



How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook, For Example

By Marshall Sahlins

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When Western scholars write about non-Western societies, do they inevitably perpetuate the myths of European imperialism? Can they ever articulate the meanings and logics of non-Western peoples? Who has the right to speak for whom? Questions such as these are among the most hotly debated in contemporary intellectual life. In *How "Natives" Think*, Marshall Sahlins addresses these issues head on, while building a powerful case for the ability of anthropologists working in the Western tradition to understand other cultures.

In recent years, these questions have arisen in debates over the death and deification of Captain James Cook on Hawai'i Island in 1779. Did the Hawaiians truly receive Cook as a manifestation of their own god Lono? Or were they too pragmatic, too worldly-wise to accept the foreigner as a god? Moreover, can a "non-native" scholar give voice to a "native" point of view? In his 1992 book *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook*, Gananath Obeyesekere used this very issue to attack Sahlins's decades of scholarship on Hawaii. Accusing Sahlins of elementary mistakes of fact and logic, even of intentional distortion, Obeyesekere portrayed Sahlins as accepting a naive, ethnocentric idea of superiority of the white man over "natives"—Hawaiian and otherwise. Claiming that his own Sri Lankan heritage gave him privileged access to the Polynesian native perspective, Obeyesekere contended that Hawaiians were actually pragmatists too rational and sensible to mistake Cook for a god.

Curiously then, as Sahlins shows, Obeyesekere turns eighteenth-century Hawaiians into twentieth-century modern Europeans, living up to the highest Western standards of "practical rationality." By contrast, Western scholars are turned into classic custom-bound "natives", endlessly repeating their ancestral traditions of the White man's superiority by insisting Cook was taken for a god. But this inverted ethnocentrism can only be supported, as Sahlins demonstrates, through wholesale fabrications of Hawaiian ethnography and history—not to mention Obeyesekere's sustained misrepresentations of Sahlins's own work. And in the end, although he claims to be speaking on behalf of the "natives," Obeyesekere, by substituting a home-made "rationality" for Hawaiian culture,

systematically eliminates the voices of Hawaiian people from their own history.

How "Natives" Think goes far beyond specialized debates about the alleged superiority of Western traditions. The culmination of Sahlins's ethnohistorical research on Hawaii, it is a reaffirmation for understanding difference.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

On its face, this appears to be a rebuttal of Gananath Obeyesekere's *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook* (Princeton Univ. Pr., 1992), which was in turn an attempt at refuting Sahlins's earlier explorations of the manner in which the native Hawaiians deified Capt. James Cook in 1779. In actuality, however, it is far more than that. This book is something of an apotheosis in its own right: a peroration on anthropology's responsibility to commit fully to appreciating other cultures' fundamentally different ways of organizing human experience. It provides a sustained theoretical exegesis that will be admired, if not necessarily subscribed to, by all who are engaged in the comparative study of societies, and it may in time prove to be the crowning achievement of one of contemporary anthropology's greatest thinkers and most perspicacious scholars. For academic collections. —Glenn Petersen, Baruch Coll. & Graduate Ctr., CUNY

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From the Back Cover

Dubbed as one of the 'Year's Best' by the *Voice* Literary Supplement, *How 'Natives' Think* goes far beyond specialized debates about the alleged superiority of Western traditions. It is a brilliant demonstration of how to do anthropology by one of the discipline's most powerful minds.

About the Author

Marshall Sahlins is the Charles F. Grey Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the University of Chicago. The author of numerous books, Sahlins is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a member of the National Academy of Sciences.

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Ruth Jones:

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