ditë,  
ke marr’ bulierën uj’ tuj qitë,  
besa n’ara ti tuj vaditë  
e djepin n’hije tuj zhegitë,  
me sahana grat’ tuj pritë,  
tuj pritë për me pa,  
për ty re, thonë, marshalla,  
gruja djerg, punët tuj ba.*  
(Doja 1991:143)

Oh young bride in confinement,  
What great luck you have had,  
you have not lingered long in confinement,  
seven days only,  
you have taken your cask to fetch water,  
and have irrigated the fields,  
leaving the cradle in the noonday shade,  
receiving all the women with food,  
receiving them warmly,  
they say their congratulations, young bride,  
in confinement, you’re still doing your chores.  
(Translated by Robert Elsie)

The pregnant woman’s seclusion usually takes the form of modesty, in her desire not to be a bother to anyone, to keep as far away as possible from prying eyes. This seclusion of the woman in confinement goes hand in hand with the absence of other persons, especially the men and more particularly the father of the child, at the time of birth. In the North, as soon as it is known that the woman is about to give birth, the first thing to do is to warn all of the males that they must *të dalin e ta lirojnë shtëpinë*, “leave and rid the house of their presence.” Likewise, after the birth, the new mother keeps her face covered for a week, concealing it from all males (Gjeçov [1933]1989:433–436). The husband, for his part, goes into hiding and does not enter his wife’s room and cannot see his child until eight days after its birth (Hecquard 1858:269).

The new mother’s temporary return to her own kinspeople after the birth can also be seen in the same way, as an attitude of seclusion with respect to her husband’s family. These different attitudes of seclusion are stamped with a cultural character and are always dealt with through ritual. Of course these attitudes also have a natural psychological motivation, which is expressed in the new mother’s need for more support after the birth within her own kin. In the strongly patriarchal Albanian culture, it was supposed that she would not find all the support she needed in her husband’s house.

Whether by instinct or by ancestral tradition, the mother takes care of her children and is happy to do so. Psychological tendencies also probably explain why a man, living in intimacy with a woman, feels affection for the children who are born to her, and whose physical and mental development he follows with interest, even if he may officially be denied any role in their procreation. According to Lévi-Strauss (1956:76[48]), some societies seek to unify these feelings through such customs as the *couvade*. It is quite possible, in effect, that the mother's "fulfillment," in the full sense of a visible biological function and a recognized social role, entails as a manner of compensation mixed attitudes and feelings in the father.

Another indirect indication can be found in certain prohibitions of sexual relations between the father and the mother, which in Albanian society as in other groups, are observed during the period of breastfeeding of the new child. Anthropological literature has had much less to say about sexual continence during breastfeeding and lactation period than about pregnancy sex taboos in relation to restrictions on activity and dietary taboos. The latter are interpreted as a reflection of cultural anxiety about sex behavior, a long pregnancy sex taboo being a cultural mechanism for relieving women's unrealistic anxiety about the potentially harmful consequences of sex relations (Ayres 1967). Thus, the greater the sex anxiety in a society, the longer the pregnancy sex taboo will be. Other theorists in the psychoanalytic tradition have argued that restrictions on women's behavior, particularly a taboo on sexual intercourse during pregnancy and parturition, reflect psychological conflicts aroused in men or women by the birth event, particularly by genital bleeding at birth. Thus, pregnant and parturient women are segregated from men and required to abstain from sexual intercourse either because men unconsciously dread the genital bleeding that occurs at birth, or because blood at childbirth activates the parturient woman's castration complex and arouses unconscious hostile impulses from which men must be protected (Devereux 1977). Following other psychoanalytic interpretations, sexual continence during lactation period could be, at first sight, a matter of the representations commonly ascribed to the fantasy that the nursing woman is "particularly apt to arouse unconscious comparison with the first object of erotic fixation: the mother" (Reik 1931:69). Yet, the reason for the interruption of sexual relations after childbirth and during lactation has more to do with the welfare of the child, but only as the outcome of a reasoning process that has little to do with the risk of conceiving, and much to do with a more structured set of ideas.

