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Myth, History, and Political Identity

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Introduction

History and discourse about the making of history is positional, that is, it is dependent upon where one is located in social reality, within society, and within global process. This is even applicable to the present discourse, which in no way represents an attempt to stand in some objective truth-sphere above or outside of the goings-on of the world. Objective history, just as any other history, is produced in a definitive context and is a particular kind of project. The discourse of history as well as of myth is simultaneously a discourse of identity; it consists of attributing a meaningful past to a structured present. An objectivist history is produced in the context of a certain kind of selfhood, one that is based on a radical separation of the subject from any particular identity, and which objectifies and textualizes reality. One logical expression of this is the neutralization of historical discourse in historiography. This in turn 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." In periods of general identity crisis, this may generate a vast literature debunking the past. The logarithmic increase of work on the "invention of tradition" in the last few years is evidence of a supposed discovery of the inauthenticity of all people's histories. Although much of this work contains important insights into the way in which histories are socially constituted, it is striking that the academic representation of the truth becomes the criterion for evaluating other people's constructions of reality. Truth-value is a mode of academic being harboring its specific strategies, and these strategies are, thus, historically and geographically situated in the world system.

In the following discussion, I examine the construction of histories as products of particular social positions. These social positions constitute the conditions of existence and formants of identity spaces or habitus, which in their turn select and organize specific discourses and organization of selfhood, including histories of the self. It is not my intention to pass judgment on the truth of such histories but, rather, to understand the interplay of factors involved in their production. Anthropologists have recently been forced to realize the political import of their own "objectivism." I have argued elsewhere that this is an aspect of the fragmentation of the world system where peoples who were formerly "spoken for" are intensely engaged in defining themselves in their struggles for autonomy.¹ By

bracketing out “truth-value,” we can, I think, begin to see more clearly the relation between making history and constructing identity.

History as Descent

While in the beginning of the 18th century there are to be found only 10 grammars, by the end of the century the number will reach 104; in the newly appearing habit of collecting antiques; and most important of all, it is manifested in the practice of “name-giving” that is giving hellenic names to new-born babies or changing one’s name into a hellenic one: Thus it is reported that in 1800 in a school at Kidonia the students agree to change their names into hellenic ones and speak from now on only classical Greek; in 1813 in Athens during a school celebration the Schoolmaster was calling the students one by one and handing a branch of olive-tree was addressing them as follows: “From now on your name is not any longer John or Paul, but Pericles or Themistocles or Xenophon.” [Michas 1977:64, citing Dimaras 1969:59]

A strange mania seems to have overtaken the Greeks: That of giving to themselves and their offspring hellenic names . . . our priests instead of baptizing our children and giving them the names of saints give them hellenic names. One hears even the coolies calling themselves Sokrates. [Michas 1977:65, citing Dimaras 1969:60]

Greek identity as a cultural phenomenon disappeared in the successive onslaughts of the Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman empires. The continuity between the population of Greece and its history was broken until the 18th century. Until then, Greeks were identified, and self-identified, as “Romans” (*Romoioi*) in the larger empires. The temporal continuity was established, finally, or reestablished by means of a spatial discontinuity. Expatriate Greek merchants of the Ottoman empire were led to rediscover Ancient Greece via the Western European self-identity in which, from the Renaissance, Greece played a pivotal role as the place of origin of everything specifically Western, from science to democracy. Thus the discovery that “what is called the learning of Europe is the learning of our ancestors . . . this wisdom is a fruit of the Greek earth which bad fortune uprooted and planted in Europe” (Michas 1977:67, citing Korais 1962, 3:724).

The emergence of Greek national identity is linked to a curious yet systemic combination of the emergence of an expatriate Greek merchant class linked to the expanding plantation economy of Greece, and the emergence of a general European identity that rooted itself in the Ancient Mediterranean. The growing cotton economy of Greece was the instrument of peripheralization within the Western world system at the same time it led to a potentially national enclave within the Ottoman empire. This process linked Greece to the European centers as an economic periphery at the same time that it enabled the import, via the new Greek elite, of a national identity from Western Europe. As such, Greek national identity consisted in the importation and establishment of the European identification of Greece, just as Greek history became the European history of the ancients.

History, then, is very much a mythical construction, in the sense that it is a representation of the past linked to the establishment of an identity in the present. The case of Greece is, perhaps, extreme for Europe, a real case of “*le regard de l’autre*,” of the definition of self by means of the other.

The Present in the Past and the Past in the Present

In his attempt to establish a structuralist-informed historical anthropology, Marshall Sahlins has emphasized the ways in which cultural models organize and are influenced by the larger social arenas in which they are implemented. In his critique of approaches that deny, on strictly logical grounds, the possibility of the past existing in the present except by an act (necessarily political) in the present, he has made his case as follows: "Yet culture is precisely the organization of the current situation in the terms of a past" (Sahlins 1985:155).

But if, as we have seen, history is precisely the organization of the past in terms of the present situation (i.e., the construction of identity), then culture is the organization of the present in terms of a past that is already organized by the present.

