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Making History in the Pacific:
Pivotal Debates on Identity Formation and the
Construction of the Past

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in

Anthropology

by

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Professor Joel Robbins, Chair
Professor David Pedersen
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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2008

Dedication

To Linda Ekstrom,
Mahalo nui loa for your support and guidance.
Without you I never could have
made it this far.

Table of Contents

Signature Page.....	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
Abstract.....	vi
I. Introduction.....	1
II. Summary of the Three Debates.....	4
III. Myth and History.....	11
IV. Positioning and Identity.....	20
V. Conclusion.....	29
References Cited.....	35

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Making History in the Pacific: Pivotal Debates on Identity Formation and the Construction of the Past

by

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Master of Arts in Anthropology

University of California, San Diego, 2007

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This paper critically analyzes three debates that have developed within recent literature on the Pacific. These debates reflect an evolving conceptualization of the culture, history, and traditions of the Pacific region and usefully draw our attention to the complex politics of representation. Furthermore, these debates represent pivotal moments in the discursive legacy of Oceania and signify important conjunctures where scholars have dictated the terms upon which the region has been historically evaluated.

The first section of this paper focuses on the notion of myth as a conceptual category, employed as a form of discourse with the power to create social reality. Throughout each debate, myth emerges as a highly influential and contested form of historical legitimization in which relations of power and subjectification are also implicated. This discussion draws attention to the analytical structures that these meanings have come to produce. Also discussed is the extent to which such uses of myth are indicative of the perspective or position of the author.

The second section of this paper investigates the power of positionality as an influential component of each author's rationale. Following Mannheim, it is argued that the author's perspective is necessarily guided by his or her angle of vision and that the construction of history is a product of particular social positions. Through the development of this discussion it becomes apparent that one's inclusion within, or exclusion from, an intellectual or cultural community determines the kinds of claims that one can make regarding the history of others.

I. Introduction

In 1989 anthropologist Greg Denning published an article regarding the Pacific region in which he asked, “Who can claim authenticity for their history in their connection to something so amorphous and so divided” (Denning 1989, 134). His question reflects recent literature that has centered on politics of representation during a time of Pacific decolonization and postcolonial development. In a region of island groups which until recently have been considered relatively insular, it seems strange and strangely appropriate that some of the most controversial attempts at history-making have taken place here (Hau’ofa 1998). Strange, due to the size and remoteness of these islands, their objectification as a construction of the West and, subsequently, their seeming global irrelevance (Hanlon and White 2000, 2). Strangely appropriate because the Pacific Island area has played a large part in the legacy of European exploration, missionary evangelism and anthropological representation. Furthermore the region has significantly informed Western definitions of “primitive”. As a result, much postcolonial writing has been concerned with “disrupting the hegemonic influence of popular and official representations of island natives as simple, isolated, naïve, and dependent” (Ibid.).

Over the last century, Anthropological publications have reflected an evolving conceptualization of the Pacific region. Culture, tradition, and history have been pivotal points of departure for much of this literature. Questions of self-definition have also been of prominent concern to native, and non-native, scholars interested in modern questions of identity. Perhaps the most productive of these publications are

those that demand the attention of the greater anthropological community. Three of these exceptional cases have developed into heated debates, intensely defended on both sides by some of the discipline's most highly respected figures. The very occurrence of these exchanges usefully directs our attention to the complex historical significance and contemporary relevance of these events.

In this paper I first provide summaries of the debates in terms of the positions taken by each author. I briefly describe the ways in which traits such as their gender, academic background, and ethnicity have effected the development of their arguments as well as the reception they received within the larger anthropological community. My description of these debates is ordered chronologically starting with Mead's 1928 book Coming of Age in Samoa and ending with Trask's response to Keesing in 1991. This linear presentation should provide a preliminary framework for interpreting each debate within the intellectual climate in which it originated.

These debates represent concerted efforts to come to terms with issues regarding Pacific history, culture, and identity. The large amount of attention that they have received within the greater anthropological community reveals the indeterminacy of modern constructions of Pacific Pasts. If in the formation of concepts, the angle of vision is guided by the observers' interests (Mannheim 1936, 245), then the construction of history is a product of particular social positions (Friedman 1992, 194). What then can we determine based on the positions being expressed in these statements? What claims are being made? And where does the attraction lie in making such claims?

In an attempt to answer these questions I first examine the value of the notion of myth as presented within each debate. Raymond William's polemic definitions are a useful point of departure but, as quickly becomes evident, the rhetoric of mythology is not so easily reduced to these neat binaries. Rather, myth emerges as a highly influential and contested form of historical legitimization. Relations of power and subjectification are also implicated in this discussion as myth provides a fundamental framework for reconciling the past with the present. The employment of myth as a conceptual category in each and every one of these publications suggests that myth as a form of discourse has the power to create social reality. My discussion of this term is meant to draw attention to the analytical structures that these meanings have come to produce. I also ask to what extent such uses of myth are structured by the perspective or position of the author. In what ways is the scholar imbricated in these discussions and at which junctures are these motives most transparent?

In the third section of this paper I investigate the influential power of positionality as a central component of these debates. Following Mannheim, I suggest that the authors' analytical arguments reflect their position in relation to this work. This positional identity is negotiated in a number of ways throughout these debates. At times, certain types of identities are espoused at advantageous times to either substantiate a claim or to refute the claims of others. As will be discussed, one's inclusion within, or exclusion from, an intellectual or cultural community often determines the kinds of claims that one can make regarding the history of others.

