Goodbye to *Tristes Tropes*: Ethnography in the Context of Modern World History*

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For Barney Cohn

The reason an anthropologist studies history is that it is only in retrospect, after observing the structure and its transformations, that it is possible to know the nature of the structure. [Bernard S. Cohn]

In the midst of all the hoopla about the new reflexive anthropology, with its celebration of the impossibility of systematically understanding the elusive Other, a different kind of ethnographic prose has been developing more quietly, almost without our knowing we were speaking it, and certainly without so much epistemological angst. I mean the numerous works of historical ethnography whose aim is to synthesize the field experience of a community with an investigation of its archival past. For decades now, students of American Indians, Indonesia and the Pacific Islands, South Asia, and Africa have been doing this kind of ethnohistory. But only a few—notably Barney Cohn, Jean Comaroff, John Comaroff, and Terry Turner—have consciously raised the point that an ethnography with time and transformation built into it is a distinct way of knowing the anthropological object, with a possibility of changing the way culture is thought. This article associates itself with this project of historical ethnography as a determinate anthropological genre. In particular, I would like to offer some theoretical justification for a return to certain world areas such as North America and Polynesia, areas which have been too long slighted by ethnographers, ever since it was

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*This paper was originally written for and presented as the Nineteenth Annual Edward and Nora Ryerson Lecture at the University of Chicago, April 29, 1992.*

1 Bernard S. Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi, 1987).

discovered in the 1930s and 1940s that they were "aculturated." For these peoples have known how to defy their anthropological demotion by taking cultural responsibility for what was afflicting them. The very ways societies change have their own authenticity, so that global modernity is often reproduced as local diversity.

II

When I was a graduate student—back in the Upper Paleolithic period—my teachers were already announcing the death of ethnography. It seemed that Marx's prophecy to the effect that Western hegemony is human destiny was at hand. By the rapid improvement of the instruments of production and communication, proclaimed the Manifesto, the bourgeoisie draws all nations, "even the most barbarian," into "civilization." "The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image."\(^3\)

The argument could well convey a sense of inevitability, since its conclusion was already contained in its ethnocentric premise. The effectiveness of this ultimate weapon of cheap commodities already presupposes a universal bourgeois subject, a self-interested creature of desire acting with an eye singular to the main chance. Yet the metaphor is even more ironic inasmuch as the Chinese wall proves not so vulnerable. On the contrary, as a mark of the limits of "civilization," hence a constraint on demand and the passage of goods, the wall succeeds in its time-honored function, which (according to Lattimore) has been rather to keep the Chinese in than the "barbarians" out.\(^4\) And even when foreign things or barbarian beings do conquer, their local reproduction and meanings are soon sinicized. Western capital and commodities do not easily make their way by demonstration effects. The idea that they will—this same refrain about China—has been playing in Europe for three centuries now: all those hundreds of millions of customers just waiting for British woolens, then cotton textiles, steel cutlery, guns, and ships, and latterly jeeps, perfume, and TV sets. A modern bourgeois version of the quest for El Dorado, the dream of opening China to Western-made products still goes on, undiminished by the perennial failure to make it a reality. Except that now the attempt to discover a northwest passage

\(^3\) Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy, ed. Lewis S. Feuer (Garden City, N.Y., 1959), p. 11.

\(^4\) Owen Lattimore, Inner Asian Frontiers of China (New York, 1940).
to Cathay appears as an equally frustrating quest to convert Asian hearts and minds. Consider this recent notice in the New York Times: "There used to be a missionary aspect to it, with a board of directors having a vision of an enormous consumer market—you know, two billion armpits in need of deodorant," said Matts Engstrom, chairman of California Sunshine Inc., a food company that does extensive business in China. "But since Tiananmen Square, they've realized that it is a long-term prospect, and even then unless you're in the right area you're not going to succeed." 5

Ironic too that Western social scientists should be elaborating theories of global integration just when this "new world order" is breaking down into so many small-scale separatist movements marching under the banners of cultural autonomy. Or are these claims of "ethnic identity" merely—to adopt Freud's characterization of the Balkans—the narcissism of marginal differences? Presumably the demands of cultural independence are only temporary. In the long run the hegemonic forces of the world-capitalist system must prevail. Still, as Durkheim said of an analogous forecast, a science that deals with the future has no subject matter.

The cultural self-consciousness developing among imperialism's erstwhile victims is one of the more remarkable phenomena of world history in the later twentieth century. "Culture"—the word itself, or some local equivalent—is on everyone's lips. Tibetans and Hawaiians, Ojibways, Kwakiutls, and Eskimos, Kazakhs and Mongols, native Australians, Balinese, Kashmiris, and New Zealand Maoris: all discover they have a "culture." For centuries they may have hardly noticed it. But now, as the New Guinean said to the anthropologist, "If we didn't have kastom, we would be just like white men." Maurice Godelier tells of evolués among another New Guinea people, the Baruya—policemen, teachers, and other town dwellers—who twenty years earlier had shunned the tribal initiations, only to return in 1979 to the villages to remedy this ritual deficit: "And it was one of them who . . . publicly explained to all the men of the tribe and young initiates that the initiations had to be continued because strength was needed to resist the life of the towns and the lack of work or money; people had to defend themselves. In my presence he shouted, "We must find strength in our customs; we must base ourselves on what the Whites call culture." 6 It may be true (as Pascal said) that three degrees of latitude make the difference between right and wrong, but with regard to the modern consciousness of "culture," nothing much changes over half the globe.


Sahlins

(in longitude). Consider Terry Turner's observations in the South American tropical forest: in the late 1980s even monolingual speakers of Kayapo were using the Portuguese "cultura" in reference to traditional customs, including the performances of ceremony, that ought to be followed "in order to preserve the 'life,' 'strength,' and 'happiness' of Kayapo social communities."7

Reified notions of cultural differences, as indexed by distinctive customs and traditions, can and have existed apart from any European presence. What distinguishes the current "culturalism" (as it might be called) is the claim to one's own mode of existence as a superior value and a political right, precisely in opposition to a foreign-imperial presence. More than an expression of "ethnic identity"—a normal social science notion that manages to impoverish the sense of the movement—this cultural consciousness, as Turner again remarks of Kayapo, entails the people's attempt to control their relationships with the dominant society, including control of the technical and political means that up to now have been used to victimize them. The empire strikes back. We are assisting at a spontaneous, worldwide movement of cultural defiance, whose full meanings and historic effects are yet to be determined.