Marshall Sahlins (1981) has used the word *mythopraxis* to refer to the enacting of myth in reality thus creating historical metaphors of "mythical realities." I shall offer an alternative use of the word, one in which history or rather stories of the past are constructed according to categorical schemes that are transferred from other domains. This is the practice of mythologization, rather than the realization of myth in practice. The latter may occur in specific circumstances where an emergent social identity manifests itself via the display of mythical models. Such circumstances occur at certain moments in the course of social movements, but they are always dependent upon a prior mythologization of the present. Thus, the formation of Greek national identity consists in the internalization of the way in which Western European intellectuals, in constructing their own "civilized" origins, identified Greece. Greek "history," in this way, became the basis of Greek self-definition.

Throughout the Pacific, the Protestant missionaries of the 19th century implemented the myth of the lost tribes of Israel to account for the special attributes of the island peoples. This has been very much elaborated by certain members of local populations who delight in telling of the migrations of their peoples, beginning in Israel, moving to Egypt, over the Indian Ocean, and so on.

"Modern archeologists and historians of Hawaii have got it all wrong," I was told by one old leader of the Hawaiian community:

The Hawaiians came from the Middle East, very likely from Ancient Israel. The history of the migrations demonstrate that, and so much of our culture; our tabus, our cities of refuge. It's all there in Fornander² if you don't believe the Hawaiians.

There is nothing astounding in all of this when we consider that the Mormon Brigham Young University has undertaken many an archeological expedition in search of the lost tribes that are supposedly to be found among the Indians of South America. There is, of course, the officializing process that often turns such stories into *history*, as in the case of Fiji, where precisely such a migration story won a prize and became standardized history. Fantasies take on a durable reality when they are successfully communicated. And that communication is a constitutive act of cultural identity.

The anthropologist may often be led into the usual superciliousness of the supposed expert confronted by the (supposed) childish imagination of his subjects. This has become somewhat of an institution in anthropology and also in history,³ that is, debunking the others' representations of themselves on the basis of a presumed monopoly of the *truth*. But the *truth* is quite beside the point here and merely accentuates the ethnocentricity of even the most relativist of anthropologists. Instead, one must ask where the attraction lies in making such histories. In colonial situations there is a tendency among certain forms of hierarchical, kinship-organized societies to identify with the source of "life-force" that appears to come from the dominant power, and which elevates the status of those closest to such sources. Internalizing a myth that links Polynesians to the Ancient Hebrews must be understood in such terms (i.e., in terms of identity). What is important here is the content and not the comparative truth-value of histories. Although we may suppose that we go about things in a more objective manner, it can easily be argued that our own academized discourse is just as mythical as is theirs.⁴

The recounting, or perhaps accounting, of and for the past is an activity that must always be placed in its social context. When an anthropologist explains that the Hawaiians received Captain Cook as their god of fertility, he may well be reproducing a representation that emerged among the missionary-trained historians of the Hawaiian "constitutional" and "congregationalist" monarchy, a representation that attempted to establish a legitimate connection between the royalty and the British as well as to categorically negate the pre-Christian "superstitions" of Hawaii. The events of the early contact overflow with interpretive possibilities. Europeans need to explain the death of Cook, man of the Enlightenment, at the hands of Hawaiian chiefs. Cultural anthropologists need to account for the scenario in terms of cultural categories and their implied motivations—Cook was in the right place at the right time to become a Hawaiian sacrifice of the god. But if he had not enacted his own practical myth of "kidnap the chief when the going gets rough," the outcome might have been very different. Whose story and for whom? Such are the questions that need to be asked of hi(s)-story.

A Myth of Sovereignty and its Political History

Throughout Africa, Island Southeast Asia, Polynesia, and the highlands of South America there are strikingly similar myths of sovereignty. In skeleton form they state that in the Beginning there were the indigenous people; they were a religious community at one with nature, and if they had chiefs, they were religious priest-chiefs, true representatives of the people, generous *patres familiarum* to their societies. Then, at some designated point in time, came the foreigners, the warrior chiefs, the sea people, the political chiefs, the human sacrificers. The human sacrificers brought with them a new political order based on real dominance and expansion. Now in one way or another these new chiefs were socialized into the community, by wife taking, ritual defeat, and sacrifice. They were tamed, in part at least, but not without legitimately monopolizing political power.

