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Comparing and Explaining Different Cultures
The Case of Captain Cook

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to reconsider the problem of comparing and explaining different cultures or their aspects under concepts of rationality. In doing so, I shall examine the controversy between two cultural anthropologists: Marshall Sahlins and Gananath Obeyesekere.

In some of his works, Sahlins claims that eighteenth century Hawaiians regarded Captain James Cook as one of their gods Lono.[1] This shows, according to Sahlins, that people in different cultures have different conceptual schemes and that these different conceptual schemes also embody different criteria of rationality. Obeyesekere criticizes Sahlins for being trapped in European mythmaking and for treating the Hawaiians as irrational. In Obeyesekere's view, human beings share a common practical rationality based in neurobiological nature. Obeyesekere tries to refute Sahlins's relativist view and claims that the Hawaiians regarded Cook as a chief. Sahlins counter-attacks Obeyesekere for his acceptance of Western views and for treating the Hawaiians as modern Europeans.

Following Ian C. Jarvie and Joseph Agassi, I shall argue that both Sahlins and Obeyesekere ignore the possibility of degrees of rationality. If we admit that there are degrees of rationality, then both Westerners and indigenes can be more rational in some cases and less

1. Sahlins, "The Apotheosis of Captain Cook"; *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities; Islands of History.*

rational in other cases. Hence we cannot draw a hard and fast line between Westerners and indigenes, as does Sahlins. But, at the same time, we need not appeal to a common biological nature, as does Obeyesekere. To make my case, I shall scrutinize an example that Sahlins raises: the Japanese Emperor.

2. Sahlins's Explanation of the Advent of Cook

Before discussing Sahlins's explanation of the advent of Cook, it would be helpful to summarize Sahlins's structural anthropology. Following Ferdinand de Saussure (and the later Wittgenstein, perhaps), Sahlins argues that cultural schemes are based in our language, and a language as a tool of categorization defines how we can perceive the world. According to Sahlins, different cultures have different ways of perceiving and categorizing the world. Hence he formulates the following slogan: "[d]ifferent cultures, different rationalities."[2] From this, we can discern that Sahlins supports cultural relativism.

From this perspective, Sahlins contends that eighteenth century Hawaiians regarded Captain James Cook as one of their gods Lono when his ships, the *Discovery* and the *Resolution*, arrived at the Hawaii Islands on January 17th, 1779. They welcomed Captain Cook and his crew. In Sahlins's opinion, the main reason Cook was regarded as their god is that his arrival coincided with a festival called Makahiki. This festival was supposed to celebrate the return of the god Lono. Hence the Hawaiians took the advent of Cook as the return of Lono. From Sahlins's point of view, the Hawaiians employed their conceptual scheme to interpret the advent of Cook.

Now, at the end of Makahiki, that is, on February 3rd, Captain Cook and his two ships left Hawaii. However, because of problems with the *Resolution*'s mast, Cook had to return to Hawaii on February 11th, after the period of Makahiki. The Hawaiians were not happy about the return of Cook. In Sahlins's view, they thought that Cook as Lono was not supposed to return to Hawaii until the beginning of

2 Sahlins, *How "Natives" Think*, 14.

the next Makahiki. Sahlins explains as follows:

> In the mythopolitical crisis occasioned by Lono's inexplicable return, the tensions and ambivalences in the social organization of the previous weeks were now revealed. The King, who came in next day [February 13th], was furious with the priests for again letting the British use the ground near Hikiau temple. The priests reciprocated with a cordial detestation of the chiefs at Ka`awaloa, an attitude they did not trouble to conceal from their British friends. And to complete the triangle, the King and chiefs "were very inquisitive … to know the reason of our return," Mr. Burney says, "and appeared much dissatisfied with it." … It would be sinister because the return-out-of-season presented a mirror image of Makahiki politics. Bringing the god ashore during the triumph of the King, it would reopen the whole issue of sovereignty. Hence the ominous notion Hawaiians did form of what brought the British back, according to some of the most reliable journalists (Burney, King, and Gilbert): that it was in order to settle the island, "and deprive them of part if not the whole of their Country."[3]

Thus there was trouble between the British sailors and the Hawaiians in that the latter seemed to think that the former had returned to invade their land. Moreover, a Hawaiian chief was killed unintentionally. As a result of this tension, Cook was killed in a melee on February 14th, 1779. Sahlins suggests that there were tensions between the British sailors and the Hawaiians before the former's departure and the Hawaiian King was suspicious about the return of Cook on February 11th. Although it is very difficult to decide when Hawaiians' conceptual shift started, it is possible that the Hawaiians became suspicious of Cook's divinity before his departure. If so, then the unexpected return of Cook might have worked for the confirmation of their doubts that he was divine.[4]

3. Sahlins, *Islands of History,* 127–28.

4. As to this issue, I have taken a look at Beaglehole (*The Journals of Captain James Cook*, 502–40) and Burney (*A Chronological History*, 253–66) on which Sahlins relies. But there is no satisfactory explanation of why the Hawaiians suddenly changed their atti-

3. Obeyesekere's Criticisms

We have thus far discussed Sahlins's explanation of the advent of Captain Cook. In his book, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook* (1992), Obeyesekere harshly criticizes Sahlins.