Western intellectuals have been too often disposed to write off the meanings as trivial, on grounds that the claims to cultural continuity are spurious. In the going academic view the so-called revival is a typical "invention of tradition"—though no slight is intended to Maori or Hawaiian folks, since all traditions are "invented" in and for the purposes of the present. (This functionalist disclaimer, incidentally, while meant to be nice to the peoples, has the effect of erasing the logical and ontological continuities involved in the different ways that societies interpret and respond to the imperialist conjuncture. If culture must be conceived as always and only changing, lest one commit the mortal sin of essentialism, then there can be no such thing as identity, or even sanity, let alone continuity.) In any event, this Maori or Hawaiian "culture" is not historically authentic because it is a reified and interested value, a self-conscious ideology rather than a way of life which, moreover, owes more in content to imperialist forces than to indigenous sources. All unwittingly, ideas of ancient custom are developed out of the colonial experience: an ethnic distinctiveness perceived from the vantage, if not also to the advantage, of the culture-of-dominance. At the Honolulu airport, visitors are welcomed by hula dancers in plastic "grass" skirts, swaying to slack-key Spanish guitars in an expression of the uniquely Hawaiian "aLOHA spirit." A culture of tourism, of the brand now widely marketed as aboriginal stock-in-trade. Moreover, it was American Calvinist missionaries—"the mishes," Mark Twain called them—whose obsessions

7 Turner, p. 304.
made sexuality emblematic of Hawaiianess. So now Hawaiians have nothing to do but recreate themselves in the image others have made of them.

Alternatively, the indigenous people are said to take their cultural distance only by evolving complementary or inverted forms of the colonial order. A historian can thus find a ready audience for the assertion that Fijians have but recently, since the turn of the twentieth century, elaborated and objectified their well-known customs of generalized reciprocity called kerekere: in part by accepting the colonial definition of themselves as "communally organized" and, more important, as a reaction-formation to the even more famous commercial instincts of White men. Reifying their easy give-and-take of goods, Fijians could represent themselves as generous, in contrast to the self-interest of the colonizers. Similarly, an anthropologist argues that the Javanese kingdom of Surakarta was able to survive under Dutch rule by displacing its demonstrations of power from fateful arenas of realpolitik to innocuous rituals of marriage.

Yet even if these arguments were historically accurate they would still be culturally insufficient, since under similar colonial circumstances the Samoans did not kerekere nor the Balinese merely marry. I return to this point again and again: "tradition" often appears in modern history as a culturally specific mode of change. Fijian exchange or kerekere also happens to be a good example of the facile historiography inspired by the principle that "there must be a White man behind every brown," as Dorothy Shineberg put it. An "elite historiography," in Guha's terms, unmindful of the culture and action of the subalterns. For the journals of missionaries and traders from the earlier nineteenth century not only provide abundant evidence that the kerekere custom was self-consciously practiced then in the same way it is described in modern ethnographies—Fijian "begging," as kerekere appears in the historical texts and is defined in an 1850 missionary dictionary—not only that, but the documents also indicate historically what one would expect logically: that the failure of White men to participate in kerekere led Fijians to construct them as selfish (by their insisting on buying and selling) rather than that the selfishness of White men led Fijians to construct themselves as


generous (by inventing kerekere). So when the mishees protest to the chief that they had come out of love for Fijians and to save them, the chief objects that it can’t be so: ‘You come here and you will only buy and sell, and we hate buying. When we ask you for a thing you say no. If a Fieejean said no, we should kill him, don’t you know that. We [of Bau] are a land of Chiefs. We have plenty of riches... We have them without buying; we hate buying and we hate the lotu [Christianity].’ He concluded by begging a knife for one of his friends, which after such a conversation I thought it best to refuse, which I did as respectfully as possible.”

12 “Begging,” an early American trader observed, “is the besetting sin of them all & both sexes do not hesitate to Cery Cery fuckabede as they call it.” “Cery Cery fuckabede” was Warren Osburn’s immortal 1835 transcription of the Fijian kerekere vakaviti, meaning “to ask for something in the Fijian manner,” a phrase that also proves that Fijians objectified the practice some months before the first missionaries and some decades before the establishment of the Colony, although not before centuries of contact and exchange with people from other island groups of the Pacific (Tonga, Rotuma, Uvea).

There is a certain historiography that is quick to take the “great game” of imperialism as the only game in town. It is prepared to assume that history is made by the colonial masters, and all that needs to be known about the people’s own social dispositions, or even their “subjectivity,” is the external disciplines imposed upon them: the colonial policies of classification, enumeration, taxation, education, and sanitation. The main historical activity remaining to the underlying people is to misconstrue the effects of such imperialism as their own cultural traditions. Worse yet, their cultural false consciousness is normalizing. In the name of ancestral practice, the people construct an essentialized culture: a supposedly unchanging inheritance, sheltered from the contestations of a true social existence. They thus repeat as tragedy the farcical errors about the coherence of symbolic systems supposed to have been committed by an earlier and more naive generation of ethnologists.

Wiser now, we trade in our naiveté for melancholy. Ethnography in the wake of colonialism can only contemplate the sadness of the tropics (tristes tropiques). Like the rusting shanty towns in which the people live, here are bits and pieces of cultural structures, old and new, reassembled into corrupt forms of the Western imagination. How convenient for the theorists of the

postmodern deconstruction of the Other. Moreover, the new ethnographers can agree with the world systematists, as James Clifford with Eric Wolf, on the incoherence of the so-called cultures—and thus of the anthropologists' culture concept. Both are also critics of imperialism: the postmodernists blaming it for arrogant projects of ethnographic totalization, the world systematists for the empirical impossibility of realizing them. Yet all these tristes tropes of Western hegemony and local anarchy, of the contrast between a powerful World System and people's cultural incoherence, do they not mimic on an academic plane the same imperialism they would despise? As an attack on the cultural integrity and historical agency of the peripheral peoples, they do in theory just what imperialism attempts in practice.

