How Hawaiians Viewed the Cook Expedition

A Captain Cook Society Conference was held in February 2009 at Yano Hall in the town of Captain Cook, Hawai`i. Herb Kane, the first scheduled speaker, was only just out of hospital after a bout of pneumonia so could not attend. His address on the Hawaiian views of the Cook expedition was delivered by Terry Wallace. An edited version of the address and sources appears below. It was entitled "Visitors From Outer Space. How Hawaiians Viewed the Cook Expedition". My thanks to Charlie Auth for making it available to us all.

Ian Boreham

The recent heated debate about Cook in Hawai`i centers around the question of whether Cook was perceived as a god, as claimed by anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (University of Chicago), or not as a god but a powerful chief commanding men, ships, metals and gunpowder, as claimed by anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere of Princeton.

Following is a comment I was invited to write for *Current Anthropology*, April 1997, regarding an essay by Rob Borofsky about the controversy. Sahlins and Obeyesekere also fired off their final comments.

As I see it, the major flaw in discussing whether or not Cook was perceived as a god is in the use—or misuse—of the term "god". Polynesians did not have a word for god in the modern sense of the term. Missionaries translated "god" into the Polynesian akua or atua; but akua can be either an invisible spirit or a living person of great power.

My Comments

In a superb summary of conflicting views, Borofsky demonstrates that Cook has become a Rorschach test, perceived according to the viewer's cultural programming. How Sahlins and Obeyesekere differ in their interpretations of the events of Cook in Hawai`i is made clear. Borofsky also comments on views expressed by Hawaiians today, and pleads eloquently for conversations across our differences which focus on common points of reference, such as "paying particular attention to generally agreed upon events".

We have eye-witness accounts by Cook's men: unable to comprehend all they saw, they were nevertheless good enough to write it down. In their view, Hawaiians saw Cook as someone of special status, and killed him when he attempted to take their king hostage against the return of a stolen boat. Later writings decline in credibility with the passage of time—the fluffed-up official publication of the voyage, the tales told to European visitors by Hawaiians adept at anticipating what their visitors wanted to hear, and accounts collected more than fifty years later and rewritten by Anglophobic American missionaries. All must be interpreted within the context of the European vision of the writers as well as their motives.

We also have cultural facts, known premises and traits of Hawaiian culture, some of which may be corroborated by their distribution throughout Polynesia. These, in the absence of credible Hawaiian accounts of Cook's visit, may help us view events through Hawaiian eyes.

One cultural fact is the absence in the Polynesian language of equivalents for such Western religious terms as divine, god, adoration, holy, sacrifice, supernatural and religion. As used by Cook's men, and by some anthropologists today, such terms misinterpret Polynesian thought.

Polynesians of 1778, having no vision of the supernatural as a separate sphere from the natural universe, could not have seen Cook as a "god". To Westerners, "god" means a supernatural being. An akua is a being of nature, one of immense power, which may be an invisible spirit or a living person. Of the Marquesans, Handy (1923:244) succinctly wrote: "The native does not distinguish supernatural and natural, as we do. Atua were simply beings with powers and qualities of the same kind as those of living men (enata), but greater. Some men and women were atua in this life; most became atua after death".

In a few words, Handy says it all.

By interpreting Hawaiian thought in Western religious terms, anthropologists step on semantic land mines. Cook's men may be excused for their religious vocabulary, but not social anthropologists for perpetuating it as scientific lexicon. The challenge to anthropologists is to develop a glossary of Polynesian terms for which no precise European

equivalents exist, and use those terms in their writings.

