
BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press, 1992. Pp. xvii, 251, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index, illustrations. US\$24.95 cloth.

Review: DAVID HANLON
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I AT MANOA

On the Practical, Pragmatic, and Political Interpretations of a Death in the Pacific

I read this book to be about the deaths of two men: that of the late eighteenth-century British explorer Captain James Cook and the other of Wijedasa, the Sri Lankan cabdriver and friend of the author who perished at the hands of repressive political forces in Sri Lanka rather than betray his son. These deaths, Gananath Obeyesekere tells us, are linked across time and space by a persisting legacy; that legacy is an international cult of terror resulting from European expansion over the globe. For purposes of this essay, I will focus on Obeyesekere's deconstruction of Cook's death and the two centuries of writing on it. Of the two deaths, it is the more prominently addressed and documented. I wish we knew more of Wijedasa, though; his fate obviously exerts a formidable influence over *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook*, making it the impressive, intriguing, and problematic work that it is. There should be a book about Wijedasa as well, but the discourse of European imperialism, not its victims, provides the primary focus of the publication under review.

Obeyesekere's thesis is relatively straightforward and clearly argued. The author contends that the image of Captain Cook as living Polyne-

sian god was created not by Hawaiians but by Europeans, and as part of a larger mythic charter for their conquest, imperialism, and colonization in the world. The Princeton anthropologist begins his attack upon the apotheosis of Cook by debunking first a related myth--that of Cook as hero. To do this, the author employs a set of "myth models" drawn from the works of William Shakespeare and Joseph Conrad. On the first of his three Pacific voyages, Cook stands as Prospero, a harbinger of civilization who remains immune to savage ways in his promotion of progress and enlightened culture. Over the course of his twelve-year travels, however, Cook becomes transformed into a Kurtz who loses his identity and becomes in effect the very savage he despises. Evidence for this transformation is drawn from the accounts of Cook and those who sailed with him. On his third and final voyage, Cook demonstrates an increasingly marked propensity for violence and erratic, often irrational behavior. In Tonga and later Tahiti, Cook resorts to force to protect his expedition against what he views as insolence, theft, and general disrespect on the part of island peoples. At Eimeo, the taking of two goats on 6 October 1778 leads to a two-day rampage of wanton destruction in which houses are burned and war canoes destroyed. Errors, miscalculations, and mistakes mark the trip north toward Hawai'i; the hardships of the voyage induce in the British explorer fits of rage that seaman James Trevenen of the *Resolution* refers to as "*heivas*"; Trevenen saw Cook's violent foot stamping and his exaggerated body gestures when angry as resembling Polynesian dancing.

Having worked to establish the British explorer as civilizer turned savage, as Prospero become Kurtz, Obeyesekere uses the arrival of Cook in Hawai'i to examine the theory of his apotheosis. Western scholarship has tended to see the opposition between the mythic world of the Hawaiians and the pragmatic, rational one of the British as resolved in the identification of Cook with Lono, the Hawaiian god of fertility. The unquestioned acceptance of Cook's deification in life has become accepted wisdom and has brought Western scholarship to what Obeyesekere calls "the border zone of history, hagiography and mythmaking" (p. 50). Not surprisingly, the work of the University of Chicago anthropologist Marshall Sahlins receives particular attention and criticism.

Sahlins, according to Obeyesekere, uses the apotheosis of Cook to advance the interests of structural history; the result gives theoretical imprimatur to European visions of Cook's deification and advances the myth in "interesting and unexpected" ways that ultimately sustain European hegemony over the area and its past. Obeyesekere views Sahlins's effort as flawed from the start by the limitations of its theoretic-

cal approach. Reflecting his own preference for a more cognitive, psychological anthropology, Obeyesekere argues that structuralism can only account for history and practical action through a formal, mathematically elegant set of transformations concerned more with abstract structures than with people and the complexities of their lives. Far from the conjuncture of structures, Obeyesekere views the arrival of Cook and his ships as entailing ruptures in the Lono belief system and the rituals around it. Obeyesekere asks how the generally disruptive behavior of sailors, their interaction with native women, the consequent disease, and the general chasm of cultural values and expectations that separated the British from the Hawaiians could possibly have led Hawaiians to accept Cook as the god Lono. Obeyesekere posits instead that these disjunctions led to a plurality of responses from different levels of Hawaiian society, none of which involved the realization of mythopraxis or, to put it another way, the historical reenactment of a mythical precedent. Obeyesekere adds with emphasis that of all the journals produced by the members of the third Cook expedition, only two--those of Lieutenant John Rickman and Seaman Heinrich Zimmerman--actually describe Cook as being perceived as something other than a man.

