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Commonsense Sorcery

The Apotheosis of Captain Cook contains much of potential value, much that might be distinctive in the very extensive literature on the Cook voyages, but is frustratingly underdeveloped and in some respects underresearched. The core of the book, as readers of this journal will already know, is an attempt to rebut Marshall Sahlins's celebrated arguments concerning the Hawaiians' apparent identification of Cook with the deity Lono; this particular critique is embedded within a reappraisal of Cook's psychology, on the third voyage in particular, and a critical history of the mythologization of Cook in the imaginations of Europeans, and more specifically those of Britons and inhabitants of British settler colonies such as New Zealand and Australia. The most original strand in the book is the reappraisal of Cook's psychology; the material concerning European mythmaking is reviewed in critical terms, but is on the whole familiar to readers of Bernard Smith and Greg Dening, as well as to anyone with more direct familiarity with late-eighteenth-century representations of exploration and the exotic.

The book obviously raises both substantive and methodological questions, as well as issues about the politics of exploration for eighteenth-century Pacific islanders and the politics of its historiography in the present. In this review I will be concerned with these methodological and wider political issues, and will neglect what might seem to be the core issue, the explanation of Cook's death itself.

On a first reading, I found Obeyesekere's critique of Sahlins broadly persuasive-- there are, at least, many points that call for some kind of response--but I have since worked through the material in more detail with students and am now struck rather by Obeyesekere's tendency to

insist upon certain readings of events and of Hawaiian responses, readings that are (1) simply not clearly substantiated by the material from the voyage journals that is quoted, or (2) excessively reliant upon a notion of "common sense" in the absence of contextual discussion of what exactly "sense" was bearing upon and with what criteria.

With respect to the first point, it is asserted, for example, that the deference accorded Cook was "confused' with that given to Omiah: "It is as likely that people prostrated and were murmuring, 'Lono,' not primarily for Cook, but to Omiah" (p. 94). The source here, Law, suggests the reverse, and the only evidence that supports Obeyesekere's contention is King's assertion that the priest Omiah is "a personage of great rank and power." Anyone who has worked extensively with early voyage sources ought to be aware that statements of this kind--that a chief, a priest, or priests or chiefs collectively possess great status and/or power --are of limited significance and are typically based on the most impressionistic and potentially misleading observations. What needs to be documented, rather, is precisely what the priest's ritual agency entailed, what capacities he had, and so on; and these points can frequently be established by the analysis of events rather than through reliance upon generalized statements. Here, Law may indeed have been mistaken as to which person the Hawaiians were expressing their veneration for (though there are other cases where it was pretty obviously Cook); but there is simply no definite reason for preferring Omiah rather than Cook, unless one is concerned to do precisely the kind of thing Obeyesekere finds Sahlins doing--that is, reading ambiguities in a manner consistent with one's argument. I too would affirm Hocart's dictum that "imagination must always keep ahead of proof as an advanced detachment to spy out the land" (p. xv), but do not accept that this is the kind of thing he meant.

With respect to the second point, it is supposed to be obvious that the *Resolution* and *Discovery* could not be identified with Lono's canoe and mast, simply on the grounds that the size of the ships is radically different. Who is to say that size is the most fundamental issue? Given the Polynesian understanding of part/whole relations, the idea that one deity or type might have a variety of exemplifications, there is nothing intrinsically problematic about an identification between a ship and a canoe, especially because there was no particular visual image or prototype of Lono's canoe anyway, which might be taken to be larger than a ceremonial war canoe in any case. It is simply not possible to reconstruct the cognitive processes that took place, but, against the evident dissimilarities between the vessels is the striking similarity between a

European sail and the crosspiece icon associated with the deity, which is distinctly unlike a Polynesian sail. It would also seem slightly wrong-headed to insist upon some simple issue of objective similarity in this case, because the kind of identification at issue is surely something such as what Taussig (1987) has referred to as historical sorcery, something that consists of a seizure upon contingent or partial similarities, which may defy historical reason, in the interest of empowering the past in the present in a singular way.

