The Culture of Culture Contact: Refractions from Polynesia*

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The moments when different cultures first came into contact were occasions of wonder and uncertainty, full of dramatic potential. Each meeting was a confrontation with an unknown more unfathomable than any other social event. The dynamics of such occasions are matters of uncertainty also for the historian especially if, as is usually the case, the historian has a closer affinity with, and better insight into, the behavior of one party. Moreover, historical sources are most likely to have been generated by one side only, making attempts to understand the process of contact hostage to partisan accounts. Further, studies of culture contact often suffer a teleological fallacy: knowledge of the later outcome of contact influences perception of the nature of early contact, and even of first contact. Thus a history of displacement gives rise to explanations of first contact couched in terms of aggression and intrusion; a history of acculturation or assimilation gives rise to collaborative explanations.

One of the contributions of modern Pacific historiography to the study of culture contact is the development of a third model, which may be called postcolonial in its emphasis on native rationality and practicality. According to this scenario, Pacific Islanders were neither

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trammelled nor victimized; they were active agents, not passive, in the
making of their new histories in the context of Euro-American con-
tact. This “indigenous agency” perspective was taken so far in some
publications as to discount the role of foreigners in Pacific Islands his-
torical change, accentuating the role of islanders to such an extent that
the new historians came to be seen by Pacific Islanders as apologists for
colonialism and exploitation, and as deniers of depopulation. The sense
of outrage appears in recent nativist histories from Hawai‘i and New
Zealand, where the effects of dispossession have been greatest, and in
reactions from a century-old Pacific Islander population in Australia
whose ancestors were relocated by labor recruitment. For these critics,
and for historians who do not wish to concede ground to these nativist
outlooks, the willingness to incorporate a native perspective against the
reality that all the written evidence was generated from the other side
presents an epistemological challenge that has been only partly met.

Culture contact was not necessarily either a meeting of two worlds,
or a meeting of raw instinct, although it is often portrayed in terms of
“two worlds” and examples of Hobbesian, “state of nature” ethics are
not hard to find. The polemical potential of partisan history thus raised
may be avoided by the recognition that the events of culture contact
present a pattern that is neither implicit in later events nor shaped by
the existing cultures of the contacting parties. Culture-contact occa-
sions elicited forms of behavior that might reasonably be described as
not being part of the normal cultural expressions of the parties
involved. They belonged, in other words, to the culture of contact
only, not to the culture of daily life or the culture of normal experience.

There are significant differences between the processes of early cul-
ture contact in the Pacific Islands and the corresponding processes else-
where.\(^1\) These differences cluster around the fact that meeting Euro-
peans was for Polynesians an experience more novel and less explicable
in ordinary terms than was usual in most other places. Polynesian-European
contact may be considered to be at the extreme end of a contin-
num. At the other end of the continuum lies the variety of European-
Asian encounters, which are distinguished by the fact that many parts
of coastal Asia were already at the time of European discovery part of
an international or intercultural network. Europeans were not the first
foreigners from afar to come to Calicut or Malacca or Ceram; they were
merely a different set of foreigners, and perhaps they conducted their

trade in different ways and associated military force with it more or less than their competitors and precursors did, but there was a greater degree of comparability or approximate equivalence between “native” (for want of a better collective term) and European than occurred in Polynesia. Religious and social change from contact with Chinese and Indian merchants, and with Muslims from farther west, was already well established. Foreigners of strange appearance, dress, language, and religion were already part of the cultural landscape. Categories in native thought must already have existed, even in places somewhat off the beaten track, to accommodate the existence of foreigners. The arrival of Europeans therefore was a novelty rather than a shock. If anything was shocking it might have been their military technology, but little else was radically different from other people.

In contrast, when Europeans arrived in Polynesia, they were not simply a variation on a theme. With the coming of Europeans, the unthinkable happened. Just how incomprehensible it was is the subject of debate, but that the nature of early contact differs from that experienced elsewhere is due to the extreme remoteness of insular Polynesia, and indeed the focus of the sources and the later literature is on the more remote parts of that region. Polynesians were not merely isolated—they were totally quarantined. The major archipelagos of Eastern Polynesia (New Zealand, the Marquesas, Hawai‘i, Tahiti and the Society Islands, and the Cook Islands) had been cut off from contact even with each other for some centuries before the late-eighteenth-century explorations. Such contact as might have taken place was with others of their own kind, Polynesians whose languages were still largely mutually intelligible, with the same gods, social organization, social customs, foods, and technology. Their isolation had lasted long enough for their knowledge of more distant Polynesian groups to have passed into the shadowy realm of myth. Distant places blurred with the supernatural; or to put it another way, mystical places were thought of as having physical form and location. Even in western Polynesia, where the inter-archipelagic distances are not as great, they inhabited an almost completely closed world in which three major archipelagos (Tonga, Samoa, and Fiji) were in regular, even intimate, contact, but had no ordinary communication beyond their own local region. Thus Polynesians did not know people who were not like themselves in almost every material particular. They had and could have had no mental categories to

accommodate the new arrivals of the late eighteenth century. First contact in Polynesia was therefore more analogous to the Colombian encounter than to any other contact in the history of European expansion. It had the potential to provoke a cosmogenic crisis. Whether it did so is a matter of some controversy. However, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that for both Europeans and Polynesians, the experience of culture contact contained significant differences from the usual pattern.