Everyone hates the destruction rained upon the peoples by the planetary conquests of capitalism. But to indulge in what Stephen Greenblatt calls the "sentimental pessimism" of collapsing their lives within a global vision of domination, in subtle intellectual and ideological ways makes the conquest complete. Nor should it be forgotten that the West owes its own sense of cultural superiority to an invention of the past so flagrant it should make European natives blush to call other peoples culturally counterfeit.

III

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a bunch of indigenous intellectuals and artists in Europe got together and began inventing their traditions and themselves by attempting to revive the learning of an ancient culture which they claimed to be the achievement of their ancestors but which they did not fully understand, as for many centuries this culture had been lost and its languages corrupted or forgotten. For centuries also the Europeans had been converted to Christianity; but this did not prevent them from calling now for the restoration of their pagan heritage. They would once again practice the classical virtues, even invoke the pagan gods. All the same, under the circumstances—the great distance of the acculturated intellectuals from a past that was effectively irrecoverable—under the circumstances, nostalgia was not what it used to be. The texts and monuments they constructed were often bowdlerized facsimiles of classical models. They created a self-conscious tradition of fixed and essentialized canons. They wrote history in the style of Livy, verses in a mannered Latin, tragedy according to Seneca, and comedy in the mode of Terence; they decorated Christian churches with the facades of classical temples and generally followed the precepts of Roman architecture as set down by Vitruvius without realizing the precepts were Greek. All this

came to be called the Renaissance in European history, because it gave birth to "modern civilization."

What else can one say about it, except that some people have all the historical luck? When Europeans invent their traditions—with the Turks at the gates—it is a genuine cultural rebirth, the beginnings of a progressive future. When other peoples do it, it is a sign of cultural decadence, a factitious recuperation, which can only bring forth the simulacra of a dead past.

On the other hand, the historical lesson could be that all is not lost.

IV

Hula schools (hālau hula) have been flourishing in Hawaii since the early 1970s. Many function under the patronage of Laka, the ancient goddess of hula, are led by inspired teachers (kumu), and observe various rituals of training and performance. Hula schools are a significant element of what some participants are pleased to call "the Hawaiian renaissance."15

Nothing essentialized here. All sorts of differences between schools in styles of music and movement, in rituals, in assertions about what is modern and what is "Hawaiian." Many arguments turn on implications of opposition to the culture of the Haole (White man). Yet the hula as a sign of Hawaianaess, of the indigenous, was not born yesterday nor merely as the construction of the Hawaiian Visitors Bureau and prurient Haole interests. The hula has been functioning as a mode of cultural co-optation for more than 150 years—a significance, moreover, that was already inscribed in the meanings of hula performances before the first White men set foot in the islands. For that matter, these first Haole visitors, Captain Cook and Company, were entertained by a great deal of lascivious-seeming hula.

"The young women spend most of their time singing and dancing, of which they are very fond," observed David Samwell, minor Welsh poet and surgeon of the Discovery, during Cook's stay at Hawai'i Island in early 1779.16 Cook's stay coincided with the Makahiki, the festival of the annual return of the original god and deposed king Lono, come back at the New Year to renew the earth—or, in another register, to repossess the wife and kingdom taken from him by an upstart rival.17 The visitation of Lono was ritually mediated and popularly celebrated by hula dancing, especially the sexually arousing dances

15 For a general history of the hula, see Dorothy B. Barrère, Mary Kawena Pukui, and Marion Kelly, *Hula: Historical Perspectives*, Bishop Museum, Pacific Anthropological Records no. 30 (Honolulu, 1980).


of young women. Of course, not all Hawaiian hula was of this sort, but Samwell collected two hula chants in 1779 that were sufficiently amorous. The women would thus attract the god—if their performance did not actually signify a Frazerian sacred marriage. But then, toward the end of the Makahiki, the reigning king sacrifices Lono, sending him back to Kahiki, the overseas homeland and ancestral source of life, a removal that captures the benefits of the god's passage for mankind.

Humanizing and appropriating Lono's seminal powers, the women's hula expresses a general function of their sexuality, which is to mediate just such translations between god and man—or, in Polynesian terms, between the states of *iapu* (tabu) and *noa* (free). Hence the essential ambiguity of women from a certain theological point of view: their powers of defiling the god amounted to conditions of the possibility of human existence. Hence also, as the party of humanity, their powers of cultural subversion. Birth itself was a form of this same capacity to bring the divine into the human world, especially the bearing of a royal child. Accordingly, chiefly births were famous occasions for hula, as were the arrivals and entertainments of noble voyagers. And all these hula performances, including the annual seduction of Lono, would have the same broad finality, the domestication of the god. But note that within this frame the particular values varied from the restoration of an indigenous and beneficent king, the tragic figure of the dispossessed Lono, to the neutralization of the stranger-king, the classic figure of the usurper—the one who does Lono in.

Thus the historic function of the hula: its recurrent appearance through two centuries of Haole domination in defense of the *ancien régime*, and specifically of a Hawaiian kingship whose powers had been contested early on by a holy alliance of pious chiefly converts and puritanical American missionaries. Adapting the Protestant ethic to Hawaiian projects of authority, the chiefs had learned to forward their commercial interests at the king's expense. Based on traditional conceptions of sacred power, on the establishment of links to Kahiki, this competition among ruling chiefs in the medium of commercial prowess greatly exacerbated the "impact" of the World System on Hawaiian culture. The historic effects of capitalism were not directly proportional to its material force, a simple matter of physics. The huge debt amassed by the chiefs is rather a measure of the impetus given by the creative powers of mana to the destructive forces of capital. The compadron and foreign agents of the World System played the legendary part of the "sharks who travel inland," rapacious strangers from overseas, and they turned the king into a historic version of Lono.

