

The debate about the myth of apotheosis history essay



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One of the most famous and defining anthropological debates concerns the death of Captain James Cook, the British discoverer of Hawaii and the eastern Australian coast. The discourse surrounding his death is associated with the understanding of religious rituals and historical events. In this essay, I will analyse the anthropological argument: whether the Hawaiian natives took Captain Cook as their returning god Lono, or whether this may have been apotheosis according to the European myth model.

Captain Cook led the English exploration ship 'Resolution' and came to Hawaii on January 17, 1779. He died at the hands of the native Hawaiians on February 14, 1779 (Beaglehole 1974, p21).

For many reasons, perhaps due to his fame and twentieth century post-colonial discourse, the interpretation of the death of Captain Cook has led to a rich debate between two anthropologists, Marshall Sahlins and Gananath Obeyesekere. It concerns the supposed apotheosis of Hawaii's discoverer, Captain James Cook. The debate has become famous, and to some extent notorious, in the field of anthropology. A similar debate about apotheosis has a precedent in the discoverer of Mexico, Hernan Cortes, who was taken for the returning god QuetzalCoatl, according to records. (Beaglehole, 1974, p15).

On one side of the academic argument, Sahlins discusses how Cook's death fits within the Hawaiians' Makahiki calendrical rituals: Cook is known as the returning god Lono and his life must be ritually claimed by Chief Kalaniopuu, who in turn is known as Lono's rival god, Ku. Sahlin uses Cook's death to

showcase his structural understanding of culturally-attached historical processes (Sahlins, 1981, p71).

On the other side of the debate, Obeyesekere questions Sahlins's analysis: the historical sources used were taken at face value and their credibility was not completely checked (Obeyesekere, 1992, p66-67). Obeyesekere goes further: Cook's death was accidental (Obeyesekere, 1992, p20).

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One of the most important points where the Sahlins-Obeyesekere debate appears to be important is the question of Captain Cook's apotheosis by the native Hawaiians. Obeyesekere sees a difference between 'apotheosis' (which he defines as "a European myth of white man taken as a god by natives"), and 'deification': "a Hawaiian custom in which a dead chief is conferred a god status" (Obeyesekere, 1992, p91).

Obeyesekere questions the apotheosis of Captain Cook as an accepted fact. In his opinion, the apotheosis is a mystification which he attributes to the European imagination of the eighteenth century. His hypothesis is based on the myth models "pertaining to the redoubtable explorer cum civiliser who is a god to the natives" (Obeyesekere 1992, p3). Obeyesekere claims that it was the Europeans who created the 'European god for the natives', therefore forging a myth of victory, imperialism and civilisation (Obeyesekere, 1992, p3).

Central to the analysis of the debate is Obeyesekere's hypothesis that Captain Cook's apotheosis is a misleading interpretation of European origin

and not a Hawaiian-sourced myth as Sahlins claims. For the purpose of this examination, Obeyesekere's myth model is re-defined as: a European discoverer, who according European eighteenth century beliefs, is seen as 'a god for the natives'. The myth model proposed by Obeyesekere is tested against the asserted apotheosis of Mexico's discoverer, Hernando Cortes.

The apotheosis of Cortes has not been found to be a historical fact, but, as Obeyesekere suggests, a confusion of similarity between the discoverer and the Aztecs (Hough, 1995, p88). Certain ethnic groups of Mexico, especially those groups who spoke the Nahuatl language and who ruled large parts of Mesoamerica in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, the late period in Mesoamerican chronology, were known as the Aztecs. This confusion was formulated by European beliefs in a cultural model of followers of Christianity which began with the Crusades (Sahlins, 1981, p98).

Captain Cook as the god Lono

Much of the debate of Captain Cook's apotheosis seems to come from being called 'Lono', the name of one of the chief gods in the Hawaiian temple. The problem posed by Cook's classification as Lono is fundamental to the alternative interpretation suggested by Obeyesekere, which suppresses Sahlins's hypothesis on Captain Cook's apotheosis (Sahlins, 1981, p99).

Cook's name 'Lono' is related to a variety of circumstances, the most unlikely being Hawaii's political crisis at the time of Cook's arrival and the potential need to give him a status that would guarantee his bond in Hawaiian warfare (Obeyesekere, 1992, p75). Obeyesekere finds proof in the ship's journals that Cook was identified as a human being rather than a god: <https://assignbuster.com/the-debate-about-the-myth-of-apotheosis-history-essay/>

the ship's officers acknowledge that Lono is a name given to other highly placed people (Obeyesekere, 1992, p76). For this reason many had interpreted Lono as a title, when truly it is a title (Sahlins, 1989, p386).