Such myths have traditionally inspired the most incredible of speculations as to the origin of the world's primitive ruling classes. More recently, historians such as J. Vansina have made concerted efforts to locate the origins of the chiefly lineages of Central Africa by carefully analyzing the "texts" of oral tradition. If it is said that the dominant clan crossed the river X in the East, it is necessary to find, in methodologically meticulous ways, corroborating evidence as well as to eliminate stories about their coming across river Y in the West. This has led to some curious results, such as that one of the founders of the Kuba kingdom in Central Africa was apparently a slave returned from the Americas with an ear of corn that became a focus of wonder and an instrument of symbolic, and ultimately real, power.⁵

The Structural Basis of Political Myth

As opposed to the formerly quite common "historical" interpretations of myths of political sovereignty, a number of structural and structuralist models have appeared in the past decade. For some anthropologists, like Luc de Heusch (1972, 1982) and, following him, Marshall Sahlins (1958, 1981, 1985), and in a different sense, Pierre Clastres (1974), the origin myths of kingship are discourses on power, or rather variations of a single discourse. Royal power is the great world historical crime against the people; it is associated with incest, fratri-, patri-, and matricide, with usurpation, and with mass murder of indigenous males by the foreigners. At the same time, the myth describes how the "stranger kings" are incorporated into the indigenous people, by their ritual death and sacrifice and by marriage. Thus, there was no invasion, in reality, and the story of conquest is, on the contrary, a statement of the nature of political power told in dynastic and heroic terms.

The Hawaiian Version

We have, thus far, seen how myths of the origin of "sacred" chiefship and kingship were once interpreted as the history of migration of ruling classes, but are now increasingly seen in more structural terms (i.e., as true myths of the origin and thus the nature of political power). There is a particular Hawaiian variant of this myth that, in spite of interpretive problems, is adequate for our discussion.

Paa'o was forced to quit his original homeland because of a quarrel with his older brother, Lonopele, a famous farmer. When Lonopele accused Paa'o's son of stealing some fruit, Paa'o opened the boy's stomach only to find he had been innocent. Enraged, Paa'o determined to leave his brother and had a canoe constructed for this purpose. By a ruse, Lonopele's own son was entrapped into a transgression of the canoe-building tabus, allowing Paa'o to offer him as the human sacrifice that would complete the work . . . Paa'o then sailed off with a number of men and (in certain versions) the feather god, Kuka'ilimoku (Ku-the-snatcher-of-the-island). Lonopele raised a series of storms of the "Kona" type (a winter storm) to destroy the canoe, but Paa'o successfully invoked schools of bonito (*aku*) and mackerel (*opelu*) fish to calm the sea. Weathering other dangers sent by Lonopele, Paa'o finally reached Hawaii Island, where he constructed certain famous temples. These were the first temples of human

sacrifice, the rites presided over by the god Ku (of which Paoa's feather god is an important form). In one version . . . Paoa also slaughtered all the pre-existing priests. The political changes he simultaneously introduced are variously recounted. Either Hawaii was at that time without a chief, or it was being governed badly by the existing chief (sometimes identified as Kapawa). In the latter case, Paoa deposed the chief, and by all accounts he installed a new ruler brought from Kahiki, Pilikaaiea. The Hawaii Island rulers trace to this chief (about 20 generations before Kamehameha). Apart from the temple form, human sacrificial rites and the feather god Kuka'ilimoku, Paoa is also said to have brought image worship to Hawaii, as well as certain sacred insignia of the chieftainship and the prostration tabu accorded divine chiefs. [Sahlins 1981:10–11]⁶

This story recapitulates the major themes discussed above: the foreign invasion of godly chiefs, the violent establishment of a new kind of political regime, and marriage to local aristocratic women. In some versions it is said that the original or aboriginal regime was more egalitarian (in our terms) and the chiefs closer to their people.⁷

Polynesian history is a strange phenomenon for the Westerner. Anthropologists, in their modernist endeavor to neutralize the other's history and to incorporate it into our history of the other, have made their stories into myth. Myth for us, of course, is a symbol of the static, unchanging structure of otherness in its essence.

Thus, we are told that the origin of the god-chiefs in Kahiki is not a reference to Tahiti but to a more general other world or heaven where the sea meets the sky. For Hawaiians throughout the historical record this has not been a problem of the same order. Kahiki is in a very important sense Tahiti—the consonant shift “t” to “k,” also present in the Hawaiian *kapu*, as opposed to the more common Polynesian *tapu* (on the “oldest” island of Kauai, the “t” is preserved). But if the chiefly ancestors of the Hawaiians are supposed to have come from Tahiti, the ancestors of the Maori are apparently from Savai'i. Now this may be the island in Samoa, but, via another sound shift, it is equivalent to Hawaii. And the great migratory legend of West Polynesia is called Hawaiiki. There is, of course, no disputing the voyaging capabilities of the ancient Polynesians, and on that basis it can be assumed that the mythology of Polynesian chiefly foundations might capture the deep historicity of Polynesian social reality rather than pinpoint actual origins.