By the same cultural logic, the period of Lono's return, the Makahiki, was transposed by royal partisans into a festival of rebellion. For decades after it had ceased to be celebrated according to the customary rituals of world renewal, the Makahiki season became the occasion for improvised renewals
of Hawaiian custom—expressed in and as the restoration of royal power. Through all this the hula, together with complementary practices of jouissance, provided continuities of form and meaning. Indeed, the hula uniquely represented the Makahiki in 1820–21, the year following the famous “religious revolution” that had in principle abolished all such “idolatry” and ceremony. For many weeks between December and the end of February the disapproving missionaries were reporting people dancing in the courtyards of Honolulu “in honor of the king,” Kamehameha II, and before the image of the hula god (probably Laka). The excitement proved to be the prelude to a series of libertine counterrevolutions in the later 1820s and early 1830s, all of them likewise breaking out at the time of the traditional Makahiki ceremony and enlisting its sentiments and practices in the political cause of the young king, Kamehameha III. Besides the hula, the old games and amusements of the New Year were revived, with effects enhanced by generous libations of Haole rum. The king dignified the first rebellion, in 1827, by sleeping with his paternal half-sister; in 1834 he finished off the last by fornicating with his full sister in front of the assembled Christian chiefs. At one time he abolished all the Calvinist interdictions on sexual relations and summoned the prostitutes of Honolulu to pay court to his current mistress. Feminine sexuality was again enlisted in the cause of humanity: in rendering things noa, as Hawaiians conceived it, for in the context then existing, the events meant the abolition of the Christian tabus as well as the return of the Hawaiian order. Nor was all this merely symbolic frolic. The king’s sexual possession of the earth at times developed into the assertion of his sovereign rights over land, and more than once his carnival opposition to the Christian chiefs came near to armed conflict. But on each occasion the king was required to yield. In the denouement, as in other curious historical details, he lived out the destiny of the superseded god.

From 1830 or earlier the Christian chiefs periodically banned the hula, and from 1851 it was curbed by legislation. However, clandestine hula schools kept operating in the countryside, until they were again openly sanctioned—by kings. Excluding foreigners from attending the scene, Kamehameha V in 1866 allowed the people to mourn the death of his sister in the ancient fashion, which included hula dances. Mark Twain managed to gain access to one of the performances.

I lived three blocks from the wooden two-story palace when Victoria was being lamented, and for thirty nights in succession the mourning pow-wow defied sleep. All that time the Christianized but morally unclean Princess lay in state in the palace. I got into the grounds one night and saw hundreds of half naked savages of both sexes beating their dismal tom-toms, and wailing and caterwauling in the weird glare of

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innumerable torches, and while a great band of women swayed and jigged their pliant bodies through the intricate movements of a lascivious dance called the hula-hula, they chanted an accompaniment in native words. I asked the son of a missionary what the words meant. He said they celebrated certain admired gifts and physical excellencies of the dead princess. I inquired further, but he said the words were too foul for translation; that the bodily excellencies were unmentionable; that the capabilities so lauded and so glorified had better be left to the imagination. He said the king was doubtless sitting where he could hear these ghastly phrases and enjoy them.  

The hula was especially favored with royal patronage during the revivalist reign of King Kalākaua (1871–91). Kalākaua sponsored spectacular performances at his inauguration and fiftieth birthday celebration. After Hawaii was annexed by the United States, the received functions of the hula were divided between the commercialized domestication of strangers in the tourist sector and the country schools less subject to modernizing innovations. The hula of the current Hawaiian Renaissance is an "invention" evolved particularly from the country schools. But it is not simply a colonial invention—a Western fabrication of Hawaiianness or else an Hawaiian fabrication in response to the West—which a certain colonial historiography, in some haste to make dupes of the ethnographers and victims of the indigenous people, or vice versa, is prematurely inclined to discover.

Not that the purpose of a historical ethnography is just to give salutary lessons in cultural continuity. More important, the purpose is to synthesize form and function, structure and variation, as a meaningful cultural process, sequitur to a specific cultural order rather than an eternal practical logic. The practical functions of institutions will appear as meaningful relations between constituted forms and historical contexts: the way the hula and the Makahiki festival—the hula by its translations of tapu (tabu) to noa, the Makahiki by its reminiscences of sovereignty lost—were effectively counterposed to a Christianized ruling class. So would the local people integrate the World System in something even more inclusive: their own system of the world.

V

For its own part, the World System, as culture, is no less arbitrary. But its familiarity allows us to maintain the delusion of a transparent and disenchanted order, singularly constructed by our material rationality, our human disposition to "rational choice."

However, material forces and circumstances always lead a double life in human societies; they are at once physical and meaningful. Without ceasing to be objectively compelling, they are endowed with the symbolic values of

a certain cultural field. Reciprocally, then, without ceasing to be symbolic, cultural categories and relationships are endowed with materiality. No chemist, Marx once said, has ever discovered the value of gold in its physical composition. Yet it is by this symbolic value that the objective characteristics of gold, such as its natural geographic distribution in the earth, become powerful factors of world history. Pardon me for being so simple. But it is sometimes necessary to remind ourselves that our pretended rationalist discourse is pronounced in a particular cultural dialect—that "we are one of the others."

Western capitalism in its totality is a truly exotic cultural scheme, as bizarre as any other, marked by the subsumption of material rationality in a vast order of symbolic relationships. We are too much misled by the apparent pragmatism of production and commerce. The whole cultural organization of our economy remains invisible, mystified as the pecuniary rationality by which its arbitrary values are realized. All the idiocies of modern life from Walkmans and Reeboks to mink coats and seven-million-dollar-a-year baseball players, and on to McDonald's and Madonnas and other weapons of mass destruction—this whole curious cultural scheme nonetheless appears to economists as the transparent effects of a universal practical wisdom. Yet even the producers who are perpetrating such tastes in the abstract interest of gain must be informed by the order of cultural values—that is, by what sells. Theirs is a classic fetishism of the commodity: the meaningful values are comprehended as pecuniary values. In the event, the invisible hand of the market economy functions like a perverse form of Hegel's cunning of reason; it is rather a cunning of culture which, by harnessing an absolute sense of rationality to a relative logic of signs, ushers in a (truly) golden age of symbolic freedom.