Take "adoration", as voiced by Cook's Lieutenant James King. In Polynesia authority was based on seniority. Authority/seniority hierarchies extended beyond the living, progressing in power as in seniority to the original creative spirits of Nature, the ultimate sources of the mana which motivated everything in the universe, whether it be the talents of a man, the growth of a plant, or the forces that moved winds, waves and stars. Chiefly families derived authority from a special form of seniority—genealogies aligning them to the major akua. The relationship is evident in the terms for parent (makua), ancestral spirit guardian (aumakua), and akua. What Cook's men perceived as "adoration" and "worship" may have been expressions of the compliant, filial respect of the junior (or commoners) toward the authority of the senior (or chiefs). Throughout Polynesia, commoners treated European officers as chiefs; however, chiefs addressed the same officers as equals.

How should we interpret the lavish hospitality given to Cook at Kealakekua Bay by the local priests in the king's absence, apparently without request for payment? Very likely it was Polynesian gift-giving with the recipient thought to be honor bound to reciprocate in some way (there was no Polynesian term for "trade" or "merchant"). It's doubtful that the priests could have been so generous on their own authority. Kalaniopu`u, as king and ultimate decision maker, must have seen Cook's arrival as one fraught with marvelous opportunities as well as unknown political dangers. By awarding Cook a prestigious title (Rono) and showering him with gifts, the king would have believed that Cook would be bound to reciprocate with some gift of service.

Having no writing by Cook's hand of the events at Kealakekua Bay, we can only speculate what Kalaniopu`u wanted. It may have been a sharing of the visitors' wondrous technology with their hosts. Obeyesekere's suggestion that the lavish hospitality was to oblige Cook to reciprocate with military assistance against Maui is supported by a historical fact: the proposal most frequently made from Pacific Island chiefs to European captains was one of joint military adventure. From the beginning of European exploration of the Pacific, when Magellan fell for such an invitation and got himself killed, to the proposals made by Kamehameha to Vancouver, it was common for an island chief to propose that his guest bring along his muskets and cannon, and join him in a lovely little war against the chief of a nearby district or island. The hospitality at Kealakekua Bay was the classic set-up.

Historians have passed over Kalaniopu`u, seen through British eyes as old and ineffectual; but S. M. Kamakau (1961: Chapter VII) describes him as a "clever" and ruthless chief who had seized Hawai`i by force and preserved it by political intrigue and prowess on the battlefield. A conquest of Maui was his great obsession. Four campaigns had been made, each a disaster, each increasing his rage and frustration. Now in old age he got the news—the British were coming, hungry and without women.

Word had come from Kauai of their weapons. They had met his enemy, Kahekili, a few days earlier, but he could offer them a deal the Maui king could never match: for Maui's harvest was wasted by war, but Hawai`i's bounty was at hand, and in his hands.

Before negotiations were possible, Cook had to be made visible as an entity within the known Hawaiian world; hence the chiefly title, Rono—one which conferred great prestige within the domain of the benevolent akua Rono, but apparently little if any power to threaten the king's paramount position within the realm of the akua Ku, patron of politics and warfare. At Kealakekua, Cook's men met a resident high chief named Omeeah, who was also called Rono, and who received the same acts of respect given Cook, including prostration before him by the commoners; yet Omeeah, as Rono, was no threat to the king.

James King was clearly informed of the distinction between Rono as an invisible akua, and as a chiefly title: "Sometimes they applied it [Rono] to an invisible being, who, they said, lived in the heavens. We also found that it was a title belonging to a personage of great rank and power in the island" (King and Douglas 1784:5). This is a distinction I find blurred in Sahlins' writing. That a living man holding the title, Rono, may have been regarded to some degree as a manifestation of the great akua Rono does not imply that Hawaiians confused the man with the "god". Similarly, some Roman Catholics may regard the Pope as a manifestation of Christ, but no Catholic regards the Pope as the Christ.

Moreover, in a society driven by precedent, Hawaiians had no precedent within the annals of the chiefs for any of the major akua to walk upon the earth in human form.

Missionaries translating the Bible into Polynesian dialects had difficulty finding equivalents for their

religious terms. Searching Hawaiian for a word for "holy", missionaries settled for hemolele (perfect) and put their own spin on it. There being no Polynesian word for religion, one had to be invented. Haahi is a Māori rendition of the English "faith". Ka ho`omana became the Hawaiian term.