If we consider the discourse of general symbolism, whose existence is demonstrated throughout ethnographic experience, it is often built on a system of binary categories. Pairs of opposites form dual series such as sun and moon, high and low, light and dark, right and left, light and heavy, hot and cold, wet and dry, male and female, superior and inferior. This discourse, like all mythology, is ideological. The binary oppositions, in terms of a relationship of perfection/imperfection, purity/impurity, superiority/inferiority, etc., do not correlate with any reality whatsoever, they reflect the positive or negative values assigned from the outset to the terms themselves. As in myths, the function of the symbolic discourse is to justify the order of the world and of society.

Now the effect of female alchemy is periodically to change running water into milk, just as the effect of male alchemy is continually to change it into blood and, by coction, into semen. Milk and blood/semen are two basically antinomic elements that become dangerous when in each other's presence. Thus all things male, usually hot and dry, are associated with fire and positive value; just as all things female, usually cold and wet, are associated with water and negative value. But, as anthropologists have often remarked, the intromission of semen/blood, hot elements, into the uterus of the nursing mother, an equally hot element, since the woman must invest her own heat to transform her waters into milk, would be the equivalent of heaping hot on hot (Héritier 1996:133–164). As symbolic thinking essentially associates the oppositions hot/cold and dry/wet, the accumulation of hot on hot would bring out the dry: the first result would be that the mother's milk would dry up (Doja 1993).

In addition, among Albanians as in other societies, the newborn baby is separated from its mother for two or three days before being put to her breast for the first time. The mother's first milk, *kulloshtra*, from the Latin *colostrum*, was often taboo, regarded as being too thick and therefore pernicious. The child was not given this milk immediately after birth because it was feared that it might carry some fatal curse. In the South, for instance, notably in Korça in the southeast, for the first three days the newborn infant is given nothing but sugar-water or chamomile (Frashëri 1936:22). In other cases, in the region of Devoll near Korça, among the Christian population, the infant is not fed by its own mother for the first three days, but by another woman; while among the Muslims, the newborn child is not fed until the muezzin has climbed the minaret three times to call to prayer (Sheshori 1944:10-15). In the North, as well, for the first week the new mother does not care for her child at all. It is looked after by another woman in the family or in the neighborhood who is still suckling her own infant (Gjeçov [1933]1989:436).

There is thus a mandatory lapse of time between gestation and childbirth, on the one hand, which from the standpoint of nutrition is a blood cycle (intrauterine nutrition through the placenta) and, on the other hand, breastfeeding, which is a milk cycle. And we well know that, in the Albanian system, the opposition blood/milk systematically corresponds to the relationship father/mother (Doja 1999a). The two nutritional cycles, gestation and breastfeeding, are disjoined and follow in time; were this not so, a disturbing confusion would ensue, an alarming sign of non-separation from the mother, perpetuating, as it were, the symbiosis of the womb.

It is in this sense, too, that Albanian tradition interprets the duration of breastfeeding. Depending on the region, the child should not be suckled more than twenty, thirty or at most thirty-six months (Cozzi 1909:905). But in the countryside, even today one can find children that are suckled until the age of four or even five, as I could observe in the region of Mokra, near Lake Ohrid in southeastern Albania. Beyond that length of time, it is considered abnormal, generally a bad sign, almost “abominable” as said in the Talmud. It is especially after weaning that the milk sucked by the child literally changes nature: from a natural object of satisfaction, it becomes “abominable,” in other words an object subjected to the law of separation inscribed in the taboo on incest. Rupture, absence and separation are characteristic features of this necessary deprivation, for both the child and the mother. To put the child to the breast once again would be going back, refusing to respect the absolute law of no-return to the womb, which is the formulation of the incest taboo addressed to the mother. These customs or attitudes could be regarded as less evident than the father’s confinement in bed. Yet a relatively easy birth and, by means of a symbolic compensation, the greater ritual help at the time of birth, together with the division of labor within the couple such that the woman has more to do than the man were all conditions that must have favored the development of this particular form known as the couvade.