According to Sahlins, Cook was called Lono as, in the natives' conception, he was known as a representation of the god Lono who had returned with the Makahiki (Sahlins, 1989, p387). On the other hand, Obeyesekere's hypothesis suggests that Cook was first introduced to the Hawaiian gods, and had to accept the rituals administered in the Hikiau spirit (for the god Ku, the king's god). Then, and only then, he is given the name Lono.

Obeyesekere uses the ship's account which details that Cook and two of his highly trained officers, King and Baily, were blessed with coconuts, and fed pork and kava. This part of the ceremony indicates that the Englishmen were introduced into the Hawaiian gods' rituals. The submission, the chants of ' O Lono' and the red clothing with which he was presented, shows that Cook had been given honours usually accorded to chiefs of the highest status and mana. Therefore, in Hawaiian society, Cook was certainly made a high ranking chief named after Lono. (Obeyesekere, 1992, p84-89).

Sahlins vs. Obeyesekere and the notion of god

One truly complex and mysterious area is how the Hawaiians communicated with the mythical: for what reasons they had their beliefs, or religion, including cosmology and a cosmogony. This complication arises from the debate of Captain Cook's dubious ceremonial death and apotheosis as Lono.

However, Sahlins and Obeyesekere's controversial debate on Cook's

apotheosis, and whether he was classified as a god before or after his death, <https://assignbuster.com/the-debate-about-the-myth-of-apotheosis-history-essay/>

is truly dependent on those academics as individuals and their socio-cultural contexts.

In How ' Natives' Think, Sahlins's introduction (Sahlins, 1995, p5) and conclusion (Sahlins, 1995, p192-193) shows a clear purpose to denigrate Obeyesekere's work by accusing him of invoking his native experience as a Sri Lankan, therefore claiming a benefit over the ' outsider-anthropologist'.

On one side of the debate about Cook's death lies Gananath Obeyesekere, an Emeritus Professor of Anthropology who has an impressive academic background. On the other side, is Marshall Sahlins, a prominent American anthropologist due to both his academic and ethnic background.

Sahlins has a monotheistic background when interpreting religious arguments in anthropology. Monotheism, one god detached from humans and nature, is the outlook that has been absorbed mentally into Western cultures, standardised and recorded during two thousand years (Campbell, 1972, p8). Any indication of pantheistic or polytheistic religions and beliefs has been removed from Europe and the Western world. People's suspicion of engaging in ' idolatry' and ' witchcraft' or any form of ' paganism' has led to individuals being exiled, hung, burned or prosecuted by official ' religious' authority. For this reason, it is doubtful that Sahlins's view of god would be free from the traditional Judeo-Christian-Muslim paternal idea, which is so strongly defined in the word ' God.'

At the same time, the East has made achievements in preserving many of their pantheistic and polytheistic traditions. This is against the background of the expansionistic aims of Christian ideologies towards different religious

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beliefs. Proselytising missions have taken place around the world since the Crusades. Obeyesekere, in being exposed to a multiplicity of pantheistic, polytheistic and even monotheistic religions as a Sri Lankan, has a better and more natural chance to try to understand and interpret a pantheo-polytheistic cosmology of a pre-literate society such as the Hawaiian.

As Weiss (1996, p15) has hinted, “ the religious convictions that one does hold are clearly the consequence of the culture in which one is raised, since it is the culture that provides the religious ideas that will be accepted, certainly by the majority.” In this sense, it is beneficial to Obeyesekere, as an anthropologist native to South Asia, culturally adept in multiple pantheistic, polytheistic and monotheistic views of the word ‘ god.’ Therefore, it is reasonable to think that his interpretations (Obeyesekere 1992, p21-22) on Cook’s apotheosis and classification as Lono result from his knowledge and first-hand experience of his native culture.

Conclusion

Gananath Obeyesekere’s theory (1992, p3), which claims that the apotheosis of Captain Cook is confusion largely ascribed to the European imagination of the eighteenth century is persuasive. European mystification may not be a result of the eighteenth century world view as such. This is because it seems to be directly based on earlier models of ‘ explorer cum civilizer’ which come from the Crusades and reached its apex with Cortes, as evidenced by Sahagun’s history. Accordingly, Obeyesekere’s affirmation that the myth model of victory and civilisation is a European myth (Obeyesekere, 1992, p3-8), is a reasonable interpretation of the apotheosis of Captain Cook, and is

found within contemporary texts. Under this analysis, Captain Cook's apotheosis is not the Hawaiian fundamental myth that Sahlins has suggested (1995, p52).