Is it possible to stop projecting? So long as we ignore the realities of language and the premises by which a people shape their conclusions about their world, we tend to perceive everything in our own concepts, and empathy is impossible. Much of Hawaiian history, written by foreigners with Western bias and personal ambitions, lacks empathy. As Barbara Tuchman observed, the difficulty of empathy is the supreme obstacle for the historian. A Chinese painter once said to me, "To paint a tiger one must be a tiger, to paint a flower one must be a flower". As an artist, I find that a depiction of an event in Pacific history requires more than painstaking accuracy of setting and details; one must also try to see the world of the participants through their eyes; otherwise, human figures will seem lifeless on the canvas, or, as we often see in Hollywood historical spectaculars, as modern people in period dress.

Polynesian and European premises, logic, and conclusions about the universe and humanity's station in it were worlds apart; but with empathy founded upon known facts of both cultures, we may improve our grasp of the events of Cook's visit and his death.

After European contact was renewed, some Hawaiians, finding visitors fascinated by the subject of Cook's death, were quick to confirm European notions about it; but among the chiefs, as well as early Hawaiian writers Kelou Kamakau, David Malo, and John Papa I`i, there seems to have been an amnesia about Cook. Sixty years after Cook's death, Hawaiian accounts which were not unkind to Cook were disregarded by Anglophobic American missionaries. Americans, humiliated by the war of 1812, found their attempts to gain influence frustrated by the Hawaiian friendship toward Britain. Seeking to discredit the British, missionaries put their own spin on the Cook-as-Lono myth, condemning Cook for self-deification—a blasphemy by which he supposedly incurred the wrath of the Almighty, and brought about his own death. Bingham (1847:75) described Cook as "contemptible" and a "worm", guilty of "disgusting lewdness". The missionary history text (Dibble 1838) taught to generations of Hawaiian children, parroted by later Hawaiian writers, created a feeling of revulsion toward Cook (Stokes 1930: 100) that I find still persists today.

Lono (formerly rono) has several meanings. It can mean news, or announcement. With the prefix ho`o (ho`orono), a warning to be attentive. "Ho`orono" may have been what the British heard when Cook landed and was led to the temple by a herald crying what sounded like "Orono", for it was the command by which commoners were warned of the approach of a chief of the highest rank, requiring commoners to prostrate themselves as an act of deference (Mary Kawena Pukui, personal communication). The British had previously witnessed this act, kapu moe, on Kauai, when commoners prudently prostrated themselves before Cook and, later, before the high chief Kaneoneo. Clerke, captain of *Discovery*, was given the same honor, but declined it. Commoners referring to Cook as "Orono" during the circuit of the island may actually have been saying "Ho`orono" to caution others of the British chief's presence.

Lono is also the name of one of the four major Polynesian male spirits, patron spirit of fertility and healing, manifested in the clouds, thunder and rain that renewed the fertility of the land each year. Lono has been the name of famous chiefs, and today is a Hawaiian surname as well as a given name.

Two stories told to Westerners in the 1820s gave rise to the idea that Hawaiians were awaiting the promised return of Lono, and saw Cook as their Lono. In one, Lono was a king of Hawai`i of the "fabulous age" who became offended with his wife, Kaikilani, and killed her. Driven mad by remorse, he went about boxing everyone he met, then sailed away, alone in a canoe, promising some day to return. He was deified as Lono-i-ka-makahiki, and sporting events instituted as part of the Makahiki in his honor. When Cook arrived, "it was supposed... that the god Rono was returned" (Ellis 1963:85-86). Ellis, confused, begins a tale of a king and ends it as one about a god.

In another version, Lono is the major "god" Lono who comes down to earth and takes human form to wed Kaikilani. The rest of the tale is the same as the first (Thrum 1907:108-116).