II. Summary of the Three Debates

The first debate that I will discuss was stimulated by the 1928 publication of Margaret Mead's book Coming of Age in Samoa. Under the advice of her graduate advisor Franz Boas, Mead conducted nine months of fieldwork on the island of Ta'u in Eastern Samoa. There she studied adolescent Samoan women in an attempt to discover the extent to which the subjective experience of development was culturally, rather than biologically, determined. She asked whether or not "the disturbances which vex our adolescents [are] due to the nature of adolescence itself or to the civilization? Under different conditions does adolescence present a different picture?" (Mead 1928, 10) Mead's observations revealed cultural practices that were radically different from those of the West. She found that differing familial organizations and attitudes toward sex produced individuals who were better adjusted, more responsible, and pleasantly complacent compared to their Western counterparts (Ibid, 154). Mead concluded that the Samoan culture was characterized by a "casual attitude towards life" which allowed for a "painless development from childhood to womanhood" (Ibid, 138). These discoveries she contrasts with claims that Western society "presents too many problems to her adolescents [and] demands too many momentous decisions on a few months' notice" (Ibid, 168). Mead concludes by suggesting that "adolescence is not a time of stress and strain but...cultural conditions make it so" (Ibid, 161).

In response, Derek Freeman published Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth in 1983 as a critique of Mead's

earlier work. During his initial trip to Western Samoa in 1940 Freeman was struck by cultural practices that appeared to be inconsistent with Mead's account. By the end of his stay in 1943, Freeman had committed himself to writing a "refutation of Mead's findings" through "the systematic testing of Mead's depiction of Samoan culture" (Freeman 1983, xiv). Freeman's account is devoted to refuting Mead's claims on the basis that she misinterpreted her observations and that she was purposely misled by Samoans to erroneous conclusions. Much of Freeman's book is dedicated to showing the way in which Mead used her fieldwork to substantiate the claims of Franz Boas for cultural determinism. Fixed on reestablishing the importance of biology in behavioral studies, Freeman's is a "scientific" approach in which he refutes Mead's claims by providing evidence against the role of culture in shaping the lives of Samoan girls. Freeman organizes these claims into individual chapters on topics of rank, competition, aggressive behavior and warfare, religion, punishment, etc., which he tries to show illustrate a "darker side" to the Samoan ethos, absent in Mead's work. He chiefly states that Samoan society constitutes a "decidedly stressful psychological environment" in which Mead's account would not be possible (Freeman 1983, 277).

The second debate to which I refer began two years after the publication of Freeman's work. In 1985 Marshall Sahlins published Islands of History, a more formal presentation of his earlier monograph Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom that he published in 1981. In his book Sahlins provides a structural account of the Hawaiian response to the arrival of Captain Cook during the Makahiki festival, a New Year

celebration for the God Lono. Sahlins interprets the deification and subsequent killing of Cook as a Hawaiian effort to cope with the anomalies of his appearance. Sahlins argues “people organize their projects and give significance to their objects from the existing understandings of the cultural order” to which extent “the culture is historically reproduced in action” (Sahlins 1985, vii). These efforts to reproduce the social order are subject to acts of “creativity” in which “meanings are revalued as they are practically enacted” (Ibid). By incorporating Cook into their cultural order, Hawaiians endeavored to make sense of their world on their own terms. Sahlins attempts to show that these creative negotiations evidence a “dual existence and interaction between the cultural order as constituted in the society and as lived by the people: structure in convention and in action, as virtual and as actual” (Ibid, ix).

Sahlins presented this position in a seminar at Princeton University in 1983 which was attended by psychological anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere. After hearing Sahlins speak Obeyesekere was unconvinced that the Hawaiians would have believed that Cook was actually their god Lono. Examining his Sri Lankan/South Asian experience he claimed that he could not find a parallel example between foreigners and Indians in their long history of contact (Obeyesekere 1992, 8). This observation led Obeyesekere to question whether the deification of Lono was a native myth or one constructed by Europeans to bolster Cook’s reputation. In response to Sahlins, Obeyesekere published The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific. He counters Sahlins’ structural account with his own theory of “practical rationality” in which individual actors “reflectively assess the

implications of a problem in terms of practical criteria” (Obeyesekere 1992, 19). A central feature of Obeyesekere’s argument is his claim to a greater familiarity with Hawaiian social dynamics than his Western opponent due to his own perspective as a “native”. This heightened awareness allows him greater insight into the Hawaiian condition and authorizes him to make valid cross-cultural comparisons with his own Sri Lankan experience. An equally important and pervasive component of Obeyesekere’s argument is his intention that this work be a memorial to his friend Wijedasa, a Sri Lankan taxi driver who was murdered for refusing to reveal the location of his son to would-be captors. In his name Obeyesekere writes to privilege the voices of those who, like Wijedasa, are at risk of being silenced by the “public acceptance of cultural violence” (Ibid, xx). It is within this context of terror that Obeyesekere attempts to reveal Cook as a prominent actor.

Initially, Sahlins did not feel it necessary to reply to Obeyesekere believing that reviewers would recognize “such a flimsy historical case” (Sahlins 1995, ix) and do the job for him. But when the American Society for Eighteenth Century Studies awarded Obeyesekere the Louis Gottschalk prize in 1992 Sahlins was spurred to action. He published How “Natives” Think: About Captain Cook For Example. In painstaking detail Sahlins refutes Obeyesekere’s criticisms utilizing his tremendous grasp of Hawaiian literature and history. Sahlins argues that Obeyesekere’s use of rationalism deprives Hawaiians of their “own good sense” and reduces their rich cultural history to a “pidgin ethnography” (Sahlins 1995, 197). In Obeyesekere’s universalizing view of practical rationality “Hawaiian people appear on the stage as

the dupes of European ideology. Deprived thus of agency and culture, their history is reduced to a classic meaninglessness: they lived and they suffered—and then they died” (Sahlins 1995, 198). Sahlins also likens Obeyesekere’s logic with that of Western Imperialism. By contrasting metaphor and reality Obeyesekere had tried to “give the ‘natives’ all that ‘rationality’ Western people had taken to be the highest form of thought, while endowing Europeans, including the outsider-anthropologists, with the kind of mindless repetition of myth they have always despised—that is, as ‘native’”(Ibid, 197). In reversing the values of the relationship between metaphor and reality, West and Rest, rational and irrational, Obeyesekere not only preserves but also endorses the distinction.

