

How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook, for Example. By Marshall Sahlins. (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1995. Pp. 318.)

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How "Natives" Think : About Captain Cook, for Example. By Marshall Sahlins. (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1995. Pp. 318.)

Marshall Sahlins is widely known in several fields of anthropology. His new book, *How "Natives" Think*, however, has its genesis in a specific and highly charged scholarly debate which may be unfamiliar to most readers. The context in which it was written requires introduction.

Sahlins has been studying the anthropology of Polynesian history, with a strong Hawaiian focus, since the 1970s. His best known work in this area is probably *Islands of History*, a collection of essays published in 1985. There, as elsewhere, Sahlins elaborated a compelling analysis of the events that transpired when Captain James Cook visited Hawaii in January of 1779 and when he returned (the events leading up to his death in early February).

Contemporary writers reported that the Hawaiians received Cook as a manifestation of their annually returning god of fruitful renewal, Lono, whose New Year or Makahiki ceremonies were then in progress. For the Hawaiians, his fulfilment of that role seemed complete when his ships left Kealakekua Bay at the ritually correct moment, 3 February 1779. Cook's fateful troubles came when a storm wrecked the foremast of the *Resolution*, and he was obliged to put back to the bay for repairs. As a fortuitous manifestation of Lono, he returned inexplicably, out of season, just as the powers of the king, the warrior chiefs, and their god were being renewed. The resultant tensions and troubles led to the death of Cook, the

sacrifice of Lono, at the hands of the warrior chiefs. A decade ago, Sahlins framed these events as an instance of the “structure of the conjuncture,” that is, “the practical realization of [Hawaiian] cultural categories in a specific historical context, as expressed in the interested action of the historic agents” (1985: xiv).

In 1992, Gananath Obeyesekere published *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook : European Mythmaking in the Pacific*, a book-length rebuttal to Sahlins’ arguments. Reviewing many of the relevant source materials, he gravely questions Sahlins’ reading and interpretation of those materials. Obeyesekere argues that it was the Europeans who deified Cook and imposed their mythology of him upon the Hawaiians. Mourning the loss of the great captain, they appropriated and recast the stories of his last visit to Hawaii, elevating his stature by emphasizing how the “natives” saw him as a god. In sum, the apotheosis of Cook was a European phenomenon. Obeyesekere does not accept the evidence that the Hawaiians conferred divine status on Cook *after* his death, but he concludes that they did so only because of his high standing, while alive, as a great chief. The debate in its simplest terms, then, is about timing and agency : when was Cook deified and by whom ?

Cook specialists will have to assess the scholarly fine points for themselves, though in reading the two authors, Sahlins demonstrates a more complete mastery of the data. Both Obeyesekere and Sahlins, however, carry their argument beyond issues of text. A relative newcomer to Polynesian studies, Obeyesekere writes with a strong sense of personal mission, as a Sri Lankan who can claim to be both an anthropologist (at Princeton) and one of those Natives whom Europeans and anthropologists study and (re)construct. Sahlins responds vigorously, challenging not only his critic’s scholarship but the solidity of the moral ground upon which he constructs his critique. The battle (for such it is) raises issues which reach far beyond Captain Cook and Hawaiian historiography.

The styles of the protagonists provide some clues to the nature of the duel. Each writer is skilled in the rhetoric of scholarly documentation and polemics (though one could wish for a concordance of both tracts, the better to keep score on specific points). The authors diverge sharply, however, in their self-representations. Sahlins, the dedicated scholar, senior in age and standing, does not reflect autobiographically on how he came to study the Hawaiians, their history, and their relations with Cook and other Europeans. Obeyesekere, more overtly post-modern and reflexive, begins his book by recounting the personal research odyssey which he was provoked to undertake after hearing Sahlins lecture about Cook as dying god at Princeton in 1987 (Sahlins [p.3] says he gave that lecture in 1982). Convinced that the colonized peoples of South Asia would never have deified any European and that Hawaiian rationality would have been no different, Obeyesekere concluded that Sahlins was buying into eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British mythmaking about Cook rather than arriving at an understanding of how the Hawaiians really perceived the famed explorer. His

book asserts that Sahlins not only misread the evidence, but, further, could not elude the Euro-centred myths and traditions in which his anthropological training was grounded.