Obeyesekere's refutation of Sahlins's work is painstakingly detailed. He finds no evidence to suggest that, at the time of Cook's visit, the rituals of the Makahiki--the Hawaiian festival of thanksgiving dedicated to the god Lono --were as stylized, formal, or widespread as Sahlins describes them. The standardization of the Makahiki, believes Obeyesekere, came some two decades later with the rise of Kamehameha I to dominance over the island group. Similarly, the author doubts that Hawaiians understood Cook's ships to be floating temples and their main masts to resemble the stick and cloth images of Lono used in the ceremonies of the Makahiki. Obeyesekere can find no documentary support for the contention that the *Kali'i*, the closing rite of the Makahiki, involved a ritual confrontation between Lono and the Hawaiian war god Ku; what the *Kali'i* rite involved was the reenactment of the death of *Kū*, not Lono. If Cook's death made him a Hawaiian deity, it should have been Ku, not Lono. Moreover, argues Obeyesekere, the death of the ordinary seaman William Watman and his burial in the special temple or *heiau* designed for the conclusion of the Makahiki was regarded by Hawaiians not as human sacrifice to mark the beginning of the season of *Kū* but as the pollution of sacred space. The decision to bury Watman in that holy ground involved Cook's affection for the fatherly Watman and the need to provide him a proper Christian burial. The subsequent removal of the pilings and sacred images of that *heiau* did

not constitute an act consistent with Hawaiian ritual prescription, but rather involved Cook's attempt to resolve the guilt and debasement he felt over his earlier participation in the rituals held at that temple. Readers should note here that Obeyesekere draws heavily from Freud in analyzing Cook's relationship with his men.

Obeyesekere's differences with Sahlins involve more than matters of emphasis or interpretation. The Princeton scholar charges the Chicago anthropologist with a series of academic violations that include an uncritical reliance on a limited number of accounts; a selective, self-serving use of certain passages; a failure to consider the ambiguities, nuances, and contradictions in those passages; and a refusal to acknowledge the weighty counterevidence of other, more substantial and reliable texts. Obeyesekere believes that Hawaiians' reference to Cook as Lono is best understood as the result of timing and Hawaiian politics. Hawaiians, asserts Obeyesekere, bestowed titles or chiefly names to locate an individual in time and place; thus, the bestowal of the title Lono on Cook marked not a recognition of the British captain as god but rather a marker of his arrival at the time of festivities honoring Lono. Obeyesekere reads the accounts of Cook, Lieutenant James King and Ship's Surgeon David Samwell to mean that the explorer's involvement in the ceremonies of the Makahiki ultimately meant submission to the god **Kū** and installation as a chief in the Hawaiian polity. Such cultural appropriation served the political interests of the principal chief of the island of Hawai'i, **Kalani'ōpu'u**, who needed Cook and his resources in wars against Maui. To Obeyesekere's way of thinking, Cook then was domesticated, not deified in life; the author refers to this convergence of local politics and foreign visitors under a particular temporal context as "situational overdeterminism."

In explaining the actual death of Cook, Obeyesekere sees not a historical metaphor for a mythical reality, but rather punishment for transgressions on Hawaiian sensibilities and sacred space. The accounts on which Obeyesekere relies here are those of Lieutenant Molesworth Phillips and John Ledyard, who both blamed Cook for his own death. Phillips's manuscript has been lost but is summarized in its major themes by the scholar J. E. Taylor, who saw it before its disappearance. Recognizing perhaps the less-than-convincing nature of arguments built on secondhand summaries, Obeyesekere finds support for Phillips's attributed assessment in close and critical counterreadings of King and Captain Charles Clerke, Cook's second-in-command. In assessing Ledyard's work, Obeyesekere comments on how historians, taking their lead from Cook's foremost biographer, J. C. Beaglehole, have tended to attribute

an anti-British bias to the American who served as a marine corporal on Cook's last voyage. Obeyesekere notes, however, that Cook and Ledyard tended to get along well and that there exists no criticism of Cook in Ledyard's account until the expedition's arrival in Hawai'i. Indeed, the dismissal of Ledyard's account, writes Obeyesekere, illustrates the power of scholarship in fostering the conventional mythology regarding Cook's apotheosis.

