

The virgin birth debate: is there practical value in the denial of paternity?

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Abstract. Various tribes deny that males have a role in causing pregnancy. Edmund Leach thinks members don't actually believe tribal dogma. I propose that there is a practical value in denying our biological knowledge.

"Hillo! What sort of fool are you?"

"The greatest fool you never knew!"

Can a tribe of human beings actually be ignorant of the fact that pregnancy is (normally) caused by sexual intercourse involving a male and a female? Various tribes deny that the father has any causal role in bringing about pregnancy. Edmund Leach thinks that some of the individuals involved do not actually believe these denials (though he also thinks that the question of whether they privately believe is outside the province of social anthropology; 1966: 40). But why deny paternity at all?

Here is one possible reason. "If we elders tell people in our tribe that males cause pregnancy, various females will be very careful about finding the right male, because they will think the right male will produce the ideal child. The easiest way to prevent futile searching after the right 'input' is to make it tribal orthodoxy that males have no causal role in pregnancy." The orthodoxy has a function of blocking a tempting project.

Reference. Leach, E. 1966. *Virgin Birth. Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 1966: 39-49.