Sahlins counters that Obeyesekere's stance is grounded in an intuitive dualism between the West and the Rest, between Europeans and colonized peoples. Indigenous peoples are constructed as a generic category in opposition to those of European descent; the corollary is that Asians and Hawaiians understand one another more readily and have more in common than either of them would share with Europeans. Sahlins finds no validity in such an assumption ; to suppose that insights about South Asian kingship and religion help us to understand the Hawaiians is misguided, and, further, dismissive of the complex distinctiveness of Hawaiian culture. It also overlooks the fact that South Asians had experience in "dealing with diverse and exotic foreigners for millennia" whereas Polynesians, "for just as long, had been isolated from any such experience" (pp. 4-5). Nor can he accept the argument that anthropology's European intellectual heritage precludes its practitioners from escaping that culture and its myths — unless they can claim the privilege themselves of being non-Europeans. Anthropologists in general, if they are any good, should be better equipped than most to read around culture and to see mythmaking in broad perspective.

Sahlins builds upon these points to critique a further argument developed by Obeyesekere. The latter argues that Hawaiians, on the basis of common sense, would not have mistaken Cook for a god ; to argue otherwise is to imply that they were primitives, dazzled by their British visitors. In response, Sahlins counters that Obeyesekere, combining "a dubious anthropology and a fashionable morality" (p. 5), takes all too little account of the extent to which any culture frames the perceptions of its carriers (and, besides, Obeyesekere himself does not deny the evidence that Hawaiians deified Cook after his death). Sahlins goes further, asserting that Obeyesekere has imposed on the Hawaiians a European bourgeois rationality based on the premise that truth will come from simple analysis of the data of our senses. It is "a common or garden variety of the classic Western sensory epistemology an affected anti-ethnocentrism that ends by subsuming [the Hawaiians'] lives in classic Occidental dualisms of logos and mythos, empirical reason and mental illusion" (p. 6).

This approach, "consistently and relentlessly applied" (p. 9), in turn erases the Hawaiians' own discourse from the historical sources. Sahlins agrees that the sources present severe problems and must be rigorously compared and evaluated for their biases, gaps, and errors. But nonetheless, he argues, Hawaiian voices often speak through them, as when Heinrich Zimmerman, one of Cook's seamen, transcribed what he heard Hawaiians saying in their own language about Cook as Lono (p. 17). The records of outsiders cannot be summarily dismissed, especially when they challenge on several fronts what a researcher would prefer to find (or not find) in them.

Sahlins summarizes the mission of his book at the end of his introduction. It would be picayune simply to catalogue Obeyesekere's mistakes. Sahlins' concern is "to show that commonsense bourgeois realism, when taken as a historiographic conceit, is a kind of symbolic violence done to other times and other customs... one cannot do good history, not even contemporary history, without regard for ideas, actions, and ontologies that are not and never were our own" (p. 14).

To grasp the whole debate and the issues it entails, one must, of course, read both Obeyesekere and Sahlins; no review can encompass all facets of the contest. This one concludes with two brief points. First, the issues (documentary, historical, and rhetorical) are of fundamental importance in the doing of history, anthropology, folklore, and all related studies, and they deserve a full airing. Second, however, a question of style returns to mind. Why and how does it come about that two scholars produce nearly 600 pages of verbal fisticuffs, published as hardbound books by two major university presses, with nary a sign that they ever sat down to talk about the subject? For all their interest and information on the subject, these works are scorings of points, reminiscent of graduate seminars where students compete for the admiration of their professors and peers by cleverly demolishing the work of others.

Why did Obeyesekere cultivate his "ire" for so long after the lecture in the year on which he and Sahlins disagree; did he attempt any direct conversation with the speaker? Did Sahlins make any approach to Obeyesekere during the three years between the appearances of their respective works? Did either university press encourage the authors to read each other's book manuscripts? (Of course, confrontations involving a major scholar and a major historical figure no doubt help to sell books.) What models do these books offer as means of handling scholarly problems and debates; can we think around and beyond the academic subculture that they share? Could constructive discussions replace these almost litigious disputes and these slidings into unhelpful oppositions between scholars of Western and indigenous origins? I would like to think so. The chiefs have had their day.

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