These tales are variously interpreted by both Obeyesekere and Sahlins; but both versions are fragments of a larger story which, unaccountably, neither author considers. The full account of the Lono story, along with a traditional chant, is found in S. M. Kamakau (1961:47-63).

Lono was a ruling chief of Hawai`i, not of the

"fabulous age", but one who lived nine generations before Kamehameha. He murdered his wife Kaikilani in jealous rage. Mad with remorse, he went boxing all comers, then sailed away. But the story continues. He eventually regained his sanity, returned to Hawai`i and resumed his kingship. He defeated an invasion from Maui in a great battle. He instituted sporting events as part of the Makahiki celebrations, and after death was named Lono-i-ka-makahiki. A complex of rock walls and platforms at Keauhou, Kona, cleared in the early 1970s for construction of a hotel, was reputed to have been one of his residences. His bones were reputed to be in a sennit reliquary recently stolen from Bishop Museum.

Hawaiians of 1778 were not awaiting the return of Lono; he had returned centuries earlier.

Addressing the disparity of interpretations, Borofsky correctly points out, "The real problem here lies not with the data... but with our efforts to make sense of the data, with our conception of Hawaiian conceptions". Our conception of Hawaiian conceptions can be improved, I submit, by interpreting the data through what is known about the Polynesian vision of their world, reconstructing that unique lens with cultural and historical facts.

As one result of the world-wide surge of nationalism and cultural revival among peoples formerly dominated by foreign powers, the question of who can speak for whom, Borofsky observes, has become a barrier across the borderlands of difference which challenges "the right of Western anthropologists to translate or speak for others". There's no doubt that in the mood of the times, the popular view of anthropologists making forays outward from the civilized center to study the exotic cultures of others (presumably less "civilized") is one which lumps anthropologists with missionaries, fortune hunters, and snake oil salesmen, and may arouse resentment. Moreover, all peoples, Westerners included, continually reinvent their history and culture within the context of their times. In the search for a glorious past to buttress self esteem, unpleasantness is too often obscured with romantic illusion, past horrors locked away in closets of amnesia, and past outrages nursed to feed present hatred. All peoples feel proprietary about their own histories and resent outsiders who, uninvited, would search secret closets and strip away veils of cherished tradition, despite the possibility that such veils may obscure historic truth.

A more positive result of the new nationalism is an emergence of indigenous scholars. As these gain expertise and authority, the tradition of Western outsiders conversing with indigenous informants may become obsolete. What Borofsky perceives as a barrier may become borderland of a different kind, a threshold from anthropology's past to a future in which useful conversations occur between anthropologists representing their own cultures. Such a trend need not result in "balkanization" if anthropologists can find common points of reference in conference with others.

Herb Kawainui Kane

Sources

Bingham, Hiram. *A Residence of Twenty One Years in the Hawaiian Islands*. H. Huntington and S. Converse. 1847.

Borofsky, Robert. "Cook, Lono, Obeyesekere and Sahlins" in *Current Anthropology*. 1997. Vol. 38, no. 2. Pages 255-282.

Dibble, Sheldon. *Ka Mooolelo Hawaii*. Missionary Seminary Press. 1838.

Ellis, William. *Journal of William Ellis*. Advertiser Publishing Co. 1963. Reprint of the London 1827 edition.

Handy, E .S. *The Native Culture in the Marquesas*. Bernice P. Bishop Museum. 1923.

Kamakau, Samuel M. *Ruling Chiefs of Hawaii*. Kamehameha Schools Press. 1961.

King, James, and John Douglas. (eds.) *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean*. Nicol and Cadell. 1784. Vol, 3.

Stokes, John F. G. "Origin of the Condemnation of Captain Cook in Hawaii" in *Thirty-Ninth Annual Report of the Hawaiian Historical Society for the Year 1930*. 1931. Pages 68–104.

Thrum, Thomas G. *Hawaiian Folk Tales: A Collection of Native Legends*. McClurg. 1907.