The reality of the myth of sovereignty is present enough in Hawaiian history. The last prophet of the pre-Christian era, Kapihe, spoke the following words, during the reign of Kamehameha I, in a period of great political upheaval that was destined to end the old regime of theocratic power:⁸

<i>E hui ana na moku</i> <i>e hiolo ana na kapu akua</i> <i>e iho mai ana ko ka lani</i> <i>a e pi'i aku ana ko ka honua</i>	The islands will be united the taboo of the gods overthrown those of the heavens [chiefs] will be brought low and those of the earth [commoners] will be raised up. [Kamakau 1964:7]
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In some reports it is stated that the Hawaiian commoners, the *maka'ainana*, did not participate in temple rituals, which for them were the foreign activities of the ruling elite. The original rulers of Hawaii, as opposed to the Tahitian aristocracy, were said to have governed through kinship with the people, and by means of *aloha* rather than by human sacrifice. There is a series of oppositions here between *aloha* and violence: reciprocity or, rather, sharing (which is not at all the same thing) instead of appropriation; fertility versus destruction and warfare; the god of the "people" and of peace and fertility, Lono, versus the god of warfare and human sacrifice, Ku.

Hawaiian traditions recount the real conflicts between the commoners and their chiefs and the cases where overbearing chiefs were simply done away with by their subjects.

Many kings have been put to death by the people because of their oppression of the *maka'ainana* (commoners). The following kings lost their lives on account of their cruel exactions on the commoners: Kaihala was put to death of Kau, for which reason the district of Kau was called Weir (Makaha). Kuka-i-ka-lani was an *alii* (chief) who was violently put to death in Kau. . . . It was this reason that some of the ancient kings had a wholesome fear of the people. [Malo 1971:195]

Certain districts, such as Ka'u, Hawaii, which were among the poorer areas, were famous for their intolerance of aristocrats. This intolerance is still very much in evidence. What was formerly a source of commoner insubordination is also one of the present strongholds of the Hawaiian movement, which has used road blocks and other forms of opposition to prevent implementation of the development insanity that has destroyed much of the other islands. Currently it is the source of the Pele Defence Fund, a group fighting the establishment of geothermal power stations in the area on the grounds they would desecrate the body of Pele, the volcano goddess.

There is, then, a tradition of conceiving an antagonism between commoners and aristocrats that is not merely a symbolic statement of the origin of chiefly power but a politically active discourse.

In the current myth of the origin of classical autocratic Hawaiian society, the entire political organization is seen as an import from Kahiki, a word that is, in phonemic terms, identical with the island of Tahiti, but which means—or, perhaps, has come to mean—"land beyond the horizon."

Pao changed it. Pao came from Kahiki. . . . Kahiki is beyond the horizon . . . it could be anywhere. The word does not have to mean Tahiti. . . . The Hawaiian opens his eyes and as far as the eye can see anybody come from there come from Kahiki. He brought the *ali'i*, he brought the class system. He brought idol worship, he brought the class system. He brought idol worship, he brought *tikis* [idols], he brought sacrifice. He brought priesthood—separation of man and woman, he brought war and *heiaus* [stone temples]. He also brought gods who were against Hawaiian gods. [Hawaiian leader in Ka'u, interview, 1985]

The core of the story concerns the contrast between an original Hawaiian society based on "equality," solidarity, and a holistic relation between man and

nature and the advent of chiefly power, or of power in general. The use of the notion of “equality” is important to understand here. In one very important sense it refers to a political contrast employed by Hawaiians themselves, which has its primary meaning in the field of modern Western discourse. But the word does not refer to the absence of hierarchy as in the usual Western sense. On the contrary, hierarchical order plays a central role in both the structure of the *ohana* and in representations of pre-Kahiki society. This hierarchy, and its accompanying authority, is based on *aloha*, on love for the people, on a generosity that flows from love and not from a principle of exchange, and on a possession of spiritual force, or *mana*, that belongs to the group as a whole. It contrasts with an exploitative power based on the absolute separation of chiefs from the people, on an absolute rupture whereby the chiefly projects become disconnected from those of the larger society. Political power is imported, as in the myths we have discussed, from a foreign land. But for Hawaiians, apparently for at least 150 years, the myth has imprinted itself upon real political discourse.

The rebellious district of Ka’u—which, quite remarkably, has maintained an anti-aristocratic culture to the present—is also well known for the local cult of Pele, goddess of the volcano, associated with the land and with the common people, *maka’ainana*, or *kama’aina*, children of the land.⁹ A local leader (interview, 1985) expresses, in his own terms, the contribution of his district to Hawaiian political ideology today.

We’ve killed three kings in Ka’u . . . in our history, and I don’t know anybody else that killed any of their *ali’is*, but we’ve killed three for fuckin’ up!

And in all of Hawaii you going to find that only in Ka’u that they have killed three of their *ali’is* because they had *attitudes*. That’s why Kamehameha no can come over here. Kamehameha never conquered Ka’u. . . . Never win this place . . . kill him if he come here. Didn’t like him . . . he was a turkey. You no can say you are king without *aloha*.

