LRB Vol. 27 No. 21 · 3 November 2005

Adrift from Locality

James Davidson

- *Apologies to Thucydides: Understanding History as Culture and Vice Versa* by Marshall Sahlins
  Chicago, 334 pp, £21.00, December 2004, ISBN 0 226 73400 5

For students of the human sciences, the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins is, with Clifford Geertz, one of the few Americans who has achieved the status of a name to conjure with alongside the French *maîtres à penser*, particularly when the conversation turns to the topics of 'Big Men' (power-brokers who aren't chiefs, masters of the games of speech and generosity), or the socially embedded economy of premodern societies, 'negative reciprocity' (exchange characterised by hard bargaining, predation or theft), the cultural apperception of colour, or why Americans don't eat dogs.

Apologies to Thucydides is the latest instalment in a series of meditations on the relationship between history and anthropology, the practical and the meaningful, the porridge of integrated, totalising systems (symbolic, cultural) and the golden syrup of the event, which has been Sahlins's major preoccupation for the last quarter century. His tropes – islands, washings ashore, shipwrecks, murders – will be already familiar to his admirers, and his basic thesis has not fundamentally changed, although his account of it has become richer and thicker with each retelling: the relationship is not a static one of opposition but a dynamic one of reciprocity. Events make sense only in a cultural context, which means that what is negligible in one place – putting a book on a toilet-seat, for example, or gun-grease derived from the fat of pigs or cows – may have major consequences elsewhere, and vice versa, the structure itself being sometimes transformed in the process. The 'mediation' through which a cultural structure constructs a personage or an event as significant – the death of a king, say – Sahlins labels 'instantiation', the mediation by which an event modifies a structure (the death of Louis XVI) 'totalisation': 'The claim is not that culture determines history, only that it organises it.'

Sahlins's most celebrated scene for exploring the drama of the structure-event relationship is the strange death of Captain Cook in the Sandwich Islands. Cook had put in at Hawaii (the big island of Owhyhee proper) on 17 January 1779. Tens of thousands of Hawaiians flocked to the ship in their canoes, or, in default of transport, swimming, singing, rejoicing, weaponless, gift-laden, seductive, the very image of the bounteous Other showering the European with swine, women and song. On Cook himself the Hawaiians bestowed extraordinary honours, falling prostrate at his feet and calling him 'Lono' – the name, it emerged, of a local god.

After a fortnight or so, the British left. A week later, they were forced to return in order to make repairs to a mast. Their welcome this time was rather different. The Hawaiians seemed less and less co-operative. They made ever more daring predations – 'negative reciprocity' – even stealing one of the ship's boats. On 14 February, in an effort to recover the boat, Cook came ashore once more with a group of marines. The plan was to kidnap the king and hold him hostage against the boat's return. The king was all for coming quietly, but at the shore

his senior wife intervened. Things turned nasty. Cook was killed, his body disassembled. Sympathetic priests subsequently returned a portion of his hind-parts.

There were two great oddities about this colonial episode to furrow the enlightened brow: the welcome offered to the British when they first laid anchor, an outpouring of warmth unprecedented in the annals of 'first contacts', and the sudden transformation of the Hawaiians from sweet to sour. Sahlins, in the first flush of his conversion to structuralist interpretations, interpreted the whole thing in terms of the deep structures of Hawaiian ritual, myth and cosmology. Through 'a series of spectacular coincidences', Cook had unknowingly gone native. And how. His visit coincided with the climax of the Makahiki festival of the god Lono, the 23-day period in which a symbol of Lono circles the island in a clockwise direction, 'the same circuit … at just the same time' as Cook's ships as they approached Hawaii from Maui, keeping the big island on their right, Lono's symbol being a piece of cloth suspended from a cross-beam, exactly like a ship's sail. What's more, they halted at precisely the point where the temple stood from which the image had departed and left within 24 hours of the precise end (probably) of the Makahiki period, on the night of 3 February.