### The Logic of Birth Practices

Anthropologists who have made a closer study of the *couvade* among indigenous societies of South America have arrived at analogous results, even though they started from different premises. For Patrick Menget (1979), the *couvade* expresses the gradual separation of an originally shared substance. Its progressive relaxation is the sign of a gradual differentiation, culminating in the acquisition of a separate identity. The physiological explanation of the

*couvade* neglects the parental complementarity in their substantial and spiritual contributions to the child, and arbitrarily isolates acts and rites that are in fact interconnected. Menget interprets the process by which a new human person is brought to life and new relationships are created in terms of the universal system of elementary symbolism. One element of this system is the representation of vital fluids, which structures the constitution of the person, her or his relationship to society and the creation of new individuals.

In line with Héritier (1979, 1994), Menget locates the phenomenon of spiritual creation within a more general theory of substances, which also encompasses incest prohibitions. He finds that two antagonistic principles, which codify the fundamental opposition between weak and strong substances, and govern both the classification of food into forbidden and recommended and the vital processes in a dynamic movement of life-substances. A strong principle, connected with sperm, blood, fat, red meat and fermented foods is the outcome of the continual somatic transformation of weaker substances: water, milk, white flours, and lean meat. Conversely, the human body, in harmony with rhythms that vary with age, sex and condition, anabolizes strong substances and neutralizes their dangerous character (Menget 1979:257). Similar models have been found among other Amerindian groups in which there is an explicit connection with a cosmogony that gives these principles a heavenly origin and a mythic past. In some cases these principles are described as “hot” and “cold,” to which an in-between category, “warm,” is sometimes added (Taylor 1950, Colson 1975).

It is this logic that, according to Menget, underlines diet restrictions and incest taboos, and works to ensure that the progressive separation of parental substance, marked by the *couvade*, does not get reunited through incestuous union. In the Amerindian *couvade*, all of the behavioral, dietary and sexual taboos ultimately come down to avoiding either an excess of strong substances, whose faulty assimilation leads to swelling sicknesses, or a loss of weak, somatized substances, which is reflected in drying sicknesses—of milk and flesh—and ends in a death analogous to death from old age. Creation of a new human being brings into play all of the universal processes involving the transformation of substances, but also separation from part of the substance somatized by the parents and the initiation of a new cycle. It thus involves both division and fusion of analogous substances from both sexes (Menget 1979:257–258). That is why the sexual continence during breastfeeding and lactation period is important, for the father cannot “add” a humor that is conflicting the one his child feeds on—the mother’s milk—without in

turn compromising the child's substantial essence. It takes some time for the mixture of the two substances to cohere, and the child's development requires maximum cohesion on the father's part.

True, part of the problem here may have been left aside, in particular the social extension and configuration of the *couvade*. Nevertheless, this "physiological model" of the substance dynamics deals with the same fundamental system, seen from the thermodynamic and energetic standpoint. For there is a continuity between the attitudes that can still be summed up by the term of *couvade* and the incest prohibition, since what the *couvade* separated starting from a shared substance, the incest taboo keeps apart. There is again a functional complementarity insofar as the *couvade* governs a communication within the social group that enables it to diversify, while the incest taboo establishes communication outside the group. Menget's global representational system ultimately helps us to understand that the ideology of the *couvade* and its social functions are not restricted to the vertical parents/child bond. The *couvade* no more marks the legitimacy than it sanctions the illegitimacy of a birth. The *couvade* and all analogous customs do even more than accentuate the principle of legitimacy, more than point to the simple fact that the child has a father.

In the same line of reasoning, Peter Rivière's solution to the conundrum has been to portray the couvade, not unlike Christian baptism, as a rite of spiritual creation, which he sums up with the formula of "Birth : Couvade :: Nature : Culture" (Rivière 1974:432). The couvade is thus interpreted as primarily concerned with the creation of a complete person, composed of a body and a mind, as "one way of dealing with what is an almost universal problem concerning the nature of man, the conceptualized dualism of body and soul" (Rivière 1974:430). The new individual's physical part is delivered, i.e. born, but the spiritual part must be created, and if the father participates in the former his primary responsibility is in the latter.