This is widely attested to in twentieth-century millenarian movements in Oceania, which raise related problems. According to Peter Lawrence, the Kilibob myth widely known in the Madang area was adapted to incorporate white men and European technology. The traditional versions of the myth posit two brothers who quarrel and depart in separate canoes, one inventing love magic, sorcery, and warfare, the other inventing a range of useful arts; though there are considerable variations, in most forms the myth is plainly a charter for the unequal distribution of various forms of ritual knowledge, craft activities, and so on (1964:22-23). In later versions of the myth associated with cargo beliefs, one brother builds an iron engine-powered ship rather than a canoe and invents, or is shown how to make, other forms of cargo also; in related myths one brother is identified as a white man, and white men are commonly taken to be returned ancestors (ibid.:93).

If a scholar points to identifications of this kind, is he or she assuming that the people are prisoners of a prelogical mentality, or that they are unable to distinguish between a ship and a canoe, or between white men and black men? The critique would seemingly insist upon precisely what it seeks to enfranchise indigenous people from: Their thought is taken to be limited to a peculiarly literal and immediate range of identifications, and deprived of the capacity for playful and manipulative extension. Here I am writing as much against Sahlins's notion of mythopraxis (applied to the Maori rather than the Hawaiians) as against Obeyesekere's insistence that because the British were white, they couldn't have been presumed to be Hawaiian deities. (I leave aside the point that precontact categories such as *haole* and *papalangi* posited fair-skinned humans from across oceans.) An alternate reading could surely see these identifications as motivated and opportunistic extensions of indigenous categories that are, after all, fuzzy and prone to extension and specification. This is well attested to in the domain of material culture (see Thomas 1991), and the dynamic around Cook may in the end be better understood if it is situated in a much wider class of identifications and appropriations. These acts of opportunistic semantic

extension are not, to my mind, somehow incompatible with practical rationality: Instead they frequently seem precisely attuned to it, and moreover to be prone not to further stereotypic replication but to revision and reformulation as cross-cultural relations change. What motivated wild and seemingly irrational identifications was the sorcerer's common sense; and in the Pacific in the contact epoch, many men and women, European as well as Polynesian, appear to have been engaging in sorcery of the historical kind.

On the one hand, therefore, it would seem that Sahlins has a case to answer--the question of how the variable character of the Makahiki calendar is reconciled with his original argument would seem especially important--yet Obeyesekere's critique cannot be taken to be conclusive. In both cases it is not so much history as sorcery, which I would not mind, as mere sleight of hand. I am not intimately familiar with third-voyage sources myself and cannot pursue the particular issues in this context. However, questions of methodological strategy, and of the politics of methodology, are perhaps of broader importance in any case.

In his preface, Obeyesekere insists on the importance of *evidence* (his italics): "Ethnographic interpretation cannot flout evidence, even though one might argue that evidence is opaque and subject to multiple interpretations" (p. xv). As an acknowledgement of the historiographic issues, this surely stops rather too short; for what counts as evidence, or what counts in what way and with what weight, is far from self-evident in cross-cultural history, especially for early phases of contact in the Pacific where the absolute quantity of documentation is relatively limited. This question of what is allowed to be salient, and what is not, precedes any consideration of opacity or conflicting interpretations, yet it is of specific importance for the kind of history at issue here, because the reconstruction of indigenous perceptions of events of contact may depend on accounts obtained or published considerably later than the events themselves.

What marks Obeyesekere's analysis, in general, is a resistance to the use of later sources that might purport to describe Hawaiian culture, or the culture of other Polynesians, that would therefore potentially offer contexts for indigenous responses. The exclusion of such material might seem eminently rigorous: Given that historical change-s certainly proceeded in a dynamic fashion over the early decades of contact, it can hardly be supposed that the notions at issue were untransformed, and later sources would appear plainly irrelevant to the interpretation of eighteenth-century events. This, implicitly, is Obeyesekere's method-