Events following Cook's death are reread to refute his apotheosis in life and to support instead the argument for his postmortem deification. The concern of some Hawaiians over the "return" of Cook as evidenced by their questions to the British in the days immediately following his death suggest to Obeyesekere not a belief in his divinity but more likely a dread of his vengeful spirit. The treatment of Cook's bones indicates not actual worship but a reflection of his status as a chief. The fate of his bones is consistent with the treatment later accorded the physical remains of both **Kalani'ōpu'u** and Kamehameha I; the cleaning, distribution, preservation, and honoring of the bones of high-ranking chiefs comprised a cultural practice accorded not gods but deceased chiefs who were deified at death and thus converted into "real gods" (p. 148).

Challenging Sahlins on one final point, Obeyesekere thinks it fruitless to seek out the actual identity of Cook's killer in heavily edited voyager accounts, flawed ethnographies, or pictorial representations that are essentially stereotypic in their depictions of savage Hawaiians and heroic explorers. What does emerge from the accounts of Cook's death is strong evidence of British barbarity. There is the bombardment of Kealakekua Bay, the killing of Hawaiians, the mutilation of their bodies, the distribution of Cook's clothes among his surviving crew, and the general lack of any behavior that would indicate mourning or bereavement on the part of the British. All of this, believes Obeyesekere, "seemed to render fuzzy the distinction between the savage and the civilized" (p. 189).

The apotheosis of Cook as a living Hawaiian god occurs, then, not in Hawai'i but in Europe, and not by Hawaiians but by Europeans. Obeyesekere takes special pain to show that the Hawaiians' alleged adoration of Cook as god was in fact a language game that resulted from the selective manipulation of firsthand accounts from his third and final voyage of exploration into the Pacific. The apotheosis of Cook also reflected and was a part of an established pattern in Europe's historical consciousness. Writes Obeyesekere, "As the Spaniards had their Cortés who was deified by the Aztecs; now the English had their Cook, their own hero who also explored and opened up a new world" (p. 130). Writers

of secondary accounts stood predisposed to accept the attribution without question, as did later voyagers who looked for signs of their own divinity in the responses and reactions of the indigenous people whom they encountered. Missionaries in Hawai'i also promoted the apotheosis of Cook to indict a native Hawaiian religion that, in their view, was so corrupt and shallow as to accord a mortal British sea captain the status of a god. Such then are the origins of the apotheosis of Captain Cook and its perpetuation, an exercise in mythmaking that serves and is explained by imperial politics.

It is an impressive book that Gananath Obeyesekere has written, especially in light of his relatively late arrival to the field of Polynesian history and culture. He is, I believe, ultimately quite right in seeing Cook's apotheosis as intricately linked to European imperialism, conquest, and colonization. The persuasiveness of his argument lies in the author's meticulous attention to detail and in his sensitivity to the subtleties and ambiguities of texts. Obeyesekere's book serves as a valuable, much needed reminder about the politics of doing history in and around colonized settings.

I am unable in a forum of this sort to undertake a detailed examination of the particular charges leveled against Marshall Sahlins's scholarship by Obeyesekere. I must confess though to a very enthusiastic response to the publication of both *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities* (Ann Arbor, 1981) and *Islands of History* (Chicago, 1985). My enthusiasm resulted not from a commitment to structural history but from the positioning of Hawai'i, Hawaiians, and Hawaiian culture as the prime foci of Sahlins's analysis. In a real sense, Obeyesekere's book returns the meaning of Cook's death to a more global stage, one that I am not altogether comfortable with.

Having expressed myself on this matter, I would like to raise several reservations regarding *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook*. These involve the matter of sources, the development of argument, the fine art of interpretation, and the uses to which other peoples and their pasts are put. In at least several instances, there occurs what I find to be "manipulative flexibility," though quite different in character from the trait credited to all cultures in historical settings by Obeyesekere. The manipulative flexibility of which I write concerns the kind of language games and interpretive play with sources that Sahlins is accused of engaging in. For example, Obeyesekere shows that Sahlins's reliance on King to describe the response of Hawaiian commoner women to the bombardment of Kealakekua Bay is highly suspect because King himself was not there. King's account is, in fact, drawn almost entirely from

Samwell. Obeyesekere claims, then, that the arguments developed by Sahlins from King's account regarding the interplay of tabu and sexuality in Hawaiian society are all unfounded. Obeyesekere, however, later uses King's journal to demonstrate Cook's resolve to use force against Hawaiians for a series of perceived thefts that occurred at Kealakekua Bay on 13 February 1779, the day before his death. Moreover, King's account is not only seen as accurate but a *likely* paraphrase of Cook's very words on the subject. Might we not have here an instance of manipulative flexibility? In a related issue, Obeyesekere relies heavily and uncritically on the accounts of Cook's earlier encounters with Tahitians, Tongans, and Maori to establish a pattern of Polynesian response that bolsters the pragmatic behavior that he believes more accurately characterizes the Hawaiians' interaction with the British. To be consistent and convincing, it seems that Obeyesekere should have given the same attention and analysis to these accounts that he did to some of his Hawaiian sources.