According to Obeyesekere, when he listened to Sahlins's Gauss seminar at Princeton University, he was taken aback at Sahlins's claim that Hawaiians regarded Captain Cook as their god Lono. In addition, Sahlins's claim provoked Obeyesekere's ire. Obeyesekere contends that it is unusual for a Sri Lankan or South Asian to deify a European.[5] This caused Obeyesekere to doubt the apotheosis of Captain Cook as proposed by Sahlins. In Obeyesekere's opinion, Sahlins's claim that Hawaiians treated Captain Cook as their god Lono is a reflection of European mythmaking. For this reason Obeyesekere tries to debunk Sahlins as influenced by European mythmaking.

As mentioned above, Obeyesekere contends that it is sheer European imagining that the Hawaiians regarded and treated Captain Cook as their god Lono. According to Obeyesekere, when interpreting the advent of Captain Cook, Western anthropologists are influenced by the idea that Hawaiians were not rational, and that works as a subjective bias against the Hawaiians. The crux of his criticism is the idea of "practical rationality," which is influenced by Max Weber and Sigmund Freud. Obeyesekere argues that all human beings partake of this practical rationality, because of their common biological nature—although he admits that there are cultural differences.

Claiming that all human beings partake of practical rationality, Obeyesekere tries to present a different interpretation of the advent of Captain Cook. In his view, if we could have a plausible alternative interpretation, then that sufficiently casts doubt on the plausibility of Sahlins's interpretation.[6] According to Obeyesekere, if Hawaiians share a common practical rationality with Europeans, it is not likely

tude toward the British sailors. So the issue remains unresolved.

5. Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook*, 8.

6. *Ibid.*, 82.

that the former mistook Captain Cook for their god. Rather, they must have regarded and treated him as a chief. If it looked as though the Hawaiians treated Cook as their god, then that interpretation must be based on a European prejudice that indigenes are inferior to Westerners. The idea that Hawaiians regarded and treated Cook as their god is a product of the European imagination. For instance, Obeyesekere contends that the apotheosis of Cook comes from Europeans' shipboard traditions.[7] Following this line of thought, Obeyesekere casts doubt on the credibility of available documented records. He claims that these records are not free from Europeans' subjective biases. Hence they must be put and analyzed in appropriate contexts. From Obeyesekere's point of view, Sahlins's view is the continuation of European mythmaking. That is why Obeyesekere severely criticizes Sahlins. In Obeyesekere's view, Sahlins does not recognize how his theory is eurocentric.[8]

4. Sahlins's Responses

In the face of Obeyesekere's criticisms, Sahlins published a book, *How "Natives" Think* (1995), and counter-attacked Obeyesekere. Generally speaking, Sahlins's response to Obeyesekere is bitter. The main reason for this is that, in Sahlins's view, different cultures have different rationalities and it is quite inappropriate to ascribe a Western "practical rationality" to Hawaiians.[9] Moreover, Sahlins argues that Obeyesekere's view is an anti-anthropology in that for Sahlins Obeyesekere's view is the inversion of traditional ethnocentrism and it undermines the very possibility of anthropology.[10] Yet Sahlins claims that this is simply sacrificing indigenous ways of thinking to Western "bourgeois" thinking in that Obeyesekere's "practical rationality" is "bourgeois rationality" that comes from Western empiricism and the Enlightenment movement. In sum, Sahlins's point is that the Western

7. *Ibid.*, 122–23.
8. Obeyesekere, "Afterword," 211.
9. Sahlins, *How "Natives" Think*, 14.
10. *Ibid.*, 9.

idea of rationality is historically and culturally contingent. So it is a serious mistake to apply such a historically and culturally contingent idea to the analysis of different cultures. Sahlins contends that the Western view is not the only way to objectivity. Indigenes have different views on experience, reality and so on.[11] Sahlins's criticism of Obeyesekere is that Obeyesekere fetishizes a historically and culturally contingent idea of Western practical rationality and regards it as universal. In other words, from Sahlins's point of view, Obeyesekere needlessly narrows the scope of rationality.