So it need not be surprising that when the advanced products of the West are successfully spread abroad, together with its higher attainments in economic rationality, all this practical reason is exposed to some cultural subversion.

VI

As Bakhtin might say, Western commodities become the objects of alien words. Or not just words, but a whole alien discourse. In the planetary hinterlands, the powers of capital appear as forces of other universes. Although they may be at the margins of the World System, the people are not (to adopt Marx's image) solitary beings squatting outside the universe. They are social beings, conscious of themselves as persons of certain social sorts. They are fathers, cross-cousins, chiefs, Bear clansmen, elders, married women, Iroquois, or Tibetans: persons functioning in determinate relations of kinship, gender, community, and authority—relations that thus entail specific rights and obligations, amities and enmities; conduct, then, that is materialized in definite modes of exchange and forms of wealth—hence social beings
operating on cosmic notions of power, quotidian instincts of morality, selective skills of perception, relative ways of knowing and, withal, large cultural resources of self-respect. We are not dealing with people who have nothing and are nothing. To put it in the terms of Vološinov's semantics, the capitalist forms in these alien contexts acquire novel local accents. And here at least a synthesis with Saussure proves useful; the novel accents are also positional values whose differential relations to other categories of the indigenous scheme constitute logics of the possible effects of intrusive "forces."

One might suggest an elementary subaltern principle of historiography; that no assertion of an imperialist discipline can be received as an event of colonial history without the ethnographic investigation of its practice. We cannot equate colonial history simply with the history of the colonizers. It remains to be known how the disciplines of the colonial state are culturally sabotaged.

VII

However, to conceive of a simple opposition between the West and the Rest is in many ways an oversimplification. Colonial history is not well served either by its representation as a Manichaean showdown between the indigenous people and the imperialist forces, to see which one will be able to culturally appropriate the other. A number of anthropologists—among them Bruce Trigger, Ann Stoler, John Comaroff, and Greg Dening—have taught us to reconfigure the usual binary opposition as a triadic historical field, including a complicated intercultural zone where the cultural differences are worked through in political and economic practice. 20 "The beach," as Dening calls it—though it could as well be the plantation or the town—where "native" and "stranger" play out their working misunderstandings in creolized languages. Here are complex "structures of the conjuncture," such as the alliances that cross ethnic boundaries and correlate oppositions within the colonial society to political differences among the local people. Think of how often the rivalry between Protestants and Catholics has been enlisted by Latin Americans or Pacific Islanders to the service of their own historic disputes. I have already mentioned something of the like in Hawaii. A recurrent conflict between the king and aristocratic chiefs, traditionally waged as the acquisition of foreign cum divine powers, was in the nineteenth century joined to the bitter jealousies in the Haole community between

merchants and missionaries. Believing themselves the true heirs of the Protestant ethic, the commercial men explicitly competed with the clergymen for leadership of the civilizing mission and the control of Hawaiians’ devotion (which also entailed control of their labor). The praying chiefs standing with the missionaries and the drinking king with the merchants—the effect was an intercultural chiasmus, a structure that magnified the conflicts among Hawaiians by the differences in interest between Haole, and vice versa. The energies of one opposition were superimposed on the enmities of the other.

A powerful stimulus was given to the competition for grandeur among Hawaiian notables through the invidious accumulation of foreign luxuries, especially during the flush days of the trade in sandalwood for the Canton market. “Send out articles of a showy kind,” an American trader wrote back to Boston in 1821; “everything new and elegant will sell at a profit; coarse articles are of no use.” Pious as they had become, the ruling chiefs never learned to mortify their own flesh—the amount of which was continuing testimony to the favor of ancient divinities. The governors of the several islands weighed in at about three hundred pounds on average. Yet even if stretched to their organic limits, the chiefly persons could be metonymically extended to the foreign lands in the sky beyond the horizon, extended as far as China and England, by the importation of fancy clothing and swank domestic furnishings. China and England had replaced the old Kahiki, homeland of the gods, and now the flash of the foreign commodities evoked the celestial brilliance of ancient kings. Was this the origin of the aloha shirt?

Of course there are strictly functional demands to production for the market, adaptations that reach deeply into the indigenous society. And foreign meanings and economic dispositions come across the beach, along with the foreign goods. Yet students of Pacific history are sometimes surprised at how easily the famous “penetration” of capitalism can be effected, with relatively little effort, violence, or threat.

VIII

Disease and destruction have too often followed, but they were not the means of access to the local people’s desires or of the deployment of their labor to trade. Not that the islanders (any more than the Chinese) gave Westerners cause to congratulate themselves on the “demonstration effects” of their clearly superior goods, since the demands of the local peoples were soon enough selective rather than eclectic and involved rather exotic senses of utility. Thus the flourishing nineteenth-century commerce in sperm whale teeth in Fiji and Hudson’s Bay blankets in Northwest America as well as Chinese silks and English broadcloths in Hawaii. Here was a period of indigenous “development,” as I shall
try to explain in a moment, during which all these foreign commodities were enriching native self-conceptions. It would thus be too easy to conclude from the people’s receptivity that “Fijian culture,” or “Kwakiutl culture,” is an indeterminate concept, inasmuch as the so-called culture appears to lack any boundary, integrity, or totality.

A brief parenthesis only about cultural integrity or coherence, since we are here more concerned with boundaries. Anyhow we are not soon likely to hear an end to poststructuralist litanesies about the contested and unstable character of cultural logics: about categories and perceptions that are different for women and men, chiefs and commoners, rich and poor, this village and that, yesterday and today. All the same, not everything in the contest is contested—which once more proves that we come here to paraphrase Durkheim, not to bury him. As polyphonic or heteroglossic as the monograph may be, one cannot legitimately insert a Japanese “voice” in a Sioux Indian ethnography. In order for categories to be contested at all, there must be a common system of intelligibility, extending to the grounds, means, modes, and issues of disagreement. It would be difficult to understand how a society could function, let alone how any knowledge of it could be constituted, if there were not some meaningful order in the differences. If in regard to some given event or phenomenon the women of a community say one thing and the men another, is it not because men and women have different positions in, and experience of, the same social universe of discourse? Are not the differences in what men and women say expressions of the social differences in the construction of gender? If so, there is a noncontradictory way—dare one say, a totalizing way?—of describing the contradictions, a system of and in the differences. End parenthesis: return to the boundary dispute.