The last debate that I will reference here surrounds Roger M. Keesing’s 1989 article entitled ‘Creating the Past: Custom and Identity in the Contemporary Pacific’. He claims that Pacific peoples are fashioning versions of their pasts that are then being used as “powerful political symbols” (Keesing 1989, 19). These constructed accounts are “modern myths” that reference ancestral ways of life which Keesing claims “often bear little relation to those documented historically, recorded ethnographically, and reconstructed archaeologically—yet their symbolic power and political force are undeniable” (Ibid). Keesing attempts to show that this inaccuracy stems from a pan-Polynesian culture espoused by many Pacific scholars and students. These gross overgeneralizations are “idealized representations of a pre-colonial society deployed to assert common identity and to advance and legitimate political demands” (Ibid, 20). This usage, Keesing claims, fails to realize the extent to which Western involvement

in the Pacific has shaped the way the past is currently conceptualized. In making claims to the ancestral cultural traditions, Westernized Pacific elites impoverish their own history by unreflexively promoting those aspects that stand to position them best politically. Keesing concludes that accurate representations of the past can only be achieved through a more “radical Pacific discourse” that challenges current manifestations from the top down and the bottom up.

Keesing’s article was published in the first volume of “The Contemporary Pacific: A Journal of Island Affairs” in the Spring/Fall Edition of 1989. Yet the full development of the debate stimulated by Keesing was not made available until the 1991 Spring volume was released. At the forefront of the responses was Haunani-Kay Trask’s entitled “Natives and Anthropologists: The Colonial Struggle”. She contends that Keesing’s advocacy of “radicalism” is in response to the danger which mobilizing natives pose to threatened “agencies and actors who hold power over Hawaiian resources” (Trask 1991, 164). Trask interprets Keesing’s article in light of the Hawaiian situation and thus refutes his claims based on her intimate knowledge of the Hawaii case. Among Trask’s chief concerns is to show that Keesing does not take into account the voices of native scholars in his assertions nor has he closely looked at the claims being made by nationalist activists. He thus makes inaccurate statements regarding historical accounts for he does not have adequate command of the literature. Trask also takes issue with Keesing’s claim that cultural nationalists unnecessarily vilify anthropologists for profiting from the exploitation of other cultures. She provides evidence to show the various ways that Hawaiians have been victimized by

expansionist projects endorsed by anthropologists and completed by development agencies. Trask concludes in stating, “Keesing would do better to take a ‘radical’ look at the racism and arrogance of *his* culture which originated anthropology and its ‘search for the primitive’” (Ibid.).

III. Myth and History

There seems to be two conceptions of myth that are actively used in the current rhetoric of anthropology. As Raymond Williams illustrates in his Keywords, myth can, on the one hand, signify a “truer (deeper) reality than (secular) history or realistic description or scientific explanation” (Williams 1976, 212). This definition is due largely to the development of new intellectual approaches to history that acknowledge myth as an “active form of social organization” (Ibid, 211). On the other hand, myth has also been used to connote the exact opposite meaning as a “false (often deliberately false) belief or account” (Ibid). As Williams notes, myth “has been used negatively as a contrast to fact, history and science” (Ibid, 212). This definition was formed in response to the disintegration of orthodox religion and reflects both a disbelief in and suspicion of irrational accounts of human behavior. Due to the disparate nature of these meanings, myth emerges as a highly contested term used extensively in the three debates discussed here. The way in which the participants variously employ its usage reveals much regarding their positioning in respect to the subject matter at hand.

I have already touched on the contested meanings of myth as shown in the Sahlins/Obeyesekere debate. It is sufficient to reiterate here Obeyesekere’s preservation of the dual meanings of myth in his refutation of Sahlins. By reversing the ontological categories, Obeyesekere tries to recast Europeans as the illogical dupes and natives as rational superiors. In this, he shows that through mythmaking, Europeans were able to gain substantial power over the history of the Hawaiian

people. Paradoxically Obeyesekere thus dignifies Hawaiians with rational thought while at the same time relinquishing their traditional form of legitimization to Europeans. Because of this displacement, Obeyesekere received praise from at least one native scholar for “debunking the image of slavish natives worshipping at the feet of Cook” (Kame’eleihiwa 1994, 112). Yet Sahlins’ account was also positively reviewed by an equally renowned native scholar who attests to the success of his “cultural-cosmological analysis [in] illuminating oft-hidden forms of native meanings” (Trask 1985, 786). In order to make sense of these opposing assessments it will be necessary to take a closer look at Sahlins’ argument.

Sahlins famously uses the term *mythopraxis* to refer to “structures...that explicitly organize historical action as the projection of mythical relations” (Sahlins 1985, 54); in other words, the enacting of myth in reality. Here, the present is organized in terms of a past grounded in mythical models. According to Sahlins, the Hawaiian encounter with the West entailed a radical reconfiguring of cultural categories that was aided by the native employment of myth as a fundamental frame of reference. Perhaps Sahlins’ most successful demonstration of this schema is the discussion of Hawaiian eroticism in his “Ethnography of Love”.

