

HISTORICAL ANTHROPOLOGY FROM A 'FREEZING JANUARY' IN 1990 TO THE PRESENT

What a pleasure it is to read *Culture and History in the Pacific* [Siikala 2021b [1990]] once again. The new, open access edition of this important volume brings back memories of my days in graduate school at the University of Chicago in the late 1990s. Such memories are bittersweet: as I write this piece in April 2021 I have just received word that my dissertation supervisor Marshall Sahlins has passed away at the age of 90. I'd like to take this opportunity, therefore, to look back at Sahlins and Chicago from my perspective as a professor at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. What was the moment of 'historical anthropology' of which *Culture and History in the Pacific* was a part? What has it become? What are the legacies of this volume and the school of thought that runs through it?

Sahlins introduced me to *Culture and History in the Pacific* as both a guide to the 'state of the art' in anthropology as well as a model which I could emulate in my own work. When the book came out, historical anthropology was making history. The stars had aligned to produce a scholarly approach which was ethnographically rich, theoretically sophisticated, and globally important. The Pacific was a major part of the story. While published in 1990, *Culture and History in the Pacific* is based on a conference that was held in Helsinki in the 'freezing January' of 1987 (Siikala 2021a: 5). It is fair, then to say that the papers in the volume were conceived in late 1986. What was happening in anthropology

in this era? What was this moment of historical anthropology?

Sherry Ortner's 1984 essay 'Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties' provides a good summation of the mood at this time. If the 1960s were about symbolism and the 1970s were about Marxism, then, Ortner argued, the 1980s were about 'practice': the dialectic between structure and agency. Although this essay is remembered for coining the phrase 'practice theory', Ortner (1984) notes that 'history' would have made an equally good keyword. Indeed, she cites Sahlins's 1981 *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities* as an example of this new trend. *Culture, History, and the Pacific* was an important volume because culture, history, and the Pacific were very much at the center of anthropological theory.

The 1980s were a time of 'blurred genres' as Geertz's (1980) famous essay (published at the beginning of the decade) put it. In that context, Sahlins's combination of anthropology and history made sense, and it had several sources. The first was a friendly rivalry with Eric Wolf, who published *Europe and the People Without History*. In 1981, the same year *Historical Metaphors* appeared, Wolf's book was a masterpiece which combined Boas and Marx to present a global history of the rise of capitalism. Another influence was Barney Cohn, an anthropologist of India who had turned to history in the late 1950s. Additionally, Sahlins's time in Paris in the late 1960s oriented him

to Lévi-Strauss's structuralism. Lévi-Strauss's intellectual and institutional rise in the French academy involved a rapprochement with Fernand Braudel and his Annales school of history. It also involves the 'Sartre-Lévi-Strauss debate', which foreshadowed much of the discussion of structure and agency in eighties anglophone anthropology. And then there were American cultural historians of France such as Natalie Zemon Davis and Robert Darnton (both of whom mentored Marshall's son Peter when he received his Ph.D. in history in 1986). In the Pacific, Sahlins discovered the Davidson school of Pacific history, which had been active in Australia since the 1950s (especially in the ANU), and researchers at the Bishop Museum in Hawai'i. All of these fed into Sahlins's work.

A key figure in this story, at least for me, was Greg Denning, whose *Islands and Beaches* (1980) and *History's Anthropology: The Death of William Gooch* (1988) bookended Sahlins's *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities* (1981) and *Islands of History* (1985). Denning's career is a map of institutions central to the study of culture and history in the Pacific. A graduate of Melbourne Uni, he took a Ph.D. at Harvard in 1971 under the direction of Douglas Oliver, then a key figure in American anthropology of the Pacific. Oliver had previously supervised Ben Finney (Mānoa anthropology alumni and professor and co-founder of the Polynesian Voyaging Society) and Tony Hooper (a keen academic organizer at Auckland Uni who would spend part of 1986 at Chicago with Valeri and Sahlins) (White 1988). Denning taught at Melbourne himself for 20 years alongside the anthropologically-adjacent historians Donna Merwick, Inga Clendinnen, and Rhys Isaac before a productive 'retirement', where he held an appointment at the ANU. Importantly, both Sahlins and Denning had guest positions at Mānoa in 1981 and deeply influenced each

other during their time on campus. When I took Sahlins's graduate seminar on historical anthropology, we read his essay 'The Discovery of the True Savage' from the newly-published festschrift *Dangerous Liaisons: Essays in Honour of Greg Denning*.