**Models of Culture Contact**

Culture contact generally has been conceptualized in ways that reflect the usual models of historical interpretation. A popular conceptual framework is the dualism of conflict and consensus. These categories correspond roughly to an outcome-model of assimilation or acculturation on the one hand, and displacement on the other. Pacific historians on the whole have avoided a conflict model of culture contact, preferring instead to see the development of relationships between Westerners and islanders as collaborative. Without the obliteration of traditional culture, continuity has been the dominant theme, and thus a displacement model does not have much application except in Hawai‘i and New Zealand, where large-scale foreign settlement was overwhelming. Without displacement, the case for a conflict model is weak, but not entirely absent. For example, the now derided “fatal impact” interpretations and the more recent nationalist or “nativist” interpretations from Hawai‘i present a “conflict” scenario without overt conquest and oppression but with cultural displacement nonetheless.  

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2. At least as usually imagined. See Bitterli, *Cultures in Conflict*, p. 72 for the supposed perceptions of Europeans by the Caribs, and the conventional view of the Central American perceptions. For technological reasons, Europeans would have seemed less strange to continental peoples of Central America than they did to the islanders of either the Caribbean or the Pacific.

3. Conflict seems generally to be the most common model. See Bitterli, *Cultures in Conflict*, and Fagan, *Clash of Cultures*.

The fatal impact thesis is a variety of historical idealism embracing the following propositions: contact between Pacific Islanders and Europeans was an epistemological shock to the former, who classified the latter as supernatural; contact was also a psychological shock, in which the islanders questioned their own identities and lost their sense of mastery of their own situations; contact was a cultural shock in which role expectations became confused and normal responses became inappropriate. Altogether, the European encounter was such a severe cultural and psychological shock as to have fatal consequences for populations and cultures alike. The introduction of exotic diseases and tobacco and alcohol use were both biologically and socially destructive; while the introduction of values such as materialism, practices such as prostitution, and a new religion that was not rooted in the existing cultural fabric caused demoralization and anomie. The “fatal impact” thesis thus holds that the effects of contact on a pristine society were wholly deleterious. The interpretation is perfectly congruent with the eighteenth-century “noble savage, civilized decadence” dualism. While a good deal of the destruction was caused by material agents (microbes, alcohol, industrial products), the “fatal impact” thesis is distinguished by its emphasis on the intellectual and emotional consequences of contact. To this extent, the thesis may be classified as assuming an idealist mechanism as distinct from the materialist bias of conflict or displacement theories.

Pacific historians have on the whole rejected the “fatal impact” and in doing so, implicitly rejected idealism. However, they have not wholeheartedly embraced materialism. Rather, they envisage a pragmatic empiricism, emphasizing “islander agency” and negotiated interactions, stressing the pragmatism and rationalism of the islanders, which was certainly evident in their exploration of European attributes and culture, and their selectivity and discrimination in borrowing and incorporating foreign articles into their material culture. They stressed the Polynesians’ ready exploitation of their bargaining strength, noticing their success in having their own way in exchange rates and choice of

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commodities. The admiration for the "rational savage" became practically a mantra running through the historiography of an entire generation. However, this approach downplayed the cultural consequences of contact, which were dismissed as simply the rational choices made by intelligent people in their selective adoption of foreign ways. Similarly, the demographic consequences of contact were all but denied, notwithstanding cases of catastrophic collapse.⁸

However, this historiographical revisionism, which was as much intended to rehabilitate Polynesians as to elucidate their history,⁹ stressed cultural continuity and thus explained culture contact behavior in terms of the cultural status quo ante. Whereas the "fateful impact" and earlier mission-inspired histories emphasized discontinuity, the new historians strove to find traditional precedents or analogues to inform the contact behavior. In this way they asserted a native assimilation of gift exchange to trade, sexual hospitality to prostitution, and traditional voyaging to enlistment on ships. The new historians were careful to distinguish themselves from other idealists whose interpretations seemed sentimental, such as Alan Moorehead of "Fatal Impact" fame, and E. W. Docker, the pioneer historian of the labor trade,¹⁰ and the earlier generation of missionary or mission-inspired historians.¹¹ Early anthropologist-historians such as Pitt-Rivers were also pro-native sympathizers whose orientation was distinctly more idealist than materialist.¹² These interpretations with their sympathetic portrayal of islanders were often described by the revisionists as racist in demeaning the capacity of the islanders for independent, rational action. To describe islanders as the victims of history was understood to be asserting that they were merely passive, inadequate people unable to frame their own responses or make their own choices. Such representations (or misrepresentations) of earlier historiography served to define the new rationalist school and allowed their less sympathetic outlook to be justified as scholarly and fair-minded.

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¹¹ Howe, "Fate of the 'Savage'.
Whereas earlier scholars on the whole, subscribing to the displacement model of culture contact, have little to say about the expansion of horizons and opportunities that culture contact presented, this last is practically an article of faith among the new rationalists who, in advancing an acculturative model of culture contact, believed that they were raising the status of Polynesians (and other Pacific Islanders) from receivers to takers, from passive to active, from victims or beneficiaries to agents and perpetrators, makers of their own history.

Wishing to distinguish themselves from the older idealists, but without wanting to embrace Marxism either, Pacific historians of the last half-century have on the whole adopted a rigorous if conservative empiricism that left them ill-equipped to engage with a new brand of idealists including both structuralists and postmodernists. The foremost exponent of the former is anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, and of the latter, Greg Dening. Of Sahlins and structuralism, more will be said below. The postmodern tendency in culture contact historiography is to consider contact situations more significant for their universal aspects than for their unique features. More particularly, this trend in contact studies is less about the study of social change in primitive society, or about the dynamics of the meeting, than about the cultural history of nos. This is reflexive history rather than contact history as such. Said’s Orientalism, a main inspiration, has very little to do with the realities of Europe’s relationships with Asia; it is instead about European perceptions of Asia and even European self-perceptions in the context of meeting Asia. Said and those who work in the same paradigm would perhaps respond that perceptions are a component of contact history. Sometimes they are not; a history of perceptions may be quite divorced from any actual contact. Conversely, culturally determined perceptions often have no place among the realities of contact on the frontier.