The Origins of Paradise

If the foreign chiefs of Kahiki brought a reign of terror, of human sacrifice and warfare to Hawaii, how was it before the deluge? Here there is no absolutely clear model of an indigenous society, but there is certainly a list of key terms. *Aloha*, the generalized fusion of love and generosity that characterizes close family relations, is the founding principle. *Ohana*, extended family, is the basic form of social organization, an “egalitarian” reciprocal sodality. There are no *tiki*, or idols, to be worshipped, nor any flock of heroic deities. There are only two beings: Ku and Hina (or, for some, Kanaloa and Hina), the male and female principles. They are represented respectively by an upright (phallic) stone and a flat stone. They embody a male-female unity expressing the fertility of land and sea. The people were at one with nature, it is said; there was no need for *tiki* or for any kind of representation of the gods, because they were in direct contact with divine force. There were chiefs, but they ruled by means of *aloha*; they were the fathers of their people and did not form a social class with a separate project.

The origins of these posited origins are a problem in themselves, insofar as they cannot be based on any direct experience of a society that preceded the aristocratic polity of the contact epoch. The image of a pre-Kahiki based polity is very much more in accordance with the social and cultural nexus that emerged in the 19th century following the disintegration of the Hawaiian kingdom as it was successively integrated into the world system. The 19th century witnessed a population collapse in Hawaii, from perhaps 600,000 according to recent estimates (i.e., Stannard 1989) to 50,000; an encroaching plantation economy and society; and a monarchy that fell entirely into the hands of an American colonial elite. The rapidly dwindling Hawaiian commoners grouped themselves in rural areas in increasingly closed corporate groups, a process documented for other parts of the globe in this period (Wolf 1957). The internal structure of such corporations stressed the values of community, of a "generalized reciprocity," of *ohana*, and of *aloha*, in opposition to the outside world, the world of exploitation and negative reciprocity. This culture of internal generosity, an economy of sharing and the ideology and practice of *aloha aina*, "love of the land," is a culture that emerged most clearly in the last century but is today posited as the indigenous Hawaiian value system. That these values, however, are today represented as those of indigenous Hawaii cannot simply be dismissed as the "invention of culture" at some late date, as we shall see below.

These Hawaiian stories of their past are divided into two generic periods. One is characterized by a kind of clan solidarity and unity with nature, a localized but not anarchic political setting where sacred chiefs were at one with their people and not overlords, and a religion that was totally embedded in the direct communication with a sacred natural world. Following this is the migratory period, when the new chiefs arrived from Tahiti or Kahiki with their gods of war and human sacrifice. The coming of the Europeans and then the Americans are all simple reiterations of the same theme of foreign conquest. Just as the Polynesian conquerors did, the Euro-Americans brought new gods with them, too. The most recent conquerors would appear to be the Japanese. Each foreign wave is a mere reenactment of the original migration.

Authenticity and the Construction of History

The construction of history is generated by, and is constitutive of, social identity. The history of historians is the identity of historians as well. It is the definition of a practice that typifies its practitioners. Although our history may appear to us to be very much more than that, as its function is to delineate the reality of *other* populations, their cultural bodies, there is no adequate way of circumventing this social constraint without retreating into a false intellectualist objectivism. The historical space of the West includes, of course, the events that are grouped under the heading Hawaiian History. On the basis of texts from the voyages of Captains Cook, Vancouver, and others, the Hawaiians' own history can be and has been challenged.¹⁰ So when the Western anthropologist or historian attacks the Hawaiian view of their own past, this must be understood as a

struggle for the monopoly of identity. Who is to be able to render an adequate version of History? The anthropologist defines his or her professional identity in relation to a specific ethnographic or historical anthropological corpus of which he or she has the right to speak by virtue of professional canons of mastery. When the “object” begins to define itself, anthropologists are likely to find themselves in an identity crunch—and so ensues a struggle, or else a quick escape to another island group, another library, another “object.” I have argued elsewhere that the emergence of local cultural movements that accompanied the decline in a hegemonic modernist identity has brought this problem to the fore. Academics have begun their assault on “native” self-representations as quickly as they have now begun to be reconstituted in the upsurge of local cultural identities.

Hawaiians, who all but vanished from the cultural face of the earth, were the subject of pessimistic acculturation studies during most of this century. And where there has been an academic longing for something more exotic, *really cultural*, there was always the distant past. Thus, in the recent turn to roots and historical cultural reconstructionism, the history of ancient Hawaii has become a focus of attention. Embedded in the ethnographic, as in the historiographic, act is the textual bias that somehow there is a Hawaiian essence that can be located before Westernization made a mess of things. As the mess is highly unethnographic, one must return to the pristine precontact material, or at least to intimations of that material. This implies that the reconstruction of essential Hawaiian culture must necessarily adhere to the truths defined by the early contact literature, or in this case, to those later missionized Hawaiian historians whose image of their culture contains the models for organizing that literature. The gospel of Cook becomes the sourcebook for aboriginal Hawaii, something that might, furthermore, be monopolized by the anthropologist in his or her research library. This strategy entails, further, that any local Hawaiian reconstruction could only be interpreted as mythical and thus inauthentic. For the Hawaiians themselves, the situation, as we shall see, was and is very different. The confrontation is striking.