In this chapter, Sahlins labors to show quite literally “the effect of sex was society” (Sahlins 1985, 23). From the time of Cook’s arrival, journal records recount the aggression with which Hawaiian women assailed English sailors with their sexual advances. Sahlins cites Beaglehole’s 1967 entry in which he claims they “used all their arts...to entice our people into their Houses...they endeavored to force them &

were so importunate they would absolutely take no denial” (Ibid, 2). This and many other accounts portray Hawaiian women as keenly set on obtaining intercourse with the foreigners even if achieving these goals entailed acts of aggression. Rather than glossing these sexual enterprises as mere prostitution, Sahlins attempts to show that Hawaiian women were acting out mythically reified conventions of hypergamy. Through a careful analysis of Hawaiian cosmology evinced in chant and hula, Sahlins constructs the political economy of Hawaii as one based on love or *aloha*. In this light, “love is the infrastructure” and “sexual conquests are a means to a variety of material advantages” (Ibid, 19). Thus when the British arrived, Hawaiian women were able to obtain material wealth through the enactment of love.

More than just ephemeral accumulation, Hawaiian women were benefiting sociologically by a privileged access to the divine through reproduction. Because, as Sahlins argues, the British were believed to be gods, Hawaiian women actively attracted and transformed the “divine generative forces into the substance of humanity in the form of children”(Ibid, 7). Because “every Hawaiian union recapitulates the original congress of male heavens and female earth” it follows that “what is born of chiefly parents is another god” (Ibid, 14). Thus, the practice of upward mobility by Hawaiian women is conducted in accordance with primordial concepts preserved in myth.

Sahlins’ analysis illustrates well the native use of indigenous cultural values in the face of radical change. He also shows that through the realization of myth in practice, autochthonous orders of meaning are preserved, extended, and revalued; thus

producing continuity in change (Robbins 2005, 3). These careful explications of transformation and development are the hallmark of Sahlins' theoretical contributions. By taking seriously the implications of preexisting cultural models, Sahlins is able to show that myths take on a durable reality when manifested in action. It seems that it is this aspect of Sahlins' writing that won him a positive review from Haunani-Kay Trask, one of Hawaii's most outspoken nationalist leaders, who raves, "Sahlins succeeds, most of the time" (Trask 1985, 784). She commends Sahlins for identifying the incompatibility of Western social science and traditional Polynesian beliefs:

They tend to explain cultural behavior as either saturated with some 'primitive' notion of self-interest *or* as inexplicably irrational.... but, in point of cultural fact, Sahlins argues, such behavior is part of a pattern throughout Polynesia, where history and cosmic ritual are woven of the same cloth (Ibid, 786).

Perhaps best known for her fierce opposition to American forms of governing and her active role in the Hawaiian sovereignty movement during the late 1980's, Trask has sought to promote and establish Hawaiian rights through her political involvement and her position in the Hawaiian Studies Department at UH Manoa. Trask's response to Sahlins reflects her own strong belief in the power of the past to shape the future. This belief also seems to motivate much of her criticism of Keesing's article regarding Pacific re-presentations of the past.

Keesing explicitly seeks to show contradictions in the process of political mythmaking by revealing the often conflicting usage of such symbols in both recapturing rights and denying them (Keesing 1989, 20). In his use of the term, *myth* stands for a version of the past that is being created in the present in opposition to an

authentic past, “the real ways of life that prevailed in the Pacific on the eve of European invasion” (Ibid, 25). Although Keesing claims that his task is neither to defend nor debunk current versions of the past, he actively uses the rhetoric of mythology to question the validity of contemporary attempts at history-making.

Throughout his article, myth is variously used to connote the many ways in which Pacific Islanders unknowingly sabotage their own forms of tradition and thus impoverish their cultural heritage. One of Keesing’s central examples of this tendency is his discussion of the “fetishization” of culture. Here he references the way in which a “dominant national population [can] impose its language and cultural tradition on minority groups while appearing to value and preserve minority cultures” (Ibid, 312). He claims that such acts lead to decontextualized versions of the past “preserved like specimens in a jar”(Ibid). Here he cites an example from Ecuador in which indigenous Indians are not allowed to participate in traditional cultural celebrations performed by Spanish-speaking mestizos in Indian costumes. Of this phenomenon, Keesing asks, “What greater alienation than watching those who dominate and rule you perform symbolically central elements of your cultural heritage: selling *your* culture?” (Ibid).¹ He claims that in Hawaii, cultural representations are myths constructed only to be sold and cater to the fantasies of tourists (Ibid, 32). Keesing recognizes the influential power of myth as a tool in identity formation and draws a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate claims to history.

¹ In his concluding notes Keesing acknowledges that “this same sense of alienation fuels hostility to anthropologists... [who] are imagined similarly to be appropriating and profiting from other people’s cultures” yet he dismissively suggests that “from the perspective of the culture of academe, this interpretation seems wildly inappropriate” (Keesing 1989, 39).

In a later review of his article Margaret Jolly deconstructs this dichotomy, showing subtle distinctions between authentic and inauthentic representations of the past that have pervaded some of the most influential essays by Western commentators. She draws on recent Pacific literature that tends to contrast “true tradition and the invented artifact, between culture as a way of life as “simply living” and culture as a reified symbol of a way of life, between tradition as a way of inheritance from ancestors and tradition as the manipulative rhetoric of contemporary politicians”(Jolly 1992, 49). By tracing the preservation of these distinctions Jolly suggests that their usage reifies a specter of inauthenticity, which unnecessarily discriminates between past and present. She prefers to view these differences as culturally embodied by individuals that occupy “differentially authentic sites in the present” (Ibid, 57).

Because there is no way of producing actual accounts of the past, Jolly suggests that the language of inauthenticity is not productive within anthropological discourse and argues for historical constructions to be relational. Here she means relational in the sense that the historical “situatedness” of Pacific peoples and of Western commentators *must* be understood in relation to one another. This recognition, she argues, should be made a central concern in all discourses about the Pacific. As Jolly shows, the language of authenticity is one chiefly employed to discredit historical accounts and therefore precludes any other productive contributions that these accounts might provide. The Mead/Freeman debate provides a strong example as to why this “specter of inauthenticity” should be carefully avoided.

