

CAPTAIN COOK AS FALLEN DEITY

Gananath Obeyesekere, 1992, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Myth making in the Pacific*, Princeton University Press and Bishop Museum Press. xvii + 251 pp.

Gananath Obeyesekera's anthropological voyage started in the sixties with a study of land tenure in a Southern Sinhalese village. His most original work—in terms of ideas and concepts—was to come a little later with some path-breaking investigations into the transformation and re-constitution of religio-cultural formations in Sinhalese society.

Obeyesekera's latest book is a critical examination of a different cultural formation, namely, the European intellectual culture that has mythified encounters with non-European peoples and societies. Was captain James Cook really deified by the Hawaiians who killed him? The received wisdom in Europe as well as in Hawaii says he was, but Obeyesekere says 'no way.'

The Apotheosis of Captain Cook can be read at two levels. And indeed, the text itself has a two-level architectural design. Firstly it is a critical disengagement with Marshal Sahlin's structural anthropological reading of Hawaiian culture and a refutation of post-enlightenment academico-intellectual imagination concerning the peoples, societies and cultures in the Pacific. Secondly, it is a critical re-construction of Captain Cook's life and time in the Pacific, a project achieved by means of a close reading of shipboard journals of Cook himself and his colleagues and of some later biographies of Cook.

What is it about Cook that ignited Obeyesekere's own anthropological imagination? Popular as well as scholarly belief points out that when Cook reached Hawaii, the Hawaiians thought that this white man was their god

Lono. As soon as Cook and his men went to the shore, so goes the belief, a group of Hawaiian priests welcomed him ceremoniously and in a subsequent sacred ritual his deification was formalized. Obeyesekere rejects this assertion:

I question this "fact," which I show was created in the European imagination of the eighteenth century and after and was based on antecedent "myth models" pertaining to the redoubtable explorer cum civilizer who is a god to the "natives." To put it bluntly, I doubt that the natives created their European god; the Europeans created him for them. This "European god" is a myth of conquest, imperialism, and civilization—a triad that cannot be easily separated (p.3).

Obeyesekere's critical enterprise thus becomes a site for another imagination, meant to interrogate cultural theories as well as "facts of history" that are born out of a canonized imagination of the colonial. It is a pity that Obeyesekere does not deal with the question of how the European imagination turned their civilizing conquerors into gods. Treating the deificatory imagination of the European bourgeois and middle classes as a mere imperialist state of mind is not enough. The question of why and how European colonialism had to invent its own colonizing deities—Cook in Hawaii and Cortes in Mexico are the most well-known instances—requires an answer which may be found in the discursive history of European intellectual cultures and political transformation. An inquiry into this issue will require Obeyesekere to move beyond his preferred theoretical window of psychological anthropology which he has implicitly suggested in the text.

J.U.

Pravada thanks Vivimarie Van Der Poorten and Lakmali Gunawardena for their help in bringing out this issue.