The resulting version of Hawaiian culture does not correspond to a specific time period. In the cultural revival, isolated facts have been transformed into symbols of Hawaianness and accorded a significance without precedent in aboriginal Hawaiian society. [Linnekin 1983:243]

Here the anthropologist struggles gallantly to defend the true essence of the Hawaiian past against the onslaught of the modern de-cultured Hawaiian who may “wax sentimental” or “wax poetic” about one or another aspect of his or her supposed cultural heritage. What is the position expressed in such statements? It might be suggested that it is one that defines culture as an external text, code, or paradigm—external to a universal methodological individual who plays at distinct “games” or forms of life that are presupposed to be different from our own. Hawaiian culture is a “game” once played by authentic Hawaiians, but which as a result of Western expansion no longer exists. Modern Hawaiians cannot play such games any longer, not unless they go and learn the rules. And only the anthropologist knows the rules. In any case, there are no real Hawaiians anymore,

since they have lost not only their culture, but even the “purity” of their genetic base, being all mixed up with many different immigrant groups that have come to their shore since the second half of the last century. As there are no longer any real Hawaiians, culture specialists are the only possible custodians of their former way of life.

Identity and the Practice of Myth

What are the elements that enter into the Hawaiian construction of Hawaiian history? The first that we have documented is that there is apparently early contact tradition concerning the relation between the aristocracy and the commoners that asserts that the former are real usurpers who shall one day be ousted so that the people can return to their old ways. The metaphorical extension of this representation to cover Euro-American colonialism needs no further discussion.

The structural basis of this particular variant of the more general myth of sovereignty is not easy to discover, but it might be suggested that Hawaiian society was transformed in such a way as to promote the Gramscian inversion to which we have referred. In Western Polynesia, for example, as in Central Africa and Eastern Indonesia, similar definitions of power are associated with exogamous aristocracies; a lesser degree of exploitation, especially between different lineage groupings; and an open exchange, including marriage, between ranks. However, the Hawaiian aristocracy of the late period was highly endogamous, violently exploitative, constantly at war, and the adamant enemy of regular exchange between ranks. It is reasonable to suppose in such a situation that the myth of the “stranger king” would take on a more convincing aura of reality for commoners. The prophet, Kapihe, might certainly have sensed this, after a decade of sandalwood trade that virtually decimated the Hawaiian commoner population while their *ali'i* moved to town, to Honolulu, where they engaged in all sorts of conspicuous consumption based on the commoners' efforts.

The second element, or condition, is the formation, following the demographic collapse of the Hawaiian population, of a plantation society that became increasingly multi-ethnic, where dwindling numbers of Hawaiians lived in communities that isolated themselves and took on the characteristics of closed corporate units within which the values of sharing, “equality,” extended family, and love for the land, *aloha'aina*, became the salient parameters of a cultural identity.

The third condition emerged in the current Hawaiian movement itself, after a century and a half of virtual ethnocide in which Hawaiians lost their population and their land, and in which even their way of life (in the sense of their culture) was forbidden. Those who began to re-identify as Hawaiians had to mobilize a number of sources. There was the objectified knowledge to be found in the libraries and the museums. There was also the enormous fund of oral knowledge that could be gotten from the *kupuna*, the old people, whose roots lay not in the 18th century but in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The above conditions have no organizational force in themselves. Here it is necessary to look at contemporary conditions of existence to grasp the motivations

and desires that have molded Hawaiian selfhood. There are common experiences of the world uniting rural and urban Hawaiians, if not middle-class intellectuals, and based on the similarity of community forms, socialization, language, and sociality. These are the specific conditions of habitus formation that are, in their turn, generative of certain ways of relating to the world. These ways of relating to the world, expressed as strategies, order the way in which the disparate elements of Hawaiian culture are appropriated and interrelated in the constitution of a cultural identity. And in such terms, what appear as disparate elements of Hawaiian tradition—imported *kava* ceremonies, *luaus*, including “foreign introductions” (Handler and Linnekin 1984:284) such as *lomi lomi* salmon, *ukulele*, and slack key guitars—which are assembled into a hodgepodge that is clearly “selective” and “may be consciously shaped to promote solidarity in the present” (Handler and Linnekin 1984:283), are in reality systemically interrelated by the same habitus that performs the above selection. And insofar as the social conditions of 19th- and 20th-century Hawaiians contain the transformation of precolonial social forms, it is not really correct to argue that “the origin of cultural practices is largely irrelevant to the experience of tradition,” or that tradition consists in “an arbitrary symbolic designation” (Handler and Linnekin 1984:286).