5. Degrees of Rationality and the Danger of Nationalism

I have thus far briefly examined the Sahlins/Obeyesekere debate. Obeyesekere criticizes Sahlins as a cultural relativist. To criticize Sahlins's relativist claim, Obeyesekere appeals to the idea of practical rationality. The problem with Obeyesekere's defense of practical rationality is his assumption that all human beings are always rational. Hence he contends that Hawaiians must have regarded and treated Captain Cook as a chief, not their god. This seems to be too strong, however. Although I shall examine this example later, Sahlins raises an example of the Japanese Emperor.[12] Until the end of the Second World War, Japanese regarded their Emperor as a living deity in that the Japanese legend says that the Emperor is a descendant of the Japanese deity.[13] Before the Second World War, Japan had already been regarded as one of the powers in international politics. It is unproblematic to say that late nineteenth or early twentieth century Japanese were very educated and rational in some respects. Yet many still accepted the myth that the Emperor is a living deity. If we follow Obeyesekere's view, that Japanese had practical rationality made it unlikely that Jap-

11. *Ibid*., 155.

12. *Ibid*., 134–36.

13. Some Japanese still seem to regard the Emperor as their deity. For instance, on May 15th, 2000, Mori Yoshiro, the then Japanese prime minister, contended that Japan is the divine country whose center is the Emperor. But this is not the problem to be examined here.

anese would see their Emperor as a living deity. Then how can Obeyesekere explain the fact that Japanese saw their Emperor as a living deity? Given that educated twentieth century Japanese took their Emperor as a living deity, we cannot eliminate the possibility that eighteenth century Hawaiians saw Captain Cook as their god. Obeyesekere dismisses here the possibility of degrees of rationality. As the above example shows, Japanese who were very rational in some respects yet believed that their Emperor is a living deity and committed themselves to extreme nationalism. In this regard, many Japanese before the Second World War were not critical of their faith in the Emperor and nationalism and hence were less rational than they could be.

So far I have criticized Obeyesekere; however, my criticisms of him do not mean that I agree with Sahlins. In my view, Sahlins's view is also problematic. First of all, we need to criticize Sahlins's claim for different rationalities and cultural relativism. In this regard, Jarvie and Agassi's view of rationality is helpful. Jarvie and Agassi argue that rationality is better seen as a matter of degree.[14] According to them, there are three levels of rationality: rationality 1, 2, and 3. Rationality 1 is that of goal-directed action to solve problems. Not only humans, but also animals display this level of rationality. Rationality 2 conforms to some rule or standard of rational thinking, although it does not promote self-criticism. Rationality 3 satisfies the highest standards of rational thinking; that is, critical thinking. From this perspective, no one is completely rational or irrational. The difference between Westerners and indigenes such as Hawaiians is not that between rational and irrational, but that between more rational and less rational on this or that matter. In some cases, Westerners and indigenes can be more rational, but in other cases, they can be less rational. Thus there is the possibility of degrees of rationality. Sahlins dismisses this possibility. Hence he has to ascribe different rationality to Hawaiians. But if we admit the possibility of degrees of rationality, we need not draw a hard and fast line between Westerners and indigenes. In this regard, Sahlins's own example is a good one: the Japanese Emper-

14. Jarvie and Agassi, "The Rationality of Dogmatism."

or. As discussed above, Sahlins refers to the Japanese Emperor to criticize Obeyesekere. This is a good criticism of Obeyesekere; however, it suggests an interesting problem that Sahlins fails to discern: the danger of nationalism.

As mentioned above, many Japanese saw their Emperor as a living deity. The reason for this is that Japanese legend says the Japanese Emperor is a descendant of the Japanese deity. Some might wonder why this is interesting. The reason would be clear, if they know the history of Japanese modernization. Since the late nineteenth century, the Japanese national problem has been how they can catch up with the West. To catch up with the West, Japan introduced Western science, technology, educational system, and even philosophy. In many ways, Japanese traditional ideas and life styles were replaced by Western ones. One good example is that, to introduce Western philosophical concepts, Japanese intellectuals coined many terms. One important result of these efforts to modernize and catch up would be the Russo-Japanese war in 1904–05. In modern history, this is the first example of a non-European country defeating a European power.[15] It shows that Japanese at the time were sufficiently rational that they could effectively digest the fruits of Western development and modernization. They still regarded their Emperor as a living deity, however. In some of his papers, Sahlins discusses the indigenization of modernity, which means a phenomenon that indigenes digest "the commodities and relations of the world-system" without sacrificing their conceptual schemes.[16] Sahlins mentions the Eskimo and New Guineans as examples of indigenized modernity. Thus Sahlins would say that Japanese employed their conceptual scheme to digest and indigenize Western modernization. Although it was structurally changed by the encounter with the West, Japanese kept their conceptual scheme intact.[17] Given that Japanese cannot completely abandon what they

15. For those who are interested in this issue, see Fuller, *Science*, 121–34.

16. Sahlins, "What is Anthropological Enlightenment?" x. The recent development of indigenized psychologies can be regarded as one example of the indigenization of modernity. For indigenized psychologies, see Allwood, "Indigenized Psychologies."