In response to Margaret Mead, Derek Freeman explicitly attempts to reestablish Mead's observations regarding sexual politics and adolescent development in Samoa as a form of myth. He collapses the disparate meanings of myth that Williams alludes to, choosing instead the definition provided by Erik Erikson: "A myth blends historical fact and significant fiction in such a way that it 'rings true' to an area or era, causing pious wonderment and burning ambition" (Freeman 1983, 100). Here, myth is presented as a kind of illusion that has tremendous power to influence and motivate the individual. Freeman then discusses the way in which Mead's ethnography was itself a myth, constructed to tilt the favor of the intellectual community towards the side of cultural over biological determinism. He claims that she succeeds and in doing so, "the complete sovereignty of culture over biology was attested" and "duly incorporated into the literature of the social sciences" (Ibid, 101).

In calling Mead's conclusions "figments of anthropological myth" Freeman attempts to delegitimize her work based on evidence to the contrary. To do so he provides a number of problematic comparisons with his own research completed fifteen years after Mead made her initial field trip. To begin with, Freeman provides an alternate rendering of Samoan society as he saw it fifteen years after Mead made her initial field trip. Within this time span there is no way to account for significant cultural changes that could have taken place. He also conducted his research in Western Samoa, which he compares to Mead's work in Eastern Samoa. Although Freeman was assured by his informants that life in the eastern islands was essentially the same as in the western islands (Ibid, xiv), he provides no attempt to prove their

similarity or account for any cultural differences that may have complicated his comparison. Also disputable is Freeman's main accusation: that Mead was purposely fooled by her informants and provided false information regarding traditional practices. Freeman's insistence that Mead's ethnography is spurious does much to question the conclusions that could be drawn from her account alone. But Freeman also attempts to show that Mead's myth was productive of a number of institutional changes that should heretofore be reconsidered. Through his ethnography, Freeman attempts the literal rewriting of history and in doing so hopes to retroactively alter the institutional changes that Mead's conclusions brought about, mainly the privileging of cultural over biological approaches to behavioral studies.

Ironically, Freeman and Mead have very similar goals at the heart of their work. By elucidating the Samoan community's liberal approach toward adolescent development, Mead sought to establish Samoans as an exemplar of modern values and practices. This was a particularly important analytical departure from the racial stigma that existed regarding non-white natives whose biological make-up was considered inferior. Against the growing momentum of the eugenics movement, Mead put forth her account to show that social practices were culturally, rather than biologically, determined. For Mead, human beings should be seen as essentially different and these differences are productive of a number of novel traits. Freeman, on the other hand, labors to show that biologically all humans are the same. He attempts to show the pervasive similarities between Samoan and Western societies in order to draw conclusions based on a shared set of biological functions. Thus, both make arguments

for an egalitarian view of racial politics. However, their respective positional identities seem to overshadow these parallel ambitions. In a way, by attempting to delegitimize Mead's work, Freeman impoverishes the efficacy of his own. This discursive undermining cannot be adequately explained within the scope of Jolly's analytical framework. She shows that historical accounts must be conducted relationally but stops short of problematizing the nature of these inherent differences.

IV. Positioning and Identity

The work of Karl Mannheim usefully directs our attention to “positionality” as a main component of the cognitive disjunctures discussed above. Mannheim was ultimately concerned with the sociological concept of thought, the investigation of “not how thinking appears in textbooks on logic, but how it really functions in public life and in politics as an instrument of collective action”(Ibid, 1). The foundation of his inquiry is based on what he considered to be “one of the anomalies of our time”: cognitive processes involved in our decision-making that remain “unrecognized and therefore inaccessible to intellectual control” (Ibid). Mannheim’s central goal was to produce a suitable method for critically understanding and analyzing these inexact modes of thought. He terms this method the sociology of knowledge. Mannheim argues that modes of thought can only be fully understood within the context of their social origins. Thus, “in certain areas of historical-social knowledge it should be regarded as right and inevitable that a given finding should contain the traces of the position of the knower” (Ibid, 266).

Derek Freeman makes the persistence of this positionality a central component in his critique of Mead. Throughout his book, Freeman personally attacks Mead in regards to what he viewed as her professional inadequacies. Bonnie Nardi argues that Freeman targeted Mead specifically because she is a woman. Cloaked in the guise of “scientific and rational criticism”, Freeman’s caustic response is his attempt to “discredit a woman who pioneered in intellectual and sexual freedom for women and to convince the world that the society thought to be sexually freest for women actually

represses, brutalizes, and rapes women more than any society on earth”(Nardi 1984, 327). What Nardi finds most frustrating is Freeman’s depiction of Mead as an “impossibly gullible” girl whose “opinions are of little more weight than the ‘heresay information’ of her girl informants””(Ibid, 329). Freeman, on the other hand, is “confident in his male supremacy” and knows that no one will “attempt to dismiss his youthful ideas as so much boyish foolishness”(Ibid, 333). Whether or not Freeman consciously sought to undermine the import of Mead’s work as a feminist project, the language of his argument suggests that he values himself differently in relation to Mead as a scholar. Aside from providing empirical evidence to disprove Mead’s theories, Freeman also maligns Mead for being too young and inexperienced to conduct the kind of rigorous ethnography that he is capable of. In contrast, Freeman presents himself as an older, wiser scholar whose work, based on hard facts and empirically derived evidence, represent the very tenets of scientific rigor for which he stands. In scoping their positional identities in this way, Freeman embodies the victory that he wishes to see over Mead and other adherents of cultural determinism. As Freeman’s argument suggests, the discourse of anthropological authority is complicated by the fact that statements regarding who can speak for whom are often based on criteria that explicitly or implicitly exclude others.