This, however, is not how the new postmodern idealists see it; to them, the cultural component of knowing makes the quest of objective knowledge problematic. The culture of the observer is so influential a factor in the observation that reality is always represented rather than apprehended. While Dening denies that his position is extreme philosophical idealism or solipsism, his perspective makes it difficult to explain how and why things happen. His forte is in elaborating meanings via metaphor and allusion. His historical characters encounter

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each other only in their own meanings. It is an extreme statement of a fairly commonplace truth, but it makes culture contact seem like Zeno’s paradox: people approach ever closer, but never meet.\textsuperscript{16} They trade, they injure, they observe, they talk and listen and copulate, but their minds do not engage. There is always a cognitive and affective screen making true perception and true understanding between them illusory. Similarly for the historian, the contact relationships are incomprehensible because the evidence is merely texts and these are never comprehensive, complete, or transparent. Moreover we read them the only way we can, and that is according to the meaning that they have for us today. The screen of culture separating voyager from native also serves to separate the historian from the voyager and his journal. The historian therefore is at a loss to understand cross-cultural relationships.

Such a view is unnecessarily defeatist, owing more to philosophy than to historical method. The evidence quite clearly establishes that Polynesians and Europeans communicated in ways that elicited responses that were congruent with the intentions of the communication. In other words, they understood each other. When the crew of the \textit{Dolphin} met the inhabitants of Tahiti in 1767, mutual intelligibility at the level sought was practically instantaneous. By sign language and onomatopoeic utterances the sailors made it perfectly clear to the Tahitians that they wanted provisions and water, and the Tahitians grasped immediately the notion of price when goods were offered in exchange. So did the Hawaiians and other Polynesians. Bougainville, the second European discoverer of Tahiti, learned quite a lot about Tahitian society after only nine days there and without a single word or cognate in common. Indeed, he made a greater mistake about the physical geography than he did about social organization. Explorers in general quickly learned enough local language to be able to elicit a good deal of information about Polynesian society and culture, so much so that their journals continue to provide a baseline for subsequent anthropological and historical research. However, there are certainly aspects of early contacts that are difficult to understand, and that might yet yield to new, unthought-of interpretations.\textsuperscript{17} European preconceptions, however, were not capable of imposing a screen of the opacity supposed by the postmodernists.

\textsuperscript{16} Dening’s works include \textit{Islands and Beaches} (Carleton: Melbourne University Press, 1980) and \textit{The Bounty: An Ethnographic History} (History Department, University of Melbourne, 1988).

\textsuperscript{17} Greg Dening, “Possessing Tahiti,” \textit{Archaeology in Oceania} 21, no. 1 (1986): 108.
THE SAHLINS CONTROVERSY AND THE SUPERNATURAL
IN CULTURE CONTACT

There is a consistency in Polynesian reactions to the arrival of Europeans across both time and space that is not adequately accounted for either by assimilating contact behavior with precontact customs or by pragmatic rationalism. W. H. Pearson attempted to account for it by suggesting that Polynesians were sufficiently mobile for there to be a pan-Polynesian custom of receiving strangers from abroad, and these customs were applied to Europeans when they first arrived. Meritorious as the argument is, it does not account for all aspects of early contact behavior, and especially for what happened after the first meeting.\(^{18}\)

The issue hinges on the extent to which Polynesians regarded their encounters with Europeans as analogous to their meetings with other Polynesians, or as a fundamentally different category of experience. It is argued below that the evidence points to a separate category. One path by which the encounter would be so classified is to suppose that Polynesians regarded Europeans as gods. It has been suggested recently that Polynesian concepts of the supernatural explain the rapacious thievery about which every explorer complained, and the eagerness that nubile young women should copulate with sailors, in that these actions resemble the unrestrained eagerness that Polynesians showed on religious festivals to appropriate attributes of divinity.\(^{19}\)

For perhaps a century and a half, writers on early contact in Polynesia asserted that when Europeans first arrived, they were taken for gods. The explorers themselves seemed to have picked up the idea, which thereby found its way into the source literature, but the missionaries who followed in their wake got the same idea from the islanders. The words that Polynesians coined to identify the foreigners—including popoa (Society Islands), papalangi (Tonga and Samoa), and pakeha (New Zealand)—imply a belief in their supernatural provenance.\(^{20}\)

That primitive peoples on their first encounters with Europeans mistook them for gods soon passed into European folklore, and the mis-


treatment that indigenous peoples suffered subsequently at Europeans’ hands seemed all the more reproachful for the divine dignity that had originally been bestowed on them.