It would be entirely possible to deduce from all these customs an implicit theory of the protection of the child, the mother, the father and everyone else, from the dangerous dimensions of the sacred life-forces that were believed to be acting at the time and scene of the birth. Considered from the standpoint of its ceremonial attributions as well as its social and anthropological premises, the *couvade* could be seen to be inspired by the recognition of this sacred power represented by the taboo surrounding birth. This taboo arouses feelings of both respect and fear, but also a desire to resist and to reduce its power through similar measures that, at the mythical level, could be termed "heroic." The differ-

ent prohibitions on certain foods or activities, on the other hand, could be regarded as weaker forms of the birth taboo expressed in a particular fashion in the *couvade*. Nevertheless, by considering the couvade as a defense mechanism against the risks of childbirth, past functionalist and psychoanalytic or more recent evolutionary psychological interpretations entirely miss the socio-logical significance of the couvade. Sperber's critique (1996) finally does in no way address the fact that the newborn's welfare depends on its insertion within a web of relationships of which the beliefs structured around sympathetic magic and contagion are but one of the surface expressions.

The birth process, of which the notions and practices of couvade form an intrinsic part, represents a state of inception as well as the incorporation of a new life at several levels. If couvade restrictions are meant to secure the child's initial attachment to life, far from being taken for granted, life is seen as depending on the attention and care the child gets from the sharing community. The parents do not only give life to the child, but also foster its introduction within the house community of substance. Then, delivery is not sufficient to give birth to the child, who is definitively born only after performing a series of ritualized practices and ceremonies, which constitute a "social placing" of the newborn as the recognition of the child before its full social integration. Among Albanians, this occurs with the ritualized practices of elevating the newborn, circumambulating the hearth and placing the child at the fireplace, and culminate with the placing in the cradle and naming ceremonies to be followed by haircut or circumcision (Doja 1993, 1997, 1999b, 2000). A comparison of ethnographic accounts in many traditionally considered couvade-practicing societies shows that in addition to practicing birth observances widely and explaining them in quite similar terms, the end of the couvade is equated with the naming of the child, while among other salient features it is the intervention of a shaman to reintegrate the couple and the newborn within the communal dwelling (Rival 1998:630).

Even if there may be some variation in the duration and severity of the couvade, these common features, which should form an essential part of any proper analysis of childbirth ritual restrictions, highlight important characteristics of birth practices. Childbirth does not constitute a radical break; it is not an event, but rather the process by which a new human life is gradually incorporated within the house-group. The incidence of perinatal risk is not higher in couvade-practicing societies, nor are newborns perceived as fragile and weak individuals any more than in other non couvade-practicing societies. Like many birth rituals, couvade restrictions are at least as much child-cen-

tered as they are parent-focused (Aijmer 1992). Indeed, all the available ethnographic evidence supports the contention that the child's insertion within a web of relationships is as profound and transmittable a motivation as the concern with protecting the baby's health. Perinatal restrictions protect the child and create new relationships between, on the one hand, the child, his father and his mother, and, on the other hand, the parents and the house-group. They also emphasize, along with native theories of procreation and sexuality, that the creation of a new human life requires the same involvement from the two sexes, even if equal participation in child-making affects men and women differently.

When both parents observe the restrictions associated with childbirth, the newborn is publicly linked to their parental ritual behavior, which signifies that the child's existence is unconditionally welcome and accepted. Social bonding starts before birth and develops and grows after birth as the child's needs are satisfied and its expectations fulfilled. Well-being is a prime concern of social life, and so is caretaking. Parents, through their repeated acts of unilateral giving away, transfer life substance onto a separate individual, who is no more linked to the mother than it is to the father, and who is made to feel just as at home in the external world as it was in the womb. As Rival states regarding South American couvade, the moment of birth is not the beginning of life per se, but rather the transfer from one dwelling (the womb) to another (the long-house), suggesting that birth is part of a wider process of gradual incorporation by which children, who start their lives in the mother's womb, are progressively integrated within the longhouse sharing economy (Rival 1998:625-627).