Implicated in the politics of this exclusion is the subject and his/her “perspective” which Mannheim claims is formed in relation to existential factors that definitively determine the extent of the subject’s experience and observation:

Perspective, therefore, is something more than a merely formal determination of thinking. It refers also to qualitative elements in the

structure of thought, elements which must necessarily be overlooked by a purely formal logic. It is precisely these factors which are responsible for the fact that two persons, even if they apply the same formal-logical rules.... may judge the same object very differently (Ibid, 244).

To illustrate his point, Mannheim distinguishes between intellectually homogenous vs. intellectually heterogeneous social groupings. He suggests that in intellectual antagonisms between these groups, the recognition of individual differences must be suspended in order to discuss the subject at hand. That is, when cognitive structures of both sides differ, they will speak as if “their differences were confined to the specific question at issue (Ibid, 251). In doing so, each side must overlook the fact that “their antagonist differs from him in his whole outlook, and not merely in his opinion about the point under discussion”. It seems, however, that this type of intellectual discourse is untenable in the debates discussed here. Both the Sahlins/Obeyesekere and the Keesing/Trask debates provide fertile ground for a discussion of positionality in regards to social context and identity formation. Their development similarly involves native vs. non-native claims to representative rights.

In his commentary on the Sahlins/Obeyesekere debate, Robert Borofsky asks what one needs to know in order to possess the authority to claim insight into the history of others. As he points out, both Sahlins and Obeyesekere have specific knowledge sets that substantiate their academic assertions:

Obeyesekere feels that he can understand earlier Hawaiians through an intensive examination of the ethnohistorical sources as well as through his Sri Lankan experiences. Sahlins feels he can understand them from more than two decades of ethnohistorical investigation (Borofsky 1997, 263).

Although Obeyesekere's familiarity with the Pacific may not be as extensive as Sahlins', as a native Sri Lankan he identifies with Pacific Islanders and draws from this cultural knowledge extensively in his arguments. Sahlins, on the other hand, has spent considerable time in the Pacific and has an intimate knowledge of Pacific history and culture. These different positions have been formed within a broader context of academic discourse and empower these respective opponents with parallel claims to representative power. Linnekin has argued that it was anthropologists who first established a "narrative authority" to speak about the lives of Pacific peoples for they were the first to recognize "culture" as such (Linnekin 1992: 249). In doing so, anthropologists discursively constructed Oceania as a stronghold of 'culture', replete with an extensively documented descriptive record. Subsequently, the right of Western anthropologists to speak for others has been challenged by the proliferation of texts by indigenous scholars who have found such representations both intrusive and inaccurate.

Anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa has emphasized the importance of recapturing, and in some cases redefining, a Pacific identity for island nations whose histories were previously handed to them by outsiders. Born of Tongan missionary parents, Hau'ofa was raised in Papua New Guinea and educated at a number of institutions throughout Oceania before completing his PhD. at Australian National University. Now a professor at University of the South Pacific, Hau'ofa draws on his intimate knowledge of the islands to advocate the conservation and protection of indigenous forms of cultural heritage. He has argued that Pacific Islanders share a regional identity

through the common inheritance of the waters of the Pacific Ocean (Hau'ofa 1998, 2000). He believes that one of the chief employments of islanders today should be to “meditate upon their histories, environments, traditions, and their contemporary situations to find inspiration for their creative cultural productivity”(Hau'ofa 2000, 34). Furthermore he urges that the best way of safeguarding this heritage “is not to reproduce them, but to build on them and create new heritage for the future”. Hau'ofa suggests that now is a pivotal time for islanders everywhere to reassert themselves as both present and united. Now more than ever, Western anthropologists must compete for authority with native scholars.

This is a battle that Trask eagerly takes up in her refutation of Keesing's article which she calls “a gem of academic colonialism”(Trask 1991, 159). Trask's main conflict with Keesing's work is that he identifies historical inaccuracies that she, and by extension other Hawaiians, do not find problematic. In attesting to a gross fabrication of Hawaiian traditional practices, Keesing fails to supply adequate proof to impugn native nationalists on these charges. Keesing urges that a “more radical” and “deeply reflexive” (Keesing 1989, 37) Pacific discourse will “liberate us” from our past; choosing to view the paths of islanders and Westerners as intimately bound within the historical record. In response Trask replies, “What do you mean “us”, white man?” (Trask 1991, 160)

Trask's language is also a tool of exclusion. She specifically employs Hawaiian terms to demonstrate the exclusivity of her Hawaiian knowledge. *Haole* is a slang term commonly used by Hawaiian locals to refer to white non-natives. The term

is widely considered to be offensive and is often employed as a term of abuse. Here, Trask directly implicates Keesing himself, claiming that he continues a long line of *maha'oi haole* or “rude, intrusive white people who go where they do not belong”(Ibid). Trask distinguishes between “haole” academics and Native scholars to show that Keesing willfully ignores the latter in preference of histories that have been constructed from without rather than from within. She attempts to show that the lack of native voices in Keesing’s argument is evidence that Keesing’s information is not at all based on the statements or actions of Native nationalists.

What is surprising to note here is that in Keesing’s reply he does not dismiss Trask’s claims to authenticity but rather seeks to establish his own. To this end he cites other examples in which he in his own writing has taken a stance similar to Trask’s regarding the devastation brought by European advancement, including the dispossession of native cultures. He attempts to show his competence in this material referencing his current work with a “genuine Pacific sage” in Malaita, whose oral tradition is being saved from destruction through Keesing’s own cultural heritage project. He even establishes his belonging to a highly respected lineage of Methodist missionaries through his great-great-grandfather Thomas Jaggar whose memory, Keesing claims, is revered by Fijian villagers who continue to tend his grave.