In fact, 'Culture and History in the Pacific' was just one of three conferences which epitomized for me the rich mixture of history, Pacific ethnography, and structuralism that I imbibed studying under Sahlins. In February 1983 Tony Hooper helped organize the 'Transformations of Polynesian Culture' conference in New Zealand, which brought a structuralist perspective to the long-standing comparative study of Polynesian culture. Not strictly historical, it appeared as a Polynesian Society special publication in 1985. In January of 1986 the Wenner-Gren foundation celebrated its 100th sponsored conference with a blow-out event in which they flew a who's who of anthropologists to Fez, Morocco for a week-long conference on 'symbolism through time', a conference with a significant Oceanist presence even if its topic was not specifically the Pacific. The result was the 1990 volume *Culture Through Time*. A year later in Helsinki's freezing January of 1987 'Culture and History in the Pacific' occurred and the proceedings appeared in 1990 as *Culture and History in the Pacific*.

Despite the admirable scholarly humility of the Finnish Anthropological Society, then, *Culture and History in the Pacific* was published at a central moment in a globally influential strand of anthropology produced by an overlapping network of scholars. We can trace this network by examining attendance at each conference. Valerio Valeri (an Italian student of Lévi-Strauss, Chicago faculty member, close friend of Sahlins, and scholar of Hawai'i and eastern Indonesia) was the only person who attended all three conferences. Sahlins attended 'transformations'

and ‘symbolism through time’, as did Edmund Leach. The publishing duo Tony Hooper and Judith Huntsman attended ‘transformations’ and ‘culture and history’.

This overlap was just part of a broader moment of productivity in the historical anthropology of the Pacific. In addition to Denning and Sahlins’s work, there was Valeri’s *Kingship and Sacrifice* (1985), Hanlon’s *Upon a Stone Altar* (1988), and Parmentier’s *Sacred Remains* (1987). Martha Macintyre, a Leach protégé, wrote a 1983 thesis ‘Changing Paths: An Historical Ethnography of the Traders of Tubetube’ which never got the attention it deserved—indeed, one of the strengths of Roger Keesing’s contribution to *Culture and History in the Pacific* is his highlighting of Macintyre’s work. Many more could be added to this list, which merely reflects my own scholarly genealogy.

But as I said above, books have long gestation periods and publications are lagging indicators of scholarly activity. In retrospect, *Culture and History in the Pacific* was the peak of a scholarly wave that had crested, not the next phase of a long-lasting scholarly trend.

In fact, in the 1980s a new set of voices came to the fore in a series of ‘emerging’ conferences which occurred at the same time as the ‘culture and history’ conferences. In April of 1984 The School of Advanced Research (SAR) hosted the conference ‘The Making of Ethnographic Texts’, a conference whose members would go on to develop classic pieces of ‘postmodern’ anthropology such as *Writing Culture* (1986), *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (1989). In 1987 a session on ‘decolonizing anthropology’ was held at the American Anthropological Association meetings in Chicago which would result in the 1991 publication of *Decolonizing Anthropology*, which is now a classic (at least in America). A 1989 conference, again at

SAR, on ‘representing anthropology’ was quickly turned around into the 1991 volume *Recapturing Anthropology*, an anthology which included three key essays which epitomized 1990s anthropology: Abu-Lughod’s ‘Writing Against Culture’, Trouillot’s ‘Anthropology and the Savage Slot’ and Appadurai’s ‘Global Ethnoscapes’.