17. Japanese language has an apt word for this: *Wakon-Yosai*, or Japanese spirit and Western learning (science and technology).

cultivated through generations, this might not sound so strange; however, the problem is that this led, at least partly, to extreme Japanese nationalism in the 1940s. Here I suggest a relation between the Second World War and the theme of "overcoming modernity" discussed by some of the Kyoto school philosophers. As I mentioned above, Japanese tried to import and digest Western modernization. Certainly, that was not done without some criticism of Western views. Yet the problem here is that such critical acceptance had political implications. Under the name of overcoming modernity, some of the Kyoto school philosophers criticized Western imperialism and colonialism and appealed to traditional values and ideas such as Buddhism and Shinto. They thought that Japan could save Asia from Western imperialism and colonialism and help overcome modernity, although other Asians did not share such a belief. But appealing to traditional values and ideas can lead to nationalism. In particular, Shinto was a Japanese national religion, which regarded the Emperor as a living deity. Thus some of the Kyoto school philosophers provided a philosophical justification for Japanese nationalism, or the so-called "ultra-nationalism," under the political slogans such as "The Eight Corners of the World under One Roof (*Hakko Ichiu*)," which regarded the Emperor as its center.[18]

I am not claiming here that the indigenization of modernity will always lead to nationalism or that the philosophy of the Kyoto school is nationalistic. But, indigenes who encounter the West will always have to think about the following question: what kind of stance do they take toward both their traditional ideas and Western ones? In my view, non-Westerners cannot and should not accept Western ideas uncritically. But, at the same time, they should not reject them politically and emotionally. That is, they need to internalize Western ideas *without losing a critical attitude toward them*. In this regard, it is surprising that Sahlins does not scrutinize the aforementioned relation between the indigenization of modernity and the possibility of nationalism. He rightly discerns that the concept of "culture" comes

18. For a brief introduction to this problem, see Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies*, 369–78 and Maruyama, "Theory and Psychology of Ultra-nationalism."

from German romanticism as part of the counter-Enlightenment movement, which was apparently a nationalist one.[19] Also, he even refers to the Japanese Emperor and the examples of indigenized modernity, as mentioned above. Nevertheless, Sahlins dismisses the danger of nationalism that I have mentioned. One of the reasons could be that Sahlins also dismisses the possibility of degrees of rationality. As seen above, Japanese who were rational to some degree also believed that their Emperor was a living deity, and that justified Japanese nationalism. That is, Japanese were not highly rational in that they could not critically examine their nationalism. But even if he discerns the problem, I am not sure whether Sahlins can offer any solution to it. The reason for this would be that Sahlins embraces cultural relativism.

Sahlins contends that conceptual schemes change structurally and historically. Yet he does not seem to think that they can merge or create a new conceptual scheme when they encounter each other. In other words, although they change, different conceptual schemes continue to exist separately. The problem with this is that the importance of encountering other cultures lies not only in that it makes us reconsider our own view, but also in that it makes us criticize other views. But if we accept cultural relativism, how can we criticize other views? Who can criticize Japanese nationalism? If we accept Sahlins's view, then it seems that only Japanese can criticize their nationalism in that they have their own conceptual scheme and criteria of rationality. There were some Japanese who criticized Japanese nationalism or knew that, given financial and military strength of Western countries such as the United States and United Kingdom, Japan could not win the Second World War. But these "rational" people were silenced, oppressed, sent to a jail, or even killed. That is, the possibility of internal criticism was almost eliminated. In this regard, Japanese did not have rational political institutions that permitted critical discussion about their extreme nationalism and faith in the Emperor. In that case, what can be done? Sahlins contends that "cultural relativism has never meant for anthropology the vulgar moral relativity for

19. Sahlins, "'Sentimental Pessimism' and Ethnographic Experience," 162–65.

which it is criticized by the defenders of Western-cum-universal virtues."[20] But this seems to suggest the limitations of Sahlins's view in that he does not provide any argument about how he can avoid vulgar moral relativity. If he can make a transcultural judgment, then it seems to me that Sahlins smuggles in some universal criterion and thus Sahlins's argument for different rationalities is not congruent with his rejection of vulgar moral relativity. Hence he faces a dilemma to choose either his argument for different rationalities or the rejection of vulgar moral relativity.

6. Conclusion

So far I have scrutinized the Sahlins/Obeyesekere debate. As I have argued, both Sahlins and Obeyesekere have problems, respectively. The reason for this is that they dismiss the possibility of degrees of rationality. As the example of the Japanese Emperor and Japanese nationalism suggests, we need to admit the fact that we are more rational in some cases, but less rational in other cases. From this we might be able to construct a better relationship between different cultures.

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20. Sahlins, "Comment," 274.

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