Cook's return a week later was both negatively and positively disruptive: negatively because the whole show was supposed to be over and Cook's presence was suddenly as atopical as his first visit was topical; positively because that very disruption could be configured in mythical terms as the Return of Lono (again) from the celestial realm of Kahiki/Tahiti to usurp the king, Lono's structural antithesis, whose warlike power had just been restored following its ritual suspension during the festival. There were several more, even more spectacular, unwitting convergences of British action with Hawaiian myth, but the upshot was that the oddity of Cook's death was explained by his oblivious but close compliance with deep-structured Hawaiian rules and roles, each conformity confirming his conformism, accidentally building up a pattern of expectation which made his subsequent nonconformity more alarming.

Sahlins the cultural detective had solved the murder mystery: 'Cook's death at Hawaiian hands … could thus be described as the ritual sequel: the historical metaphor of a mythical reality,' as if the Hawaiians had done away with their British doll who had re-emerged (sinisterly) from the toy-box of the horizon after playtime was over, and/or, like over-enthusiastic method actors, or like slaves to a 'primitive mentality' (hard to escape that implication), they had naively enacted an actual killing, in accordance with a merely ritual script. For the problem with primitives, as Lévy-Bruhl informed us long ago, is that they don't know what a metaphor is.

This was too neat (a priori) for most anthropologists, and Sahlins was criticised both for his reconstructions of what the Hawaiians were up to that winter of 1778-79 and for what a generally sympathetic Geertz called his 'highly carpentered and suspiciously seamless argument'. The suspicious coincidence was not so much Captain Cook's conformity with Hawaiian structures, as the fact that a convert to structuralism had managed to find so perfect a demonstration of the efficacy of its methods at the site of one of the most notorious conjunctions of the Enlightenment with Savagery.

This kind of criticism was to have been anticipated. What seems to have surprised Sahlins was something that came from a different direction, the ethnopsychoanalyst Gananath Obeyesekere, who claimed that Sahlins, like Cook, was indulging in an age-old European fantasy, that Europeans were taken as gods by the primitive savages they first encountered.

Obeyesekere, being from Sri Lanka, knew that colonised peoples had more common sense – that, crucially, they had got the colonisers' number. Amazed that Obeyesekere's error-spotted book was not ripped to shreds by critics, but even won prizes, Sahlins was compelled to write a rebuttal, *How 'Natives' Think*, his most accessible book (which you can buy together with Obeyesekere from Amazon at a discount).[*]

How 'Natives' Think initiated Sahlins's continuing resistance to the several dodgy dogmas that shelter under the umbrella of moral-political ('pseudo-political') postmodernism, 'as if the truth of other societies necessarily consists of our own right-mindedness', arguing that one can know the Other, that one is not destined merely to ventriloquise one's own symbolic order ('natives' are cannibals, Europeans are as gods); that structures of thinking are not impermeable to facts; that the West has no monopoly on the game of constructing the Other and, comparatively speaking, is not necessarily very skilful at it (a low blow, that one), that the Rest have no monopoly on pluralistic thinking; that there can be goodness in dirty-fingernailed empiricism (in trying carefully to reconstruct how 'natives' thought), and indeed that there can be wickedness in postmodernism (in gagging 'native' voices or postcolonising non-Western minds with 'Western rationalism'), even a kind of 'symbolic violence'.

But for all his errors, Obeyesekere had the 'who speaks?' tide with him, and still has. And 'who speaks?' has a point. Concluding a brilliant paragraph in *Culture in Practice* (2000), with an assault on the notion of a monolithic Western (colonialist) discourse, Sahlins produced a nice Tacitean *sententia*: 'The pseudo-politics of interpretation is the last refuge of the idea that the individual is the tool of his culture – which again proves that people who do not know their own functionalism are destined to repeat it.' One might, more lamely, retort that a structuralist who speaks without knowing his own place in the structure will find it hard to make himself heard. Sahlins seems not to know what he looks like, a Big White Man flying high in the loftiest intellectual traditions of Continental Europe, making occasional swashbuckling swoops onto islands of cannibals and oddities to prove a point about something that Saussure once said, or Sartre or Certeau. He should have learned from his 'natives' that there is a time and a place for hard bargaining.