I mean the currently fashionable idea that there is nothing usefully called “a culture”—no such reified entity—since the limits of the supposed “cultures” are indeterminate and permeable, a lack of closure that again indicates a lack of system. Paradoxically, this argument misreads a cultural power of inclusion as the inability to maintain a boundary. It is based on an underestimate of the scope and systematicity of cultures, which are always universal in compass and thereby able to subsume alien objects and persons in logically coherent relationships. So far as Western imperialism is concerned—the one culture that has not been deconstructed by the changing of the avant garde, as it retains its essential and monolithic consistency as a system of power—for the local people the European is never altogether a stranger. As Marilyn Strathern says of Melanesia: “It has been something of a surprise for Europeans to realize that their advent was something less than a surprise.”

peoples have no monopoly on practices of cultural encompassment, nor are they playing with amateurs in the game of "constructing the other." Every society known to history is a global society, every culture a cosmological order. And in thus including the universe within its own cultural scheme—as the Maori or native Australians include the order of nature in the order of kinship—the people accord beings and things beyond their immediate community a definite place in its reproduction.

Divinities or enemies, ancestors or affines, the Others are in various ways the necessary conditions of a society's existence. Sources of power and cultural good things, though they may also be dangerous, these beings from the beyond represent a predicament of dependency in which all peoples find themselves. All must construct their own existence in relation to external conditions, natural and social, which they did not create or control, yet cannot avoid. They are constrained in some way, if never the only possible way, by the passage of the seasons, the annual rainfall, the customs and actions of their neighbors. In such respects, no culture is sui generis. And a more or less self-conscious fabrication of culture in response to imperious outside "pressures" is a normal process—dialectic or schismogenetic, perhaps, but not pathogenic. The diversity of human cultures, Lévi-Strauss remarks, "depends less on the isolation of the various groups than on the relations between them."

IX

Differences in the modes of cultural invention and reproduction appear with the advent of the colonial state. Interesting that from the perspective of many colonized peoples, it is this moment of domination, the assumption of subaltern status, that is most marked in historical consciousness rather than the first appearance of the White man or the earlier period of "contact." For Europeans, of course, the great rupture in the history of the rest of the world is initiated by their own appearance there—an epiphany that supposedly produces a change in the quality of historical time. In extreme (but not rare) formulations, nothing was happening before the European "discovery" (of places that had been known to mankind for millennia), merely a static reproduction of "traditional" forms; whereas, from the moment the first Western explorer or trader landed, the people’s history became eventemential—and adulterated by the foreigners’ culture. Still, the Fijians, as many other colonized peoples, figure the historical break differently: "before the flag" and "after the flag," they say, referring to the establishment of British rule. This is the B.C. and A.D. of their world history, "Before Colonization" and "After Domination," and it entails a different sense of the cultural qualities of time and change.
"Before" was the time under their own cultural control. Western commodities and even persons could be encompassed within their own "development" projects. Foreign wealth subsidized native cultural schemes: the kingship in Hawaii, ceremonial feasting in Ponape and the New Guinea Highlands, hunting and warfare on the American Plains, potlatching on the Northwest Coast. This helps explain why certain things of European provenance—not only horses, tobacco, bush knives, or cloth but even Christianity—are still locally perceived as "traditional" culture. They refer to an epoch that might be called "develop-man." "Develop-man" was a word I overheard in a conversation between two New Guineans, when one of them inserted the English word "development" into a neo-Melanesian (pidgin) sentence.° To me it came out sounding like "develop-man," an error on my part that seemed to express truly the initial relation of many Pacific Islanders to the encroaching Western economy. The term captures an indigenous way of coping with capitalism, a passing moment that in some places has managed to survive for over a century. The first commercial impulse of the people is not to become just like us but more like themselves. They turn foreign goods to the service of domestic ideas, to the objectification of their own relations and notions of the good life. Brought into the orbit of the capitalist world system, this global crusade of economic rationality, New Guinea Highlanders indeed prove themselves quick studies in commercial cunning—which they use to stage the most extravagant "traditional" ceremonies anyone could ever remember. More pigs have been eaten and more pearl shells exchanged in these recent festivals than ever was done in the good old days, not to mention the liberal consumption of such novelties as beer and tinned corned beef. Let the neocolonial bureaucrats or the development economists complain as they may, this is neither "waste" nor "backwardness." It is, precisely, develop-ment from the perspective of the people concerned: their own culture on a bigger and better scale. "You know what we mean by development?" says a leader of the Kewa people to the ethnographer. "We mean building up the lineage, the men's house, killing pigs. That's what we have done."\(^2\)

X

Of course, under a colonial state that relates to the underlying population by combined techniques of discipline, repression, and persuasion, the conditions of the people's cultural reproduction are radically altered for the worse. It is


\(^{23}\) Lisette Josephides, The Production of Inequality: Gender and Exchange among the Kewa (London, 1985), p. 44.
a period of humiliation, in which the political and economic prose of
domination is often improved by a Christian poetry of human degradation.
American missionaries used to complain endlessly that the problem with
Hawaiians was that they lacked sufficient self-contempt. Eating, laughing,
and copulating too much, while never working too long, the islanders simply
could not understand how rotten they were. The whole Judeo-Christian
cosmology of the human condition, of a human nature inherently corrupted by
sin, of life as a punishment, this whole system of self-hatred had to be laid on
them—"the furious, vindictive hatred of life," as Nietzsche called it, "life
loathing itself." Only then, when they were sufficiently disgusted with
themselves, would they be prepared to become like us, "civilized."