The participants in these ‘emerging’ conferences were of a different generation than those of the ‘culture and history’ conferences. Much of the ‘culture and history’ moment was the work of ‘silent generation’ scholars born between the two world wars, such as Sahlins and Denning. Edmund Leach, an eminence grise at the conferences, had even served in the war. He was 75 and ill when he participated in the Morocco conference that resulted in *Culture Through Time*, which was dedicated to Leach because he had passed away between the end of the conference and the publication of its proceedings (Macfarlane 2008). In contrast, the ‘emerging’ conferences were organized by baby boomers just coming into their full powers as scholars: Faye Harrison was 36 years old when the decolonizing anthropology session was held at the AAAs, and James Clifford was 39 at the ‘Making of Ethnographic Texts’ conference. At the ‘Representing Anthropology’ conference Trouillot was 40, Appadurai 45, and Abu-Lughod 37. These younger scholars would be the ones to set the discipline’s direction in the 1990s.

That direction would be very different from ‘practice theory’. Ortner (1984) described practice theory as the next step in a coherent anthropological project to understand culture and society. The rebellions of the 1960s (which were published mostly in the 1970s), she claimed, generated new answers to longstanding questions. The emerging voices of the 1990s, in contrast, replaced classic questions with new

ones: What were the politics of representation? How did the political economy of the academy benefit some people and not others? Was the culture concept useful in the newly-globalized world? Was anthropology so fundamentally connected to colonialism and capitalism that it was irretrievably unethical? What, in short, if anthropology was part of the problem and not part of the solution?

There were signs even in the 1980s that Pacific anthropology would not be exempted from these new questions. Derek Freeman's *Margaret Mead and Samoa* was published in 1983, casting aspersions on one of the most well-known anthropologists of the Pacific. Malinowski's scandalous *Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* was brought back into print in 1989—Malinowski, obsessively hungry for attention in life, would probably have approved of the decision! Sahlins's *Islands of History* was expertly dissected by Haunani-Kay Trask in 1985 in perhaps the best academic book review ever written, a work which lauded Sahlins but was also fearless, precise, and critical about his shortcomings, especially his lack of interest in the horrors of colonialism (Trask 1985). In 1987 Valerio Valeri's *Hawaiian Kingship* received a scorching review from John Charlot to which Valeri (1987) replied with an equally scorching rejoinder. And as Petra Autio points out in the new introduction to *Culture and History in the Pacific*, the 80s were also the era of the 'invention of tradition' debates. Joe Tobin (1994) has an admirable summary of these debates in the Hawaiian context, so I will not revisit them here except to note that they were a key moment in which anthropology's authority and politics were brought into question.

By 1992, it seems to me, the wave had crested, and the historical moment of which *Culture and History in the Pacific* was a part had ended and the themes of the 'emerging'

conferences took center stage. Consider this: in 1992 Sahlins published his major monograph on Hawaiian history, *Anahulu*. Lilikalā Kame'eleihiwa—a former student of Sahlins and Denning and one of the most-cited authors in *Islands of History*—criticized the book and labeled him the 'brooding sorcerer of Chicago' (Denning, Kame'eleihiwa, and Anderson 1994: 218). Her own 1992 volume, *Native Land and Foreign Desires*, would go on to become a classic and today she is a central figure in the resurgence of Hawaiian history by Hawaiian authors. 1992 was also the year that Obeyesekere's assault on Sahlins, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook*, also appeared in 1992. *Apotheosis* attracted far more attention than *Anahulu*, and the 'Sahlins-Obeyesekere debate' would become emblematic of 1990s-era concerns about postcolonialism, ethics, and epistemological authority. On the whole, Hawaiian scholars were not on Sahlins's side in this debate. I think overall Sahlins won the debate, at least in terms of the minutiae of Hawaiian history, but his victory of Pyrrhic. Once a leftist, Sahlins became part of the conservative right as the discipline's political sympathies shifted past him. Foucault and Said, who Sahlins mocked rather than engaged with, would become central to intellectual debate, not Sahlins himself.