Keesing’s concern to self-identify as a legitimate Pacific scholar, as well as Trask’s attempts to prove the opposite, suggest that subjective positionalities have much to do with interpretations of the past. In turn these positionalities undermine the academic pursuit of objectivity, which Jonathan Friedman has suggested is constructed

within an equally definitive context. In his ‘Myth, History, and Political Identity’ Friedman shows that an “objectivist history is produced in the context of a certain kind of selfhood, one that is based on the radical separation of the subject from any particular identity, and which objectifies and textualizes reality”(Friedman 1992, 194). Such a project leads to a “truth-value representation of the past that is implicitly intolerant of anything that appears to distort the historical record ‘as it really happened.’” Recently, anthropologists have had to reckon with the political implications of this form of objectivism as peoples who were formerly spoken for have begun to define themselves in their struggles for autonomy.

Obeyesekere directly inserts himself into the politics of this discourse by aligning himself with Hawaiians as a native Islander. Offended by what he deemed to be Sahlins’ marginalizing interpretation of Cook’s arrival, Obeyesekere reinterprets the event through the integration of his own cultural knowledge. One such instantiation is his critique of Western misunderstandings of native *tropes*. He claims that Sahlins’ misinterpretation of “Hawaiian myths of the white man” result in inaccurate literalizations of the trope (Obeyesekere 1992, 173).

As a parallel example, Obeyesekere presents a story from his past. He reminisces that as a child he and many of his fellow Sri Lankans would occasionally sing songs about the trains as they passed by their houses in Colombo. The first song he recounts likens the train to an iron demon that eats coal and drinks water. Here, the words meaningfully allude to the physically visualized function of the train. Yet, the song was always regarded humorously for the train is clearly not a demon even if the

text suggests otherwise. In the second song the words mean very little but their utterance is onomatopoeic with the chugging of the train as it slowly passes. In this case, these words could have been replaced with others and the effect would have remained the same. These two separate uses of language illustrate the situational context of meaning which Obeyesekere claims can easily become misconstrued by those who are unfamiliar with native tropes. Although villagers might find these habits comical, historians could misread the parodic nature of such utterances.

Obeyesekere argues that the problem endemic to ethnography is the inability of outsiders to recognize subtle nuances that are context specific. “This context of utterance,” he claims, “though confined to the bounds of a speech community, can be very stable but it can also as often become fluid, shifting ground according to time, place, and history”(Ibid, 175). Thus, minute cultural distinctions can greatly influence the way one interprets certain forms of indigenous knowledge. It then follows that only the native is able to render such interpretations accurately.

As I have shown, these debates demonstrate the way in which groups of individuals construct knowledge claims based on their ability to invoke a particular kind of identity that will place them within the intellectually dominant sphere. This is one of the topics addressed by Ivan Brady in a 1983 special section of *American Anthropologist* dedicated to revisiting the Mead/Freeman debate after the period of its initial popularity. Channeling Michel de Certeau, Brady asks how anthropologists “get to know what they know in the first place— how they authorize themselves to ... ‘speak in the name of the ‘real’” (Brady 1983, 908). Here it seems that the competing

identities of Mead/Freeman, Sahlins/Obeyesekere, and Keesing/Trask only serve to complicate this question. Furthermore, their hybrid positionalities (female/native, female/non-native, male/native, male/non-native, etc.) extend the implications of their arguments beyond the scope of the debates at hand, imbricating them in a diverse range of discourses initially unimagined (feminist, political, nationalist, etc.). Thus, a single publication can refract in a number of ways, splintering into new avenues of possibility or fortifying existing lines of intellectual inquiry.

In this section we have seen the positions of the authors break down in terms of the groups with which they most strongly identify. Here, these arguments fracture along the lines of gender, culture, and theoretical adherence. Following Anderson we can understand these groupings as ‘imagined communities’. I extend this meaning to categories other than nationalism but preserve Anderson’s use of the term “community” to mean that “regardless of the actual inequality that may prevail in each, the [group] is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson, 7). This virtual homogeneity creates a totalizing view of such communities, the borders of which only reveal themselves once they have been transgressed. Trask is thus able to agree with Sahlins’ theoretical treatment of Hawaiians but once he makes claims regarding the social permeability of the Hawaiian community she is quick to reprimand his interpretive liberty. She is also able to use her Hawaiian identity to argue against Keesing, effectively ‘othering’ him as a non-native outsider while engaging him as an academic colleague. Such cleavages suggest that intellectual communities are never clean-cut but are constantly being redefined.

V. Conclusion

For Hawaii, the arrival of Cook has come to represent a definitive break in history at which point the past can no longer be considered “traditional”. Sahlins and Obeyesekere critically engage the documentation of this period, pulling apart these narratives in hopes that they will reveal the sequence of events that first introduced Hawaii into the modern era². Cook’s arrival set in motion many processes that would alter the trajectory of Hawaiian futures in ways that could not have been predicted at the time. The strategies with which Hawaiians initially faced these changes have been discussed at length throughout this paper and I suggest that the interpretations given by Sahlins and Obeyesekere reveal the kinds of strategies that each sought to invest Hawaiians with.

Sahlins’ structural account privileges Hawaiian ways of dealing with cultural change on their own terms. He scopes the actions of the Hawaiians as instances of creative negotiation in which mythical orders were reified through their enactment. In this way, Sahlins gives agency to ancient Hawaiians whose cultural heritage was continually asserted even in the face of totalizing change. His analysis takes seriously the cultural specificity of Hawaiian strategies and seems to suggest that traditional forms of knowing will figure prominently in the modernization of Hawaiians. He

² In using the term modern I mean to reference what has variously been referred to as the Western modern, which encompasses new ideas regarding subjectivity, social formations, and worldviews. All of these changes have been exported from the West along with technological, scientific, and industrial developments. Rofel has argued that negotiating the modern imbricates local and global structures in site-specific reconfigurations. These developments generate “consequential struggles because people living in heterogeneous circumstances have been pulled into a ‘worlding’ [process]”(Rofel, 13). Taylor describes such a force as successive waves “which flow over and engulf one tradition after another”(Taylor, 162). He thus speaks of “alternate modernities” which require people to find “resources in their traditional culture which, modified and transposed, will enable them to take on new practices” (Ibid.).

paints a picture of continuity in change in which indigenous cultural values will gain, rather than lose, their efficacy as people work to preserve and extend these meanings into the future. These conclusions point to a cultural approach to modernity in which the Hawaiians were able to reinterpret certain aspects of their culture based on a new understanding that such alterations were indeed possible and necessary. Thus, Sahlins' constructs a trajectory in which the Hawaiian ethos is central to Hawaiian engagement with the persistent waves of modernity.