ological principle, and it is so explicitly where he rejects the nineteenth-century Hawaiian identifications of Cook and Lono. I do not dispute the view that the interpretation of the encounter with Cook must be grounded above all in the voyage texts, but would point out, first, that this historiography can only have a politics, in the sense that indigenous perceptions can only be read through those texts rather than somehow reconstructed or recognized independently. Despite a writer's ideological commitments, the rejection of later sources only disenfranchises an indigenous commentary that may in fact be available in other accounts. The more important point, though, is that the exclusion of later sources is simply too crude a historiographic rule. Changes certainly take place, but their effects are variable; certain institutions or beliefs attested to later cannot plausibly be represented as innovations consequent on any specific form of colonization; other practices may very well have changed. In other words, the reconstruction of indigenous responses can draw strategically (and comparatively) on later and other materials, and indeed must do so unless one is prepared to acquiesce in the limitations of particular bodies of documentation.

This has a crucial bearing on the issue that Obeyesekere says motivated his effort of research and the critique: the question of whether indigenous people represent a foreigner and a colonizer as a god. On the basis of South Asian categories, Obeyesekere insists that this can only be mistaken. While I accept the point that the European apotheosis of Cook has its own reality, and a pretty transparent basis in a project of imperial imagining, a basic issue is passed over, that is, what notions Polynesians possess of deities. In my view they are quite different to South Asian concepts, and the radical distance and status that deification elsewhere implies, that clearly troubles Obeyesekere, is less conspicuous in Polynesia. While Peter Buck (Te Rangi Hiroa) is cited as an authority for the view that living men were not made gods, Buck is not authoritative at the best of times and conspicuously unreliable for Polynesians other than Maori. Accordingly, far from it being impossible in Polynesian cosmology for living people to be identified as gods, it is well attested to, in the Marquesas if not in Hawaii: Powerful shamans, for instance, were known as *etua (atua)* while alive, and far more mundane objects and animals could also be taken as deities or exemplars of deities in certain contexts (see Thomas 1990). This does not resolve the issue of how Cook was identified, but it does suggest that it is not prima facie problematic and does not in any case carry the significance that is attached to it.

The section of Obeyesekere's book that is freshest from the point of

view of one familiar with Cook-voyage scholarship is the challenging and almost iconoclastic rereading of Cooks persona. While the argument that he was always divided between Prospero and Kurtz, that the latter clearly took over on the third voyage, is a little too sketchy and schematic, it is broadly persuasive; the claim that the older sailor William Watman was a kind of father figure, whose death precipitated Cooks fatal plunge into deeper depression and irrationality, is highly suggestive and worth exploring further.

In this area, Obeyesekere's analysis might be much enriched by the kind of ethnography of shipboard theater and power that Dening offers in *Mr Bligh's Bad Language* (1992). Yet both books refer often to paternal constructions of captains, and to their lapses into despotic behavior, seemingly without grasping how central this language of arbitrary power was to debates from Filmer and Locke onward, concerning the constitution of both fatherhood and government (that figured in the period, in the widely read texts of John Millar and Mary Wollstonecraft, among many others). Cook and Bligh were contending not only with dilapidated ships, vast oceans, fractious crews, and islanders with their own agendas, but also with antinomies fundamental to their political culture, which was to impose a kind of historical sorcery upon themselves. An analysis of these resonances could only enrich the analysis of the fraught and contested relations of power on the vessels, which were of course so often expressed through or implicated in relations between vessels and beaches and beyond.

Obeyesekere's book is valuable insofar as it reopens a debate, particularly if it prompts Sahlins to provide a more detailed justification for his arguments than appeared in *Historical Metaphors* (1981), which was, after all, offered only as a preliminary sketch of a larger work. I would be concerned if the critique were taken to be definitive, as I was concerned when I saw Sahlins's original argument being too hastily accepted and too readily taken to provide a paradigm for diverse and very different histories. I remain just slightly irritated by the preoccupation with Cook's death. Didn't other things happen on the voyages? Weren't the encounters with the Tahitians and Maori more sustained, and probably more consequential, than that with the Hawaiians? If *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook* prompts a wider range of readers to return to the eighteenth-century sources, they may discover other encounters and histories, less matter for mythmaking yet equally important for their ramifications for indigenous histories. After more than two centuries of European mythmaking, it is surely time for those indigenous histories to be foregrounded.

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