The couvade, therefore, also relates to a certain conception of children as inherently social, and of child development as the natural development of self-reliance. In addition, the child's process of becoming a person fully immersed in a developed web of sharing relations is inseparable from the process by which its parents become parents, i.e. a married, reproductive couple fully inserted within a house-group. The couvade, in this light, represents a 'second marriage' (Rival 1998:633) as much as a 'second birth' (Rivière 1974:431) concerned in both views with social creation. Like marriage practices, birth practices both replace the creativity of biological parents with that of spiritual parents and celebrate reproductive sexuality, that is, women's and men's power to create a new social being, with a body and a soul. The fact that in Albanian culture marriage has fulfilled its function only after a healthy, thriving son is born (Doja 1994, 2005) confirms that childbirth materializes the conjugal tie and creates marriage. So the wife and the hus-

band are in a sense ‘reborn’ as mother and father during the birth process. Whether by instinct or by ancestral tradition, the mother takes care of her children and is happy to do so. Psychological tendencies also probably explain why a man, living in intimacy with a woman, feels affection for the children who are born to her, and whose physical and mental development he follows with interest, even if he may officially be denied any role in their procreation. According to Lévi-Strauss (1956: 76[48]), some societies seek to unify these feelings through such customs as the couvade. It is quite possible, in effect, that the mother’s “fulfillment”, in the full sense of a visible biological function and a recognized social role, entails as a manner of compensation mixed attitudes and feelings in the father.

The fact that the father symbolically shares the pregnant woman’s or new mother’s unavailability is often explained by the need to harmonize tendencies and attitudes that, taken separately, appear to lack homogeneity. But the husband and the wife are forced to take the same precautions because they merge with their child who, in the weeks and months following its birth, is believed to be exposed to grave dangers. That is why Lévi-Strauss, in his brief discussion of the couvade as a form of totemic classificatory thought in the context of naming systems, remarks that the father respecting couvade restrictions does not imitate the mother but the personal identity of both parents is closely merged with that of their child. In no case, he says, “does the father play the part of the mother, he plays the part of the child” (Lévi-Strauss 1962b: 259[195]). In other words, the father and the mother are affirming their substantial similitude with the child. This seems to be confirmed by the nature of couvade restrictions in Amazonian societies, which make the parents of a newborn child follow the diet of an infant and relieve throughout the fasting period the first years of a child (Rival 1998:634).

Ultimately, the individuation process of the child, depending on its getting a soul as well as a body is not contradictory by any means to its being placed within a field of social relations, leading to its successful incorporation within a specific social group. In this sense, both Menget’s and Rivière’s focus on the transcending effect of culture and symbolic discourse that work at ordering and transforming raw biological matter, is not essentially contradicted, as Rival (1998:631) argues. By giving priority to a hierarchical symbolic ordering which makes the spiritual creation of the child not only necessary to its welfare but also socially more significant than its biological birth, in Rivière’s approach such placement is not ignored, nor overlooked. On the contrary, given the father’s special role in creating the child spiritually, his interpreta-

tion implicitly leads one to infer that the placement is made from a clear ideological standpoint which corresponds to patriarchy. If the birth of a child irrevocably transforms sexually mature men and women into parents, it remains nevertheless true that fatherhood and motherhood constitute two non-equivalent forms of parenthood, especially in such societies like the Albanian culture with a strong patriarchal ideology and conflictive cross-gender social interactions (Doja 1995, 1999a). This is in some ways the conclusion also reached in studies of Christian baptism and by most anthropologists interested in male initiation rituals (Hugh-Jones 1979, Godelier 1982).

Menget's interpretation is similar to Rivière's in that both look for the signification of the couvade, not within the institution itself, but within the structural and abstract properties of dualist categories of substance which, ultimately, determine the social order. Moreover, Menget's structural theory is attractive in that it draws no distinction between bodily substances and food substances, a view shared by anthropologists who view kinship in terms of biological processes. In reaction to earlier overformal 'descent' models, and in keeping with the greater emphasis upon body and practice in anthropology generally, the current understanding of kinship emphasizes the importance of relatedness no longer seen as a social identity given at birth and fixed in a set of structural positions, but rather as a process of becoming, embodied in acts of feeding, of exchanges of bodily substance, and of sharing house and hearth (Schneider 1984; Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995; Godelier, Trautmann & TjonSieFat 1998; Carsten 2000, 2004; Godelier 2004). If relatedness is now increasingly considered as processual, fluid, and contextual, with descent identity being at most a possibility created from cognatic kinship, then Menget's point that Amazonian parents understand the protection of their newborns in terms of the substances which make up the person does not overlook the sociological significance of the father's recognition that he and his newborn share the same substance.