Obeyesekere, on the other hand, interprets these Hawaiian strategies in terms of the traits that will best prepare them for the cognitive and social transformations associated with modernization. By arguing for "practical rationality" he attempts to position Hawaiians as already modern and free from the kind of traditional constraints that would impede their progress. Here, Obeyesekere attempts to align European and Hawaiian pragmatics to show that their similarity amounts to an equality of mental capacity. Obeyesekere's emphasis on transcultural aspects of Hawaiian thought rather than on its culture-specific qualities suggests that he seeks to make a case for all natives regarding their association with modernity. By suggesting that natives are *already* modern on Western terms, he denies the existence of any need to conform in the face of change.

The ethnographies of Margaret Mead and Derek Freeman exemplify the politics involved in subsequent interpellations of the island "other". Questions regarding how and through what lens natives were to be understood figured prominently in discussions of what role anthropology was to play in the historicizing

of the Pacific region. As Antony Hooper suggests, the descriptive record of Oceania “contributed significantly to the acceptance of culture... as an attribute of all people”(Hooper 2000, 6). He contrasts this new understanding of culture with the German or French “high culture”, which was understood to belong to only a privileged few. But as the Mead/Freeman debate shows, the terms upon which anthropologists engage native communities are themselves highly contested, leading to new definitions of culture and identity.

Holston has suggested that these renderings represent concerted efforts to familiarize the unfamiliar through “description, classification, and interpretation” (Holston 1989, 6). Such an enterprise also supposes a complement, “that the familiarization of the strange will defamiliarize the familiar by breaking it open to new and unexpected possibilities”(Ibid.). Mead’s ethnography illustrates this point well. By drawing conclusions based on the adolescent experience in Samoan society she labored to show that the transition into womanhood was not a universally difficult experience. She argued that Western strategies of childrearing were actually responsible for much of the hardship associated with female adolescence. In contrast, the Samoan experience reveals cultural norms that function to ease the growing pains of young women as they sexually mature.

Mead’s success in promoting a cultural model for understanding these differences amounted to what Freeman considered “a triumphant outcome for believers in the sovereignty of culture” (Freeman 1983, xii). As a strong adherent of biological determinism, Freeman was unsatisfied with the institutional changes that

Mead's success brought about. He attempts to retroactively delegitimize the foundation on which these changes were based by painstakingly refuting the validity of Mead's ethnography as a myth. Much in the same way that Obeyesekere presents "practical rationality" as a method superior to Sahlin's structuralism, Freeman tries to show that biological, rather than cultural, analysis is a more accurate way to measure societal difference. By implying that Mead's theoretical beliefs and gender make her less of an anthropologist Freeman is able to argue that his own stature as both male and a scientist make him, and by extension biological determinism, superior.

Culture, however, is of central concern in the Keesing/Trask debate. These two articles are examples of the recent proliferation of scholarly work that has centered on issues regarding tradition, nationalism, and identity. They represent concerted efforts from both sides of the ethnic divide to come to terms with contemporary notions of culture. Keesing writes in response to what he perceives as the unwarranted use of indigenous history to legitimate the political goals of modern Pacific politicians.

Keesing suspects that these concepts of historical entitlement give rise to inauthentic constructions of tradition that in turn generate influential power of their own. He is careful to show, however, that previous and existing forms of domination inherently influence such constructions. Keesing argues that past colonial encounters dictate the models on which Pacific Islanders base their conceptual structures. The dominated, he suggests, "must internalize the premises and categories of the dominant; in part because the discourse of domination creates the *objective*, institutional realities

within which struggles must be fought; and in part, because it defines the semiology through which claims to power must be expressed” (Keesing 1989, 23). Here, he attempts to show that colonized natives unconsciously accept these terms because they have no other recourse for communicating their needs but through a decidedly counterhegemonic discourse. Benjamin’s Angel of History provides an apt parable for Keesing’s description of the native as caught in the throes of “technology, progress, materialism and development”(Ibid.):

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.³

In response, Trask enumerates the ways in which island natives have constructed their own versions of culture and tradition, effectively recapturing the descriptive privilege to define native identity on their own terms. Trask argues that a rich cultural history both orients Hawaiians and gives them the power to shape the course of the future. In her words, “the Hawaiian stands firmly in the present, with his back to the future, and his eyes fixed upon the past, seeking historical answers for present-day dilemmas”(Trask 1991, 260). Like Benjamin’s angel, Hawaiians’ backs also face the future but their native identities provide a strong trajectory that will keep them on course. Her statements along with those of Sahlins present a strong argument for the persistence of culture as a driving force in the politics of representation.

³ As cited by Benedict Anderson 1983 (2006) pages 161-162.

Anthropological work conducted in the Pacific region has done much to determine the initial trajectory of its intellectual inquiry. The three debates discussed here represent pivotal moments in this discursive legacy and signify important conjunctures where scholars have dictated the terms upon which Oceania has been historically evaluated. In this paper I have analyzed the contributions that each of these publications has made to a growing understanding of Pacific history and history-making. In doing so I hope to have contributed new insight into the ways in which different positional identities are expressed through the production of critical discourse. In addition I hope to have drawn attention to the contested nature of historical representation and the dynamics of power and exclusion involved therein.

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