To his credit as a scholar, Obeyesekere acknowledges the larger issues in the use and interpretation of texts. He notes in his introduction that he does not treat all texts the same way; he is highly suspicious of some while considering others more seriously. "Consequently," he writes, "the reader might well disagree with the stand I have taken regarding a particular text" (p. xiv). Nonetheless, this propensity toward interpretive license makes even more unsettling the frequent use throughout the book of such suppositional phrases as "must have been," "likely that," "quite probable," and "reasonable to assume."

The recorded accounts of native Hawaiian historians also are used in varying and contradictory ways. According to Obeyesekere, the writings of indigenous scholars such as Samuel Kamakau and David Malo, both trained at the American Calvinist seminary or high school at Lahainaluna on the island of Maui, reflect in part "a deliberately constructed 'myth charter' for modern evangelical Christianity" (p. 159). Evangelical prejudice induced Kamakau in particular to arrange Hawaiian cosmology in a ranked pantheism that included places for Lono and Cook as Lono. Obeyesekere, however, later plays on the general silence of these sources respecting the actual cause for Cook's death to tease out an inference against the argument of Cook as the god Lono. Obeyesekere does not dismiss outright the legitimacy of these native Hawaiian writings. Kamakau's works are said to contain excellent accounts of native cosmology and historical genealogies, and to exhibit the contentious or argumentative nature of Hawaiian discourse. What these works ultimately offer, believes Obeyesekere, is not history but a

glimpse at how later Hawaiians came to understand and incorporate Cook in their histories. I would argue in response that what Kamakau, Malo, John Papa ‘Īi and others wrote was indeed history and, in its general inquisition and consciousness of the past from a troubled present, not unlike the kind of intellectual exercise undertaken by Obeyesekere in *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook*. The more radical character and possibilities of these indigenous histories should also be remembered. Kamakau, for example, wrote regarding the prophecy of Ka’opulupulu, a priest from Waimea on the island of O’ahu, that “white men would become rulers, the native population would live (landless) like fishes of the sea, the line of chiefs would come to an end, and a stubborn generation would succeed them who would cause the native race to dwindle” (Samuel Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs of Hawaii*, rev. ed. [Honolulu: Kamehameha Schools Press, 1992], 167). Where are the missionary tropes in this passage?

At the core of this work rests the concept of practical rationality, “the process whereby human beings reflectively assess the implications of a problem in terms of practical criteria” (p. 19). Structuralism is not the only kind of anthropology with which Obeyesekere takes issue. He argues for the notion of practical rationality as a way to overcome the reifications of those who find a culture’s most fundamental values and meanings expressed symbolically. An appeal to the practical rationality of all cultures may offer an important caution against the idea of culture as fetish. The universality of pragmatic considerations, though, does not explain easily or quickly how local cultures act in distinctive ways to comprehend the alien, domesticate the foreign, and appropriate the useful. Obeyesekere’s own research into the contexts of Cook’s deification in Hawai’i would seem to prove this point.

Ironically, Obeyesekere’s commitment to the value of ethnography as a way to uncover the empirical evidence of this practical rationality rests somewhat disjointedly against what I consider to be his very effective deconstruction of European texts and the political discourse that permeates them. Is not practical rationality a literalizing trope of sorts that obscures the “nuances of utterance” and the “utterance of meaning” noted by Mikhail Bakhtin and John Searle? Are we to understand that ethnography is for the Rest what discourse is to the West? Practical rationality may help us to understand how late-eighteenth-century Hawaiians, like contemporary citizens of Sri Lanka, are all victims of an ongoing cult of international terror. I wonder, though, how much better we know Hawaiians through the context of terror and this spy-glass of practical rationality. Do we not lose a sense of them as people

amidst yet another alien, albeit well-intentioned theoretical paradigm?
I wonder too how the descendants of Kalani'opu'u will regard this
work; I think they might tell us that their past more than "barely exists"
(p. xiv) and that it is not as easily ordered as Obeyesekere believes.