Of course, this story is a little too neat. A lot of historical anthropology was produced in the 1990s. Ann Salmond's *Two Worlds* (1991) and *Between Worlds* (1997) were published in the 1990s. Hooper and Huntsman's long-delayed *Tokelau: A Historical Ethnography* appeared in 1996. Nor was the generational divide as extreme as I make it out to be. Valerio Valeri (born 1945) was of the same generation of Trouillot and Abu-Lughod, but did work in the older mode. And of course historical anthropology continues to be done to this day, thank goodness. But like many formerly-trendy

approaches it is now just one school of thought among others and no longer of great interest to a broader scholarly audience.

We can see these shifts and changes with some more comparisons: In 1979 the ASAO distinguished lecturer was Marshall Sahlins, and the lecture would go on to become *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities*. In 1993 the distinguished lecturer was Epeli Hau'ofa, and his lecture became the path-breaking 'Our Sea of Islands', a text which fundamentally transformed the study of the Pacific forever. In 1983 Tony Hooper organized a conference on 'transformations of Polynesian culture'. In 1997 he organized a conference on 'culture and sustainable development in the Pacific'. Throughout the late 1990s, I believe, anthropologists of the Pacific came to see the region as a fundamentally modern place grappling with globalization. I remember reading with excitement ethnographies such as Gewertz and Errington's 1991 *Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts* which saw Papua New Guinea not as a repository for myth and otherness but part of the modern world with a political economy, an approach also taken by Carrier's edited volume *History and Tradition in Melanesian Anthropology*. The contemporary Pacific was on the rise. Historical anthropology had become history.

Was this the end of culture and history in the Pacific? Of course not. As anyone who has read *Culture and History in the Pacific* will know, history is a process of transformation.

To trace this transformation, let us return to Ortner's work. Although the book we are celebrating is called *Culture and History in the Pacific* we might equally call it 'Culture, Power, and History in the Pacific', since many of its chapters examine how cultural structures undergird or subtend the political projects of Pacific actors. This was in line with trends

which Ortner discerned in the discipline. In 1989, Ortner recognized that in the 1990s there would be a 'power shift'—that is to say, a shift of interest from 'practice' to 'power' (Ortner, Dirks and Eley 1989). As a result she, Nick Dirks, and Geoff Eley created a new book series at Princeton University Press entitled 'Culture/Power/History' (in the late eighties, atypical punctuation choices were considered a sign of intellectual sophistication). The theory anthology in the series, itself titled *Culture/Power/History*, was a doorstop of a book and seemed unbelievably amazing to me when it appeared in 1994. Culture, power, and history? Could a synthesis of such incredible elements ever be achieved? And if so, what form of unimaginable scholarly potency would be unlocked? The book's mix of British cultural studies, 'French Theory', anthropology, and feminism was mind-bogglingly beguiling.

Although it may not be obvious at first, the scions of the culture and history moment would take up this interest in power and add it to their concern with Pacific history. This happened not just at Helsinki, Chicago, Mānoa, and Melbourne but especially at two other institutions: UC Santa Cruz, home of Jim Clifford and other faculty at the History of Consciousness program, and the ANU, where Margaret Jolly, Greg Denning, and many other important faculty had a home.

Graduates of the Center for Pacific Island Studies at Mānoa would continue on to the ANU or Santa Cruz. At the ANU, they worked with Denning and Jolly. These students, often influenced by David Hanlon, include authors such as Greg Dvorak (*Coral and Concrete*, 2018) and Katerina Teaiwa (*Consuming Ocean Island* 2014) among others. At Santa Cruz, Clifford would mentor students such as Vince Diaz (*Repositioning the Missionary* 2010) and Teresia Teaiwa (whose papers appear in *Sweat*

and Salt Water). All of these authors mixed history and fieldwork, and featured adventurous and often playful prose styles, often inspired by Denning. They were informed by anthropology, even if they stood in a tense relationship with that discipline. Anxiety, after all, is a sign of influence!

