

How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook, for Example, by Marshall Sahlins. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995. ISBN 0-226-73368-8, x + 318 pages, table, maps, figures, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. US\$24.95.

How "Natives" Think . . . is Marshall Sahlins' reply to Gananath Obeyesekere's *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook* (1992), which argued (contrary to a prevailing historical view, and in particular the version of it put forward by Sahlins) that Captain Cook was not taken by the Hawaiians to be a god, but merely a chief whom they installed with the name of Lono. In Obeyesekere's view, Cook's apotheosis is an eighteenth-century European construct, built on antecedent "myth models" of the explorer-cum-civilizer who is a god to the "natives." It was thus not Hawaiians who made Cook into a god, but Europeans. Obeyesekere supported his argument in two ways. First, by an assertion that the Hawaiians, in common with people everywhere, had too much "practical rationality" to have taken Cook for a returning local god, especially since he and his crew neither looked like Hawaiians nor spoke the language. Second, by a reading of the relevant historical sources, which, according to his view, show that the major journals of the voyage did not make this connection between Cook and Lono, and that the assertion that they did comes from later accounts by American missionaries or from Hawaiians who had been influenced by their teachings.

At this level, the issues are ordinary enough, of the sort that one might

think could be argued simply on the basis of the historical evidence.

Obeyesekere, however, also sought to go beyond this, connecting the genesis of the "apotheosis myth" (and also those writers, such as Sahlins, who have promulgated it) with imperialism, the general denigration of "natives" everywhere, and the "contemporary culture of violence." Furthermore, he made a distinctly dubious claim to the ethical high ground on the basis of being himself a "native," albeit of Sri Lanka rather than Hawai'i.

Mainly because of these wider assertions and insinuations, Obeyesekere's book caused a certain frisson in cultural studies, although it received a much cooler, and generally mixed reception from anthropologists and Pacific historians. Now, however, with the appearance of *How "Natives" Think . . .*, the issues have a new importance, mainly because of the vigor and cogency of Sahlins' reply.

Sahlins' first two chapters recount the events of Cook's visits to Hawai'i, pointing up the evidence that he was indeed taken by Hawaiians, in both life and death, as a manifestation of the god Lono. These chapters traverse many of the well-known "facts" from the journals of the voyage, here interspersed with observations (long parentheses, footnotes, and references to the extensive appendixes) calling into question many of Obeyesekere's interpretations of what might have been going on. This is Sahlins' most complete and thoroughly documented account of his general thesis. Throughout, his basic interpretive move involves the relating of events to Hawaiian anthropology. Thus his

account of the meaning, significance, and ritual calendar of the Makahiki festival, and the way it can be calibrated on the recorded incidents of the voyage. Thus also his account of the social and political divisions of Hawaiian society and their relationships to the rituals at Hikiau temple that Cook participated in during late January and early February 1779. The strength of his argument lies in the fact that motivations are specific, local, intricately referenced to Hawaiian beliefs rather than, as with Obeyesekere, based largely on appeals to "plausibility" and a generalized common sense.

Chapter 3 deploys the same interpretive strategy against specific points of Obeyesekere's argument, giving detailed accounts of Hawaiian notions of divinity, the relations between gods and humans, more on the Makahiki, and the evidence showing that the events following Cook's death pointed to his having been a royal sacrificial victim rather than just a chief who had died. Obeyesekere's interpretations are not simply called into question here. They are systematically attacked, with the argument all the more telling because it calls for no special familiarity with the sources for a reader to appreciate several logical flaws in Obeyesekere's reasoning.

The heart of the controversy, however, lies in Chapter 4, which deals with the interrelated issues of rationality and cultural order, both of them well known to anthropology and thoroughly rehearsed in a number of previous polemical affrays over matters such as "prelogical mentality," the *pensée sauvage*, virgin birth, and the like. In such matters, the tendency has

always been for argument to slip into philosophical generalities. In this particular runaround, however, the issues can also be nailed down to a specifically anthropological question of the interpretation of a fixed body of evidence.

Obeyesekere built his interpretation on the basis of what he called "practical rationality," a concept taken from Weber, which he stripped (so he maintains) of its utilitarian implications, and which he distinguished from "common sense" by its closer attention to more reasoned and reflective ways of thinking. Sahlins pays close attention to this, situating it firmly in the wider western empiricist tradition in which the senses and utilitarian needs are taken as the sole grounds on which objective reality is constructed, and "rationality" can exist untainted by the a priori categories of any cultural tradition. Sahlins argues (as indeed he has before, most notably in *Culture and Practical Reason*) that such views are historically specific, for all that they may be endemic to a prevailing view of the world and the "common average Western form of epistemic murk" (150). As he points out, even Locke was well aware of the relativity of objectivity, a view that remains as the foundation on which any genuinely *anthropological* knowledge must be based.

This opens the way for the most telling part of Sahlins' critique. Obeyesekere, so he argues, has paid but scant attention to Hawaiian discourse about the nature of things, preferring to base his interpretations on the universal "practical rationality" that he maintains gives him access to

the Hawaiian mind. But then if “practical rationality” is nothing more than bourgeois rationality disguised as a panhuman attribute, Obeyesekere has turned the Hawaiians into pragmatic realists, leaving westerners as prisoners of their myths about being gods to the “natives.” This, then, is true violence: the “systematic erasure” of Hawaiian concepts and their cultural particularity—a violence, moreover, that is exacerbated by Obeyesekere’s resort to fashionable piety with his claim, as a “native,” to have privileged access to the way eighteenth-century Hawaiians thought.

Readers may differ about the philosophical issues involved. Others who are familiar with the historical evidence may well question details of interpretation, and we may not yet have heard the end of dispute at this level. Such considerations aside, however, Sahlins has made a powerful argument. Even if eighteenth-century Hawaiians were imbued with all the “practical rationality” Obeyesekere attributes to them, it would still be a good bet that, after having taken a close look at things and perhaps having had a talk about them, they would have come to the perfectly sensible conclusion that Cook was a manifestation of Lono—and acted accordingly.

But there is more to *How “Natives” Think* . . . than that. It is a complex work, engaging attention at several levels. Sahlins is one of contemporary anthropology’s most distinguished stylists, wrapping erudition and high seriousness in direct and elegant prose, interspersed with abrupt shifts of register and colloquial throwaway asides—such as the ironic observation (43) that

“[Obeyesekere] knows this to be true of Hawaiians because he is Sri Lankan himself.” Style is not all, but it tells, particularly in academic street-fighting such as this, where each side seeks to command the open spaces of public debate. There is outrage too—at what Sahlins sees as the negation of the whole humanist project of anthropology and the appropriation of “culture” by those who would write too glibly of “the culture of autobiography” and such matters. Throughout, there is also Sahlins’ passionate commitment to the integrity of anthropology, expressed in such passages as: “What guides my response is a concern 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. I want to suggest that one cannot do good history, not even contemporary history, without regard for ideas, actions, and ontologies that are not and never were our own” (14).

There are echoes here of many things, and the central idea has been expressed many times, though seldom, perhaps, with such elegance, at least since Mauss’s haunting evocation (in *Sociologie et Anthropologie*) of the “many dead moons, and others pale and obscure, in the firmament of reason.”

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