It has been argued similarly, contrary to the culturalist notion that cultural identity is no more than “conscious models of past lifeways,” that they are firmly “grounded in unconscious experience of ongoing social networks and in the parts one has to play and ideals one has to hold to succeed within these networks” (D’Amato 1987:189). This is crucial to understanding the difference between the anthropologist and the Hawaiians. The former, inhabiting an individualist universe in which all culture is ultimately disenchanting because it is “arbitrary,” expresses conditions of social existence based upon the separation of the subject from the universe of meaning that he or she produces or engages. This takes the anthropological form of culture as text-program-rules, the unauthentic, as opposed to the romantic vision of *gemeinschaft*, or genuine culture. However fashionable it has now become, finally, to obliterate the romantic vision by claiming that all culture, all history, all tradition is similarly constructed and therefore unauthentic, there is a serious gap in the argument. Sapir and even Tönnies would never have disputed the constructed nature of culture. The truth-value of tradition was never at issue. Rather the authenticity to which they refer is of an existential nature, in the relation between cultural producers and their products. This in turn is related to differences in the way the subject is constituted. In a context where the subject’s identity is embedded in, or dependent upon, a larger encompassing set of relations, the objects, which to us may appear as mere symbols, are in fact constitutive of the participant’s identity. Thus, although it is certainly the case that the history constructed by Hawaiians in the process of forging an identity consists in the attribution of meaning to the world, this attributive practice is driven by a structure of desire and motivation that is embedded in a specifically Hawaiian reality, one that is in its turn conditioned by local, regional, and global social and economic processes.

The conditions of Hawaiian existence appear in the form of constraints that guide the strategy of history making. And this history making consists, in Western

terms, in transferring the model of 19th-century Hawaiian culture to the dawn of history and treating what Europeans think of as classical Hawaiian society as just the first of several imports. Hawaiian-Hawaiian history is thus the inversion of European-Hawaiian history. It takes the modern for the ancient and the “ancient” for the beginning of the modern.

Ku was just used. . . . And they even created an image . . . Call him on different names, Kuka’ilimoku.¹¹ . . . And they trying to say that was part of Ku’s *kino laus*,¹² a *tiki* to fight, to stand certain times of the year. . . . Or maybe Ku was dominant at that time all over the world. Was they Ku’in all over at that time? Early Seventeen, Sixteen hundreds . . . everyone was out looking for property. All Europe had boats out . . . Spanish was out there. Fifteen hundreds everybody started lookin for that gold. Who was dominant, real heavy, Seventeen hundreds with Kamehameha? . . . It was Ku all over the world!

Who was he. What we got to call him *ali’i*, king. Bullshit! The Napoleon of the Pacific, the Julius Caesar of Hawaii. [interview in Ka’u, 1985]

This politicization of the myth of Hawaiian sovereignty was powerful enough to impress itself upon the standard version of Hawaiian history as written by the White colonialists. The renowned volumes by Abraham Fornander, *An Account of the Polynesian Race: Its Origins and Migrations* (1969), first published in the last century, which have been used as a standard reference up to the present, recount a similar version of the original Hawaiians followed by a period of migration and the establishment of the Hawaiian chiefly dynasties from Tahiti.¹³ Needless to say, Fornander is one of the authors most appreciated by modern Hawaiians who are consciously engaged in studying their past. He is very often cited as the foremost authority on Hawaiian history as against more recent archeologists who have based their models of Hawaiian social evolution on modern anthropological theory.¹⁴

Mythology as the Politics of History

The common understanding of history, peculiar to modern Western society, is one that consists in a stream of events, a temporal continuum whose empirical existence is unquestionable. One might well argue that the temporal continuum punctuated by great events is our own mythology, but I shall not attempt to do that here.¹⁵ It is only necessary to point out that exercises in the deconstruction of events that turn out, on closer examination, to be heavily interpreted (e.g., the French Revolution and other revolutions) demonstrate the degree to which they are integral parts of the way in which we forge and reinforce our own identity.

Greek national identity was created out of a European cosmology that placed Ancient Greece at the summit of the ancestry of Western Civilization. The establishment of a particular history was the work of identity construction, both for Europe and for Greece as an emergent periphery in the European world system. Greek nationalists found their past in the institutional memory of expanding Europe. The Greek past was not opposed to the expansionism of the present but was seen as its democratic, individualist, and commercial foundation. Ancient Greece

was the essence of the modern, of everything that was positive in the present and hoped for in the future, its philosophy and science as well as its politics. These concerns of the cultural elites of Europe as well as those of their Mediterranean vassals formed the selective environment for the particular version of Greek history that was destined to become official.

Hawaiian history is constructed out of entirely different circumstances. It is, contrary to Greek history, based on identity entirely opposed to Western modernity. If the former finds its source in the European imagination of its own past, the latter finds its sources in the real experience of the context of Euro-American domination. Greek history internalizes the external gaze of its European other, making Greece, in this fashion, the ancestor of Europe instead of a mere political and economic periphery. And it was, of course, forged by a peripheral elite. Hawaiian history extricates itself from Western dominance by projecting a value system produced in the modern context onto an aboriginal past. This kind of history would seem to have some kind of systemic basis among the colonized peoples of the world. African socialism and American Indian egalitarian and "ecological" values are projected onto the past as the essence of cultural traditions that can be brought back to life by breaking with the present. The Western historical reality may, however, be very much the inverse of these representations, however irrelevant this must prove to be.

If history is largely mythical, it is because the politics of identity consists in anchoring the present in a viable past. The past is, thus, constructed according to the conditions and desires of those who produce historical texts in the present. This is as true of our own history as of anyone else's.