Around much of the world, however, the universalizing cultural project of
the West does not succeed so well. The subaltern period is a "dominance
without hegemony," as Guha puts it (for South Asia), marked by the
compromises of the colonial state with the cultural particularism of the local
people—who otherwise could not be ruled. In dominance without hegemony,
Guha writes, "the life of civil society can never be fully absorbed in the
activity of the state." The colonial regime is "doubly alienated" from the
indigenous people, at once as foreign and as a state. It is an "absolute
externality." The colonized adapt to its impositions by motivated permuta-
tions of their cultural traditions. Hence the sublimation of warfare in
ceremonial exchange, or the cargo cult that subsumes the colonial experience
in a native theory of ancestral powers, to cite well-known Oceanic examples.
In the end, the people's humiliation is a double-edged sword, turned back
against foreign dominance, as in the current "culturalism" or "the invention
of tradition." In the words of Amilcar Cabral: "Culture has proved to be the
very foundation of the liberation movement. Only societies which preserve
their cultures are able to mobilize and organize themselves and fight against
foreign domination. Whatever ideological or idealistic forms it takes, culture
is essential to the historical process. . . . And since a society that really
succeeds in throwing off the foreign yoke reverts to the upward path of its
own culture, the struggle for liberation is above all an act of culture."25

And how else can the people respond to what has been inflicted on them
except by devising on their own heritage, acting according to their own
categories, logics, understandings? I say "devising" because the response
may be totally improvised, something never seen or imagined before, not just
a knee-jerk repetition of ancient custom. "Tradition" here functions as a
yardstick by which the people measure the acceptability of change, as Lamont

24 Guha (n. 11 above), p. 281.
25 Amilcar Cabral, "The Role of Culture in the Battle for Independence," Unesco
Courier (November 1973), p. 16.
Lindstrom remarks of Tanna islanders. Cultural continuity thus appears in and as the mode of cultural change. The innovations follow logically—though not spontaneously, and in that sense not necessarily—from the people’s own principles of existence. Traditionalism without archaism.

Allan Hanson recounts a conversation with a “mammoth” old Tahitian who “has succeeded rather well in combining indigenous values with French influence.” Sinking into a large chair after an excellent dinner and indicating the prominent place that a refrigerator occupied in his living room, he beamed contentedly at Hanson and said, “‘Le ma’o [food] in the refrigerator—voilà la vie tahitienne!”

XI

Notice that for the people concerned, syncretism is not a contradiction of their culturalism—of the indigenous claims of authenticity and autonomy—but its systematic condition. The first thing, of course, is to survive. This is what the politics is decisively about. Yet the movement almost never envisions a utopian return to primordial days and ancestral ways. The traditional culture has its superior values, but refrigerators, outboard engines, and television sets were not among them. Modern culturalism includes the demand to have these things, or more precisely, to domesticate them. Defenders of the indigenous order are prepared to make useful compromises with the dominant culture, even to deploy its techniques and ideals—in the course of distinguishing their own. Hawaiians, Amazonians, or native Australians stake claims to be the world’s leading ecologists, the original friends of the earth (Mother). But then, are they not just acting as proxy critics of Western society, deceiving and undoing themselves by mystifying Western values as native cultures? This seems not the correct interpretation, even granted that a peculiar ambiguity attends the modern culture movement—which from the left can be read as political resistance, if from the right as an ideological sellout. What I am trying to do here is get above the melee, as it seems to me that the local politics become means or expressions of a larger process of structural transformation: the formation of a World System of cultures, a Culture of cultures—with all the characteristics of a structure of differences.

In the upshot, in any local sector of the global system the transformation assumes the dual appearance of assimilation and differentiation. The local people articulate with the dominant cultural order even as they take their distance from it, jiving to the world beat while making their own music.

27 F. Allan Hanson, Rapan Lifeways (Boston, 1970), p. 62.
Hence Michael Geyer's argument that similarity and difference develop together in modern world history, an observation that could be paired with Terry Turner's notices of the cultural dualism of Kayapo bodies, villages, and society as a whole—each level externally Brazilian and internally Indian. Interesting that earlier scholars of what is now perceived as "cultural inversion," this disposition of peoples in contact to elaborate the contrastive features of their respective traditions, that earlier scholars saw the cultural inversion as a structural equilibrium. Recall that Gregory Bateson originally defined "complementary schismogenesis" as a phenomenon of acculturation. And in *Naven* he argued that such processes of mutual differentiation are generally limited or counteracted, on pain of total separation and potential destruction. 28 Of course, this is the whole idea of how structures travel and are transformed in Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologiques*. Here again the oppositions between peoples in contact are balanced by resemblances as each strives to be as good as, and better than—thus the same as and different from—the other. "Everything happens as if, on the plane of beliefs and practices, the Mandan and Hidatsa had succeeded in organizing their differences into a system," he wrote in a well-known piece on myths and rites of neighboring peoples.29 The myths themselves speak of the wisdom of neighboring tribes staying far enough apart to be independent while remaining close enough together to be interdependent.

Of course, given the current theoretical and moral discourse of domination and subjection, the unearthing of such quaint relics as "structural equilibrium" or "structural complementarity" must appear feeble if not politically perverse. It might be better just to ignore the accumulated anthropological knowledge. This popular tactic is called "poststructuralism."

Alternatively, the old-timers remind us that a politics of culture is a process of structure. Rather than the overthrow of the World System, which is now an irreversible fact of their existence, the local peoples' inventions and inversions of tradition can be understood as attempts to create a differentiated cultural space within it. And actions that are at once indigenizing and modernizing appear as structural rather than just hypocritical. Roger Keesing and others make the point that the leaders of modern movements of cultural revival are often the most acculturated people, and most successful in the commercial world whose values they ostensibly repudiate. Not long ago I spent the better part of a day with one in the mountains of south-central Taiwan, an artist of the Austronesian Paiwan people, the organizer of an

aesthetic revival that is for him the means of an even larger project of cultural restoration. When I asked him why he wanted to return to Paiwan tradition, he answered with a criticism of modern materialism and individualism of a kind that can be heard in many Third World places: a life of money is inhuman by comparison with Paiwan culture. This he said while eating a steak in a Western restaurant in the Chinese town of Ping Dong, the restaurant being a sort of club to which he belonged and to which he and his young Chinese wife escorted us from the mountains in the Jeep he had recently purchased—from the proceeds of his two stores, where he sells his work and other ethnic products, including textiles from Indonesia and India. Yet there was nothing cynical about the man—on the contrary; and like everything else he did, his movement between cultures was graceful rather than incongruous. But then, who would be in a better position to mediate an intercultural relationship? And like the Polynesian ecologists or the Amazonian chief who turns a camcorder on the representative of the Brazilian Indian Service, does not the Paiwan artist make an assimilation of the dominant culture the means of sustaining a difference?