Most importantly, the authors were often Pacific Islanders writing about their own places or else (in Dvorak's case) settlers with deep biographical entanglements in the place they wrote about. Many of these authors helped spread Mānoa's vision of Pacific Studies to the wider world. The year 2000 was a major turning point, as it featured both the influential 'Native Pacific Cultural Studies on the Edge' conference and the foundation at Victoria University Wellington of the world's first Ph.D. program in Pacific Studies, an effort led by Santa Cruz alumni Teresia Teaiwa and April Henderson. In 2007, ANU developed its Pacific Studies teaching program and the Native and Indigenous Studies Association was organized in the United States. History was a key ingredient of all of these approaches.

At Chicago, things turned out differently. Unlike Clifford, Sahlins never connected studying Pacific culture with training Pacific Islander students. Sahlins's scions—almost all white men—took his interest in culture, power, and history in different directions. David Graeber, the famous 'anarchist anthropologist', developed what might be called the 'cosmological political anthropology' of Sahlins's work, looking at the deep cultural structures which repress creativity and imagination and legitimate oppressive and inegalitarian social orders. Webb Keane's work developed the concept of 'affordance' to retheorize the way 'structure' can facilitate agency rather than debilitate it, and his development of the concept of 'ethical life' also emerges from Sahlins's work.

Participants in the Helsinki conference didn't do half bad themselves, either. A year after the conference Marilyn Strathern would publish *Gender of the Gift* (1988), a book which went off like a bomb in anthropology, and, remarkably, has kept on exploding ever since. Strathern's work shared with Sahlins an emphasis on the radical alterity of the Pacific other. Both authors encouraged their students to see Pacific culture as a form of theory which was the equal of Western philosophy—a stream of Sahlins's thought that we can see continued in the work of Greg Schrempf, for instance. Cambridge, where Strathern took up the William Wyse chair in 1993, became a center for the 'ontology' movement which developed both of these strands of thought. More recently at Cambridge, Rupert Stasch (a Chicago graduate) has become perhaps the most active developer of his teacher Valerio Valeri's legacy. Joel Robbins—influenced by Sahlins but not formally a student—developed an anthropology of the good rooted in the problem of the historical transition of Urapmin to Christianity. What sort of structural transformation was Urapmin conversion? This essentially historical anthropological question drove Robbins's work.

As a Chicago-trained anthropologist teaching at Mānoa, I have often thought about the difference between the CPIS and Chicago trajectories which emerged out of historical anthropology. Mānoa is (or aspires to be) a Hawaiian place of learning and an indigenous-serving institution. I find the work done in Pacific Studies to be exciting, and I am honored to be training a generation of indigenous anthropologists in my department. At the same time, I recognize the analytic insight and theoretical value of the work of authors like Strathern and Sahlins. A central question for me is, how to demonstrate the utility of Chicago to Mānoa. How can I use insights derived on

the shores of Lake Michigan to aid students and colleagues whose biographical projects and political commitments are fundamentally different from those of Sahlins and my other teachers? Luckily, this newly available edition of *Culture and History in the Pacific* is a valuable tool to help answer these questions, because it shows how important the anthropology of the Pacific can be, even if it is done during a ‘freezing January’ in Helsinki.

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Citations in the bibliography are for specific works cited or quoted in detail. All of the dates described in this article are drawn from a dataset created as part of the development of a history of anthropology timeline. Each of these dates are sourced from publicly available data. For more details and sources on these dates please consult the dataset at <http://www2.hawaii.edu/~golub/hoatimeline.csv> <Accessed 23 March 2022>

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