Notes

¹Roger Keesing, who has been a major force in developing an analysis of cultural movements in terms of the politics of identity and especially the way in which colonial classifications may be turned against colonial powers by those so classified, has himself been the target of recent criticism by native activists (Keesing 1989, 1991). This is partly due to a Gramscian cognitivism that tends to view all culture as misrepresentation. Thus, in spite of his important contributions to an understanding of the politics of representation, he does not consider that this extremely "disenchanted" view of tradition is largely irrelevant to the practice of identity, which has nothing whatsoever to do with questions of truth-value. If all cultural representations are false, then so is this one.

For Hawaiians, anthropologists in general (and Keesing in particular) are part of the colonizing horde because they seek to take away from us the power to define who and what we are, and how we should behave politically and culturally. [Trask 1991:162]

²Abraham Fornander, a Swede by origin, who was a judge in Hawaii during the second half of the 19th century, is well known for his massive historical scholarship concerning Polynesia, which includes, among other works, *The Polynesian Race* (1969) and the enormous edited work, *Hawaiian Antiquities* (1916).

³Whose subjects are, thankfully, dead and cannot protest the historian's vision of reality.

⁴See Bernal's *Black Athena* (1987) for a powerful example of the relation between European identity and academic discourse.

⁵This version was presented by Vansina in a seminar given at University College London in the spring of 1974. I have not found any published reference to this interpretation, so it is possible that it did not survive subsequent discussions.

⁶This passage from Sahlins's *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities* (1981) should not be mistaken for a single myth even though it appears in small print offset from the surrounding text as if it were a quotation. In fact, it is Sahlins's own collation and paraphrase of a number of sources and a selective condensation of themes that are relevant to his discussion. The variants of the Paa legend do, however, differ substantially on a number of points. The opposition between Paa and Lonopele is quite ambivalent in one version in which Paa implores Lonokaheo to become ruling chief in Hawaii (Beckwith 1974:372–373). In versions collected by Fornander, both Paa and his ruling chief Pili-kaieia come from Western Polynesia—from Upolu and/or Vavau in Samoa, and Tonga, respectively (Fornander 1969, 2:33–34).

⁷The aboriginal state, however, may also be referred to negatively in terms of political anarchy (egalitarian) and a general lack of order.

⁸The *kapu* system, as it is called, which was the basis of sacred power in Hawaii, was formally ended by an event that has even been referred to as a cultural revolution in which the second king of all the islands, Kamehameha II (Liholiho), conceding to the demands of his very authoritarian mother Kahamanu, and after consuming a boat load of rum, partook of a meal together with her, thus breaking a principal *kapu* and signaling the royal rejection of the former basis of power. This unleashed a short civil war that was won by the Kahamanu faction with Euro-American military aid, driving many priests underground and paving the way for the soon-to-arrive missionaries as well as for a core of Hawaiian cultural opposition. It should be noted that the abolition of the *kapu* law occurred in a situation where the basis of aristocratic power was already embedded in world trade, Western credit, and Western military presence.

⁹Pele is the famous goddess of the volcano. The Island of Hawaii is known even today for its active volcanoes, especially Mauna Loa and Kilauea, the latter of which is the dwelling place of the goddess. Pele today represents the land and the people of the land even if she, too, comes from Kahiki. She is associated with the sacredness of the land and the defense of the people.

¹⁰It would be more correct to say that the Hawaiians' version of their own history remains as a subaltern challenge to the dominant institutionalized discourse of museums and universities.

¹¹Kuka'ilimoku, "Ku-the-island-snatcher," is the most aggressive form that can be taken by the generic phallic god of war and the sea, Ku.

¹²*Kino lau* means "image" and refers to the different forms that can be taken by a more general phenomenon, or to the representation of one form in another. The meaning of the word *Kane*, one of the major gods, is simply "Man," and Man is the *kino lau* of *Kane*, just as *Kane* is a kind of generic man. The different forms of the major gods, of which there are very many indeed, represent different concrete manifestations or aspects of the more general forms.

¹³The original was published in the years 1878, 1880, and 1885, in three separate volumes. Fornander, who served as circuit judge in the islands, was a good friend of the royal family.

The work itself took many years to complete and was based on extensive oral historical research into the traditions of the various Hawaiian islands. Although steeped in the oral traditions of Hawaii, Fornander does not reproduce the opposition between a pre- and a post-Tahitian political era, maintaining a more thoroughgoing migratory vision in which earlier dynasties are replaced by later ones. This has come down to us in notions of an earlier Marquesan migration and a later Tahitian migration.

¹⁴The Hawaiians' own histories are decidedly nonevolutionary, as opposed to the current academic versions that treat Hawaii as a test case of internal evolution from a more egalitarian to a quasi-state society without outside contact of any significance (Cordy 1981; Kirch 1984; Sahlins 1958).

¹⁵For a discussion see Friedman (1985).

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