Surely, by dramatizing men's equal participation in procreation and by making it visible, perinatal observances have the catalytic effect of furthering the absorption of in-marrying men into their wives' houses. In most South-American indigenous societies, the rule of uxorilocal post-marital residence and the critical importance of fathering children in men's social careers are two closely related social facts (Rival 1998:634). Yet, if the couvade is not a rite of fatherhood, as much as the whole system of birth practices are but rituals of co-parenthood with different implications for men and women, this is always the case, notwithstanding the residential character of the social group.

More often than not, it is rather an overemphasis on the uxorilocal nature of Amazonian societies, of which Rival seems well aware in other respects (1998:639), that runs the risk of overlooking the fact that the ritual abstinence by a man on the birth of a child, corresponding as it does to his public notification that he is connected to this child and to its mother, is not contradictory to or independent from marriage and residence but complementary.

By practicing the couvade restrictions, a man claims to be a father and publicly demonstrates his willingness to accept paternity. In Amazonian societies any man who has contributed semen may observe the taboos associated with the couvade, by which he publicly acknowledges his creative contribution to the making of the child. Alleged or claimed fatherhood is not without consequences and can be translated into a multiplicity of more or less official links that blur distinctions between cognatic and affinal kin, and between the biological and social aspects of kinship (Rival 1998:624). Yet, if the father lives uxorilocally with the child's mother, his claim simply furthers his incorporation within his wife's group. But to claim residence patterns and marriage arrangements as necessary structural preconditions for understanding the couvade and birth practices, we come up with the evolutionary schemes of nineteenth-century anthropology or with the cross-sex identity options of more recent psychology.

To adequately explain the role of the couvade we must transcend the sociological level of unilocal marriage rules, in order to define the jural and physical nature of fatherhood and look for the non-empirical and universal character of the differences between male and female parenthood within the framework of their hierarchical integration (Houseman 1988).

In the context, for instance, of an ideology that insists that 'ancestry lies on the father's side', a father will show how he 'gives life' to his child. By contrast, in the context of an ideology of exchange that diminishes his reproductive contribution in favor of the mother's brother's agency, the groom will put visible effort into documenting his own consubstantiality with his wife and child. So it is that in the case of the Karembola of Madagascar (Middleton 2000:117-118), a special practice associated with the couvade is undertaken by a groom partly to counter the excessive pre-eminence claimed by his wife's agnates in the act of creating the child. In response to men who insist upon re-encompassing their kinswoman's swelling belly within their house and descent group, the groom envelops his wife and baby in his care. In performing such a practice a man seeks to demonstrate paternity over and against the maternal ideology claimed by his affines, if it were not for the fact that, during the

couvade, his daily routine may undergo an explicit gender reversal which involves him in a kind of maternity. He is 'regendered' in relation to birth as a father proving his substantial link to and effecting upon the child by mothering the mother and baby in the house.

Symbolically, when he intervenes in the mother/child relationship, the father is performing an act of socialization. The natural birth is thus counterbalanced by a cultural birth, not only through the father's behavior, but also by means of that other cultural object, the father's trousers, which Albanians symbolically substitute for the natural passage the child must take to come into the world. What is called *couvade* is part of a public means of confirming or creating classificatory relations, of rearranging the cognatic universe into the idiom of substances, objects and behaviors. The exchange established through this language is at once natural and cultural, biological and social. The *couvade* is thus part of an ordered, coherent set of attitudes that accompany and ensure the development of individual destinies even as they delineate and initiate communities of substance within the society. The strength of this process is that it articulates a logic of natural qualities of the human being with a problematic of social and cultural succession.

## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup>For the many prohibitions the pregnant woman was supposed to respect, I used primarily a series of questionnaires covering a large portion of the Albanian territory, completed with my own first-hand knowledge and fieldwork research in several Albanian areas. All the results are deposited in the Ethnographic Archives of the Institute of Popular Culture in Tirana, where data from the first half of the 19th century can also be found.

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