For the historians of the age of decolonization, however, these reports seemed incredible. The spirit of the age demanded sentiments of racial equality, and primitive rationality was both an article of faith and demonstrable empirically. The new rationalist historians simply rejected the notion that Polynesians could ever have thought Europeans were supernatural. The idea embarrassed them, as well as contradicted their rationalist perception of the native mind and the apparent pragmatism of contact relations. It was the sort of idea that appealed to “fatal impact” theorists whose work was so comprehensively rejected. Tainted by association, the idea of the supernatural European was summarily dismissed. An apparent exception appeared in an early article by Hawai‘i historian Gavan Daws, who accepted that Hawaiians believed Captain Cook to be the god Lono. However, there were particular circumstances: Cook had arrived in Hawai‘i at the time of a festival, the makahikā, which was the annual visit of Lono. Moreover, like Lono, Cook circumnavigated Hawai‘i clockwise, his sails resembling the cloth-drapped cruciform poles that heralded Lono’s presence. The resemblance did not stop there: Lono was ritually killed at the end of the festival; Cook was killed more or less according to the same schedule. Throughout, Cook was addressed as Lono, and treated with extraordinary veneration.21

However, there was no suggestion in Daws’s essay that Europeans generally were regarded as gods, and the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the Hawaiian perceptions of Cook were not duplicated at other times or elsewhere. It seemed that only Cook was divine. Indeed, it was only the priests of Lono who thought him so, and it was their rivals, the chiefs of the war god, Ku, who killed him. Thus, Daws’s contribution was not in asserting the divinity of Europeans in Hawaiian eyes, but in suggesting that contact events with Europeans had to be understood in terms of Polynesian politics. Polynesians had a history and were having a history when Europeans stumbled in. Careful textual reading and a constructive imagination aided by sound ethnographic information could explain contact history by locating it in the Polynesian historical context. Daws’s argument therefore confirmed rather than contradicted the emerging paradigm of Pacific contact history.

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The same events and the question of putative divinity were of interest to anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, for whom the intrusion of Europeans into Hawaiian history had an added significance. For Sahlins the death of Captain Cook provided a test case for theoretical questions in anthropology, and in particular the relationship between culture and history: whether events have a logic of their own as historians believe, or whether they are merely manifestations of long-term structural characteristics of society. At issue was the capacity of anthropology to explain social change. The death of Captain Cook was to show how a structure can be upset by an event that itself owes its various meanings to the respective structures of its contexts. This event in Hawaiian history was pregnant with implications for the future because it occurred at a point where two structures normally occupying different worlds came into contact. As Sahlins put it, a conjuncture occurred between two structures. The conjuncture came to have a structure of its own: the structure of the conjuncture, and if this structure of the conjuncture could be explicated then we would understand not just why Captain Cook died, but how cultures change when they come into contact.²²

Sahlins’s hypothesis depended on a particular understanding of the events of December 1778 to February 1779. The point was that the Hawaiians, like all peoples, behaved according to their understanding of events. For something as unprecedented as the arrival of Europeans, their understandings came from the repertoire of myth that provided the nearest parallels, and in this case, the parallels were extraordinarily close. Overall, although Hawaiians seemed to be reacting to events simply as events as they happened, their strategies in the long term can be seen as fitting in with the meanings that they already possessed. Thus, although Sahlins eschewed the idealist-materialist polarization, his interpretation was distinguished from the orthodox historiography by its idealist elements, and in particular the subtlety of his reconstruction of the Hawaiian mentality. Central to the argument was the claim that Cook was generally taken to be the god Lono.

The Journal of Pacific History published review articles of the two books in which Sahlins developed his interpretation. Neither reviewer (both had postmodernist credentials) specifically addressed his interpretation of the historical events, though both gave their general

²² Sahlins developed these arguments in several publications but mainly Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities. Several essays dealing with the same problem in different contexts are published in Islands of History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
approval, even admiration. This was typical of the historiographical response: Sahlins was much admired, but not emulated. Nor was he exposed to any published criticism by historians notwithstanding the fact that his account of the death of Captain Cook lent itself to misinterpretation. Sahlins was understood as saying that Cook was killed because Hawaiians could not understand his visit in any other way than as Lono’s annual return. Not realizing that he was a man, they killed Cook simply because that was always the fate of the god Lono when he came ashore to confront the chiefs of the god Ku each year. This seemed to take history out of the explanation altogether: Cook’s own actions, the disputes over property, the actions of his crew, the imperfect communication between the two peoples, were all basically irrelevant as causes of Cook’s death because the Hawaiians were constrained to act according to the requirements of the ritual cycle. They did not perceive events as they really were, but instead perceived them as the realization of the myth. In other words, it was all fore-ordained.

When eventually a challenge to Sahlins was published, it came not from a Pacific historian, but from an anthropologist, Gananath Obeyesekere, who, though expressing an orientation toward structuralism, couched his critique in the language of the empirical rationalism of what had become historical orthodoxy. He argued that Hawaiian behavior, at the time of first contact and subsequently, exhibited both pragmatism and rationality; it was inconceivable that Hawaiians could have regarded the Europeans as divine because they obviously were not; Cook was responsible for his own death because of his own hubris and violent ill temper. European misjudgment, not Hawaiian myth or structure, holds the key to those unhappy events. The idea that Cook was thought to be a god was wholly European. Indeed, Europeans always held that native peoples everywhere believed they were gods, and no sooner had news of the great navigator’s death reached England than

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his status as a Hawaiian god was the subject of various literary ventures. Inevitably it passed into European general knowledge that this was how Hawaiians had regarded Cook. Travelers to Hawai‘i fed the idea to the Hawaiians with their unending questions about him, so that Hawaiians soon learned that that was what Europeans wanted to hear. Cook was thus apothesized not by Hawaiian myth-acting, but by European myth-making.  