If all this makes any sense, if the world is becoming a Culture of cultures, then what needs to be studied ethnographically is the indigenization of modernity—through time and in all its dialectical ups and downs, from the earliest develop-man to the latest invention of tradition. Western capitalism is planetary in its scope, but it is not a universal logic of cultural change. In any event, we have been ourselves too dominated, historiographically and ethnographically, by its imperial claims. The agenda now is how it is worked out in other cultural manifolds.

XII

The first fifty years of capitalist develop-man in Fiji, roughly from 1800 to 1850, achieved unprecedented levels of cannibalism, thus confirming a certain totemic nightmare that has haunted the Western imagination at least since Saint Augustine articulated it: that if human venality is unleashed, the big fish will eat the little fish. But modern academic hawksers of the World System have given too much credit to the trade in European muskets for local sandalwood and bèche-de-mer (sea cucumbers) as the reason for the interrelated developments in warfare, cannibalism, and state formation in nineteenth-century Fiji. The firepower of the musket and the labor requirements of the

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bêche-de-mer trade are said to have made the political fortunes of the kingdoms of Bau, Rewa, and their like. Yet these powerful states had already achieved their historic form and much of their dominion before any Europeans came, certainly well before the bêche-de-mer trade of the 1830s introduced an appreciable number of muskets into Fijian wars. Indeed, the control of Western trade by Bau and Rewa was due to their indigenous dominance, rather than vice versa, as neither of them enjoyed significant resources in sandalwood or bêche-de-mer within their own territories. Nor were the muskets then obtained by Fijians decisive in their wars. Notoriously subject to misfire in the humid tropics and quickly neutralized by changes in fortifications, muskets were in any event not employed by Fijians with great accuracy or efficiency. It was said by missionaries that Fijians loaded their muskets with powder in proportion to the size of the man they wished to kill—so that the bigger the target, the more likely the gun would blow itself up. Muskets were actually much more effective when they were many fewer, from about 1808 to 1825, as wielded then by renegade Botany Bay or Manila men in the service of Fijian ruling chiefs. For the mercenaries were careful to single out enemy paramounts and warrior champions (qāqā) as targets: leaders whose fall could put an entire army in disarray and open the way to a general massacre—by Fijians in the foreigners’ train, using bows, spears, and clubs. Hence it was not European muskets that historically made Fijian chiefs powerful so much as the chiefs that made the muskets historically powerful. By virtue of the organization of Fijian society, a little firepower went a long way, structurally. The effect came from Fijian principles of hierarchy, from a system in which the ruling chief was the condition of the possibility of his people’s social existence. One good shot, then, and it was all over. Nor were the foreigners who did the shooting, flotsam and jetsam of Western imperialism, responsible for the political forms or ambitions of the nineteenth-century Fijian wars. Yet a certain trade did have some such significance: the trade in whale teeth, of the kind long acquired from Tongan islanders and now obtained on easy terms from passing European merchants and whalers. Fijian intellectuals have long argued that the teeth of sperm whales were the true source of Bau’s greatness.

Whale teeth were the highest Fijian valuables. In Radcliffe-Brown’s terms, they were goods of supreme social value, with the power of constituting greater social relationships and totalities. Ritualistically presented in the appropriate way, as transactions of chiefs, they arranged wars, assassinations, and noble marriages, made and unmade political alliances, saved villages and kingdoms from extermination, supplicated benefits from the god. In respect of their capacity to create society and to give life and death, whale teeth were like the

god. Indeed, the form of their presentation from the inferior to a superior was sacrificial: "May we live," says the inferior chief. "I take hold of the treasure," says the superior; "may you live; may your land endure." Thus Hocart's observation on the exchange value of whale teeth, to the effect that a few ounces of divinity are worth pounds of gross matter. Hence also the arguments of Fijians that have privileged whale teeth over muskets in the formation of the nineteenth-century states; the more whale teeth in circulation, the more power in existence in the Fiji Islands.

XIII

Proof? Lévi-Strauss talks about the chemist who, having carefully synthesized sodium chloride in the laboratory and confirmed its composition with the standard tests, just to make sure it's salt, tastes it. A good proof of the historic value of the whale teeth is that, ethnographically, you can taste it. Not only because whale teeth continue to organize Fijian life—marriage alliances, respects to chiefs, or any "heavy" kerekere of goods or persons—and not only because the ritualized formulas of their exchange remain barely altered expressions of a transaction in divine benefits. There is also the extraordinarily high price of whale teeth in the pawnshops of Suva, the capital city. The power of the whale tooth appears in its historic transformations.

Not far from Suva, in the village of Cautata, Poate Matairavula a few years ago showed me a small wooden chest, set in the farthest corner of the rear right-hand bedroom of his "European-style" house. The space was the modern equivalent of the most tabu part of the old Fijian house (the logi), where the head of the family slept with his wife and reproductive forms of wealth were stored, including seed yams and the weapons that procured cannibal victims. The wooden chest, Matairavula explained, was the "basket of the clan" (kato ni mataqali), holding the collective treasure in whale teeth. Passing with the leadership of the clan, the chest was a palladium. So long as it is intact, Matairavula said, the vanua—the land, including the people—will be preserved. In 1984, Matairavula was showing me an example of an old "basket of state" (kato ni tū), the likes of which (so far as I know) have not