Sahlins responded with an entire book dissecting Obeyesekere’s argument, pointing out among other things the fatal flaw that while Obeyesekere’s Hawaiians were too rational to allow structure to overwhelm experience, the English were trapped in their own structures (“natives always think Europeans are gods”), which prevented them from understanding mundane experience, in this case, Hawaiian testimony about the death of Cook. The consensus among followers of the debate seems to be that Sahlins won, but historians have remained cautious. Obeyesekere’s rationalist challenge received warmer reviews than Sahlins’s original thesis, and of the rejoinder, the Journal of Pacific History’s reviewer awarded the fight to Obeyesekere on points.

The debate was not about Sahlins’s structuralism as such, but about the use of evidence. Its significance is that it brought into the open what historians had been loath to broach: the uncomfortable question, “Did Polynesians think that Europeans were gods, and if so what part did this play in the development of culture contact relationships?” Part of the reluctance of historians to accept that they did arises from confusing the Christian idea of God with the Polynesian, a failing that Sahlins also attributes to Obeyesekere. The issue was not so much that a god could be born as a man, or that a god could be present in a man, but that in Polynesian thought there was no fundamental distinction between gods and men. Men, of course, mostly were not gods: they were not immortal, and did not have exceptional powers. But men were not all the same. Some men could be gods; chiefs were gods, or very close to it, and yet could suffer human infirmities, become sick, and die. After death they continued to be gods but with different attributes from those they had formerly. When gods did appear among men, they seemed in

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every respect to be men—that is why they were mistaken for men, could impregnate women, and so on. Similarly, objects could be gods, and so could birds and fish. Historians have not understood the extent to which anything out of the ordinary was regarded by Polynesians as supernatural in substance or origin—even the most mundane objects, to say nothing of subtle contrivances like pocket watches, compasses, and muskets. Thus there was no impediment in Polynesian thought to Europeans being gods. It was neither blaspheous nor gullible that they should have classified as gods these extraordinary beings who had doors in their bodies whence objects could be produced, who breathed fire, could change their skins, could make people sick, and could kill people at a distance through having domesticated thunder and lightning. Since Polynesian myths are full of stories of young women bearing the children of gods, it is scarcely to be wondered at that in the eighteenth century Polynesian girls threw themselves at the first sailors they saw, not only in Tahiti and Hawai‘i, but elsewhere also.

**European Perceptions**

If Polynesian perceptions were so important in shaping their response to Europeans, then European perceptions likewise deserve some scrutiny. The currency of the "noble savage" belief has been invoked to explain the early harmony between the two peoples, but it was more a case of the relationship evoking the image. The relationship between Europeans and Polynesians in their early encounters is bound up with the evolving philosophical classification of races and the coincidence of the most influential meetings with the efflorescence of eighteenth-century science. The meeting with Polynesia occasioned a reassessment of worldview for Europeans, but the historiography of this process is as consensual as the other is controversial.\(^29\) The rediscovery of Polynesia\(^30\) at precisely the time that noble savage enthusiasm reached its peak in France was of the first importance for subsequent imaginings. The continued perception of Polynesia by Europeans as an earthly paradise,

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\(^{30}\) For the purpose of this discussion earlier contacts with parts of Polynesia may be ignored, having been ephemeral both in terms of European perceptions and their consequences for Polynesia. These include the expeditions of the Spanish in 1595; the Dutch in 1616, 1642, and 1722; and the English in 1765.
and its continued marketing in those terms by the travel industry, is the expression of a structure that came into being in 1767. Ever since that initial encounter there have been travelers who have fled to Tahiti or other Pacific destinations looking for and expecting to find what could not be found elsewhere. Paul Gauguin was neither the first nor the last romantic of that kind. 31 Half a century before Gauguin, Herman Melville deserted his whaling ship in the Marquesas Islands and subsequently wrote a novel that promoted the antithesis of primitive virtue and civilized decadence. 32 So convincing was Melville’s experience-based fiction that for years afterward travelers visited the islands trying to locate the scenes and people he wrote about.

Other places have been far less subject to utopian or romantic representation. Utopia, El Dorado, and Montaigne’s virtuous cannibals were all placed in South America; but whereas the literary world always understood that these places were fictitious, created for philosophical purposes, utopian status was actually conferred on Polynesia. In a similar contrast, what was once the “mysterious Orient” had multiple images, but along with squalor, disease, and teeming populations was a mystique of fabulous wealth, mystery, the promise of spiritual enlightenment, and sensual allure. Europeans never perceived Polynesia in such braided terms: as a utopia it was always natural, secular, and sensual.

The reason for this particular image of Polynesia is that Tahiti was discovered twice in 1767, first by the English (Captain Samuel Wallis in HMS Dolphin), and second by a French expedition led by Louis Antoine de Bougainville. Bougainville’s narrative of his circumnavigation gave prime position to its highlight (although this was by no means the objective of the voyage or its most important result): the nine days on Tahiti where human society appeared free, uninhibited, and happy. 33 Long before Bougainville’s book was published, however, the expedition’s naturalist, Philibert Commerson, published a brief account that in its enthusiasm for primitive life seemed to confirm the philosophy of Rousseau’s Discourses, that natural man was naturally virtuous and guilt-free, and that reason and accomplishment were corrupting and decadent. Diderot, among others, used the image of Tahiti both as critique of French civilization and model of its alternative a

32 Herman Melville, Moby Dick, first published in 1846, was the first of three autobiographical novels about his travels in the Pacific.
view that was reflected in popular literature as well. The enthusiastic embrace of primitivism in France probably owes more to the Comte-Bougainville-Diderot representations of Tahiti than to anything else. The specimen Tahitian, Ahutoru, whom Bougainville had brought back to France, was a good-natured, well-mannered, gentle, sentimental figure, which attributes, as part of his "natural" state, proved the superfluity of civilization as a shaper of good character. The "natural" society from which he came was represented as well ordered, its people hospitable, and the arts of love practiced with neither secrecy nor shame. As to hierarchy and authority, they existed to be sure, but Tahiti was also a place where a king could paddle his own canoe without loss of dignity. The setting for this perfect society was a supremely beautiful island, quarantined by nature, so fertile and the climate so benign that food production could hardly be called work. Bougainville likened it to the Garden of Eden. Pace Voltaire's Dr. Panguis, there really was a place where everything was for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

The impression was false in almost every particular, and was corrected by later experience, but the image nevertheless lived on as a powerful European literary convention and lent conviction and poignancy to the later, disillusioned depictions of a decadent, priest-ridden, diseased, and dispirited community. Indeed, the massacre in Samoa of members of La Pérouse's expedition in 1787 may be traced to misjudgments based on the conviction that the image of Tahiti represented ubiquitous, primitive reality. The immediate circumstances of Tahitian hospitality were usually overlooked, and these cast a different light on the first modern meeting between Tahitians and Europeans. This happened to be with Englishmen.

34 Jean-Jacques Rousseau's influential tract, A discourse upon the origin and foundation of the inequality among mankind, was published in 1761. Denis Diderot, Supplément au voyage de Bougainville, was first published in 1766, but apparently written soon after the voyage.


36 McCormick, Omai, pp. 16–18.


38 John Dunmore (trans. and ed.), The Journal of Jean-François de Galaup de la Pérouse, 1785–1788 (London: Hakluyt Society, 1904–1995); pp. liii, 395, 540. La Pérouse personally had no patience with Rousseau's speculations about natural man, but members of his expedition were impressed. La Pérouse also felt hampered in his dealings with "native" peoples by the orders of the King of France that were in effect, to err on the side of humanity, instructions that also reflected the influence of Comte or Rousseau.
Left to the English, Tahiti would never have given European culture *La Mirage Tahitienne*. The English response was more phlegmatic. It is evident from remarks of Cook both that he was acquainted with the idea of primitive perfection and also that he was not influenced by it. He was nevertheless moved to wonder—probably stimulated by his scientific companions, Banks and Solander—whether the Australian Aborigines were not perhaps happier than Europeans, and whether the Tahitians might have been better off had Europeans never contacted them. Cook, however, merely raised these questions; he did not purport to answer them, nor use them to launch into a larger philosophical discussion. If Commerson's enthusiasm for Tahiti may be credited with having fuelled the ardor of primitivism in Paris, then perhaps Cook's phlegmatism dampened such ardor on the other side of the Channel. Philosophers, such as there were, were dismayed at Cook's cultural relativism and its endorsement by Dr. Hawkesworth, which seemed to suggest cultural betrayal rather than enlightened rationalism. Whereas the French explorers' accounts sent philosophers and other literary figures into rhapsodies of enthusiasm, the corresponding English literature evoked paroxysms of ridicule and satire. Joseph Banks's amorous adventures were widely lampooned; the accounts of uninhibited sex shocked and amused, but did not compel any serious philosophical speculation. There were no philosophical flights of fancy though the questions of the nature of primitive man and the implications for human nature and social affairs generally were certainly debated among intellectuals. Away from the salon set, the contact culture of voyagers generally was more akin to Cook's phlegmatism than to Commerson's romanticism. As the Spanish and Dutch predecessors of the English and French had discovered earlier, it was well to be wary around sav-

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ages, and even demonstrations of friendship could often mask or give way to dangerous situations. The islanders found the same thing with respect to Europeans.

Thus, Europe’s encounter with Polynesia stimulated a series of questions for European intellectuals about their own place in nature and the structure and function of human society. It may be supposed, or at least asked, whether the same encounter had similar consequences for Polynesian thought. The implications of Sahlin’s and Tcherkezoff’s work are that at the very least, the Polynesian boundary between natural and supernatural was called into question. Not seeing as much of European society as Europeans saw of theirs, a more comprehensive Polynesian intellectual revolution was unlikely. Nevertheless, the Polynesians found themselves in a situation without precedent. Although their visitors might have seemed like gods, they were not gods; but even if they were, gods had never come in this form, in such numbers with such possessions or willingness to engage with men and women the way the French and English sailors did.

Understanding First Contact

In terms of shaping European perceptions and launching a permanent historical engagement, Europe’s encounters with the Pacific Islands began with the discovery of Tahiti. It was not only the beginning, but became the archetype as well, involving suspicion, ceremonial neutralization, violence, reconciliation, and finally sexual manipulation. The initial experience of HMS Dolphin at Tahiti in 1767 was fairly typical of what Tahitians and other Polynesians considered the normal way of behaving toward strangers: caution tempered with hostility, apprehension mixed with an ardent desire to be either rid of the strangers or to bring them within their power. Their first reaction was to dissuade the strangers from coming close to shore, and when that failed, they engaged in ceremonies involving long speeches and the presentation of green branches in rituals that Pearson has shown to be a pan-Polynesian formal reception of voyagers. It is clear that these ceremonies were performed somewhat unwillingly, as the Tahitians really wanted nothing to do with the visitors. Ceremonies of peace alternated with assaults that increased in scale and artfulness as each preceding

one failed. In this sequence of events the Tahitians tried to lure the English ashore by one means or another where harm might be more easily done to them. When that failed the scale of assault increased until the Tahitians realized that nothing was to be gained thereby. The English for their part desperately tried to avoid a clash so that they might procure water and fresh food. They had no difficulty getting the Tahitians to understand how to trade, but the Tahitians immediately developed their own ideas about commercial morality. Indeed, Tahitians used trade and the spectacle of seduction to launch a final, carefully planned and coordinated mass assault on the ship, which left the English no alternative but to resort to the use of their great guns, inflicting tremendous carnage.45

Peace was finally established with a good deal of nervousness on both sides. The turning point in the relationship between ship and shore was the establishment of prostitution, a trade that the old men of Tahiti were instrumental in bringing about. Before long the laws of supply and demand fixed the prices, and all other trade was spoiled in consequence. The officers’ attempts to preserve the provisions of trade were threatened by the crew extracting nails from the hull of the ship with which to pay the women whose prices had been rising steeply.46 Meanwhile, the greatest friendship seemed to prevail, and sailors could go ashore and wander about the country in perfect safety. When after only nine days (and only five days after the decisive battle), the Dolphin departed, the supposed queen of the island evinced such distress and disappointment that the ship’s company was divided as to her possible motives: genuine affection, or bitter disappointment at lost (perhaps sinister) opportunity.47

A new cultural form came into being during those few days when the Tahitians were trying to take the measure of the English. Once the normal, culturally prescribed response to voyagers had been seen to fail, the Tahitians had embarked on experimentation, first by increasing the intensity of their former conduct, and later by changing it altogether. Consequently, when Bougainville arrived several months later, the Tahitians knew how they should behave in the presence of Europeans: above all they should avoid provoking conflict, and they could obtain everything they wanted by keeping up a steady supply of women who charmed the pants off the French sailors to their enduring reputation.

46 Ibid., pp. 207–208.
for free love and unstinted hospitality. They provided an abundance of food and artifacts for trading, and they traded honestly but were expert thieves of things that were not for sale. They accepted trifles in payment. They conducted themselves with both confidence and trust. They made no attempt to attack the ship, and they evinced much sorrow when the expedition departed after nine days, instead of the agreed eighteen. This encounter demonstrates that a new panoply of behaviors had already come into being. They were not part of the usual pattern of conduct among Tahitians, either in their dealings with themselves or in their dealings with other Polynesian visitors. They came into being during and as a result of the English encounter. Trade, theft, prostitution, and hospitality would be the defining traits of the culture of culture contact.

When James Cook came two years later (1769) on a scientific mission that required a three month sojourn in Tahiti, he knew the details of Wallis’s encounter, but not those of Bougainville’s, the narrative of which was not published until 1771 in France and 1772 in England. When the Tahitians employed the same, proven strategy, Cook was aware of the contingency of Tahitian hospitality and did not mistake it for anything else. Controlling the terms of contact was a challenge even for a man of Cook’s resolution. From the beginning, the Tahitians were submissive and friendly, the greatest threat being the transmission of venereal diseases, about which Cook wrote “all I could do was to little purpose for I may safely say that I was not assisted by any one person in ye ship.” Theft also was a constant worry. However, Cook insisted on absolute consistency in all matters of discipline: Tahitian thefts and assaults were punished, either by the English or at their behest by the Tahitian chiefs; sailors who misbehaved were punished in view of the Tahitians, as Wallis had done before him. Cook’s parting reflections were typical of his unromantic outlook:

We . . . took our final leave of this people after a stay of just Three Month, the most part of which time we have been upon good terms with them: some few differences have now and then happen’d, owing partly to the want of rightly understanding one another and partly to their natural thievish dispossession which we could not at all times, neither bear with or guard against, but these have been attended with no ill consequences to either side except the first in which one of them

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was kill'd, and this I was very sorry for because from what had happen'd to them by the Dolphin I thought it would have been no hard matter to have got and kept a footing with them without bloodshed.\textsuperscript{51}

In the sequence of events we see behavior that was not typical of eighteenth century Englishmen. It was not normal for the English to treat “savages” by the same rules as they treated themselves. Nor was it normal for them to punish theft and assault among themselves as lightly as they punished transgressing Tahitians. A far more normal reaction would have been the violence of the Spanish at the Marquesas in 1595, which occasioned heavy loss of life, most of it gratuitous.\textsuperscript{52} The killings during the Dolphin’s visit were both reluctant and defensive, and the behavior of the English may be described generally as uncharacteristically restrained. Cook was certainly restrained (for all the allegations in some critiques about his violent rages and cruel punishments), and more than that, he taught his officers to practice similar prudence with the result that when they too became commanders of exploring voyages, they withheld their hands in the face of provocation and danger.\textsuperscript{53} La Pérouse’s disciplined approach to Polynesian provocation, twenty years after Cook’s first voyage, has been referred to above.

The European culture of discipline and punishment was set aside, or at least much modified; a new culture of culture contact took its place. For the Europeans this was a culture of comparative tolerance and mildness, and of attempts to understand the islanders’ point of view, respect their property rights and sovereignty, and study their culture on its own terms. Traders who followed the explorers also acted with patience and imagination for the most part to achieve their purposes, but had less compunction about the measures they would take when put at a disadvantage. In Hawai’i in 1788, the trader John Meares threatened the destruction of a town when an anchor cable was cut, if the anchor was not retrieved from the seabed.\textsuperscript{54} Whereas traders usually show us an eighteenth century version of rational behavior, the explorers generally display the glare of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

For the Polynesians, the culture of culture contact also involved set-

\textsuperscript{51} Beaglehole, Journals, I 117.
\textsuperscript{54} John Meares, Voyages Made in the Years 1788 and 1789 from China to the North-West Coast of America . . . , (London: Logographic Press, 1790 [Reprint Israel/Da Capo, Amsterdam and New York: 1967]): 341.
ting aside their everyday culture, but the substitution was circumstantial: the new form was practiced only in the presence of visiting ships, and did not become part of their daily lives. This creates a difficulty for scholars who have sought to understand island behavior in the contact zone in terms of their ordinary conduct, who explain that Polynesians were hospitable because that was an established cultural form, that they stole things because they did not understand about property rights, and that their women took to prostitution because they had always had liberal ideas about sex. 55 However, Serge Tcherkezoff has recently argued that normal sexual behavior was by no means so free and easy as travelers at the time, or scholars subsequently, portrayed it. On the contrary, island leaders tried to normalize sex between their young women and visiting sailors by performing nuptial ceremonies, just as they tried to capitalize on the opportunities by presenting women to the ships. 56 The free love that was so easily transformed into prostitution was itself the product of contact, and not a prior circumstance. Similarly, the putative indifference to property as an explanation for what Europeans called theft was not authentic Polynesian culture. Polynesians had notions of property similar to Europeans and recognized theft as theft. 57 The pattern was broadly similar elsewhere in Polynesia. In Hawai‘i the first discoverer, Cook this time, was greeted with a combination of reception ceremonies and opportunistic seizure of property, but without assault. Trade and prostitution quickly became established as the interface behaviors but without the initial violence or suspicion that had occurred during the first contact on Tahiti. 58 Cook tried unsuccessfully to prevent sex between his crew and island women, and the latter when rebuffed were both indignant and abusive. 59 This was not learned behavior: neither prostitution nor commerce as such existed previously, but nor did Europeans teach prostitution and trade to the Polynesians. These behaviors simply sprang into being in the moments of contact. Nor did prostitution and trade become part of Polynesian mainstream

59 Beaglhole, Journals, III 255–256, 475 n. 2.
culture. Brothels and markets did not become features of Polynesian village life.

Subsequent experience between the races tended to elaborate the new medial culture on the Polynesian side more than on the European. As contacts increased, experience favored the Polynesians who received repeated visits, rather than the visitors, many of whom came only once and others only several times. Contact was a way of life for those Polynesians who lived in frequented places, but it was merely a passing experience for the people of the ships.60

Conclusion

Both Tcherkezoff and Sahlins stress the supposed divinity of Europeans and offer that as an explanation for the behavior of the Polynesians toward them. Their arguments are accepted here but with the rider that as a divine visitation, the coming of Europeans had so many novel features that new ways of responding had to be and were developed. Conventional discussions of culture contact take account only of overt behavior, and that suggests that the Polynesians accommodated themselves very readily to the novelty of European discovery. The mental processes behind the behavioral adaptations are another matter. The use of adjectives like "astonished," "curious," "eager," "friendly," "hostile," "opportunistic," "dishonest," "shrewd," "generous," and so on describe but do not explain Polynesian conduct. In trying to render Polynesian behavior intelligible, historians have been inclined to focus on institutions and practices rather than mentality. Early contact historians, preoccupied with the differences between Polynesian and European, supposed confusion and bewilderment; later historians, preoccupied with asserting the fundamental psychological homogeneity of humanity, supposed that Polynesian behavior was intelligible in the same terms as their own. Recent attempts to restore mentality to Polynesian history have been extremely contentious, and reflect these earlier divisions between cultural opacity and psychological universality.

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In this context the debates about culture contact in Polynesia have missed the point, which is not about contemporary values concerning issues of postcolonial rectitude into which the rationalist historians of the 1960s and 1970s made it when they condemned the shibboleth of a stereotyped, passive native, and instituted the rational islander, working out his own destiny. They accused their predecessors of denying the Polynesians their humanity; Obeyesekere's strictures against Sahlins amount to much the same charge, that he was locking the Hawaiians into a European, colonialist stereotype. Sahlins demonstrated the futility of this strategy by suggesting in response that Obeyesekere was an agent of cultural imperialism, depriving Hawaiians of their own voice and making them into Europeans. Sahlins's work on Hawai'i should put the question of Polynesian perceptions back on the historiographical agenda. Not only that, the much-derided idealist approach needs to be revived, and attention given to the profundity of the intellectual and emotional novelty of Polynesia's discovery by the rest of the world.

On the European side the culture of culture contact took the form it did because of the influence of the Enlightenment rather than the Romantic movement, that is, by an intellectual method rather than a preconception. Europeans dealt with Polynesians as rational creatures with minds of their own, rather than as noble savage objects of admiration. On the Polynesian side the significant factor was not Polynesian ideas about sex, property, exchange, traveling, or fighting, but their ideas about gods. This cannot be understood without realizing that the Polynesians lived in a world of immanent supernaturalism. None of this is inconsistent with their trying to control, subdue, or repel Europeans, or of trying to gain whatever advantage they might. Unlike the Montezuma of obsolete American histories, the Polynesians were not disempowered by the arrival of gods and did not feel that they should surrender all they had to them; but as the rationalist historians of the 1960s and 1970s correctly averred, they recognized in their arrival an opportunity of which they might take advantage, to enrich themselves and to defeat their enemies. For the first few decades after first contact, Polynesians went about their affairs as if the coming of Europeans did not represent a turning point in their history. Their self-perception and explanations of their changing circumstances affirmed their own cultural understandings; but in their actual dealings with Europeans, their behavior was directed by the novelty of the occasion, giving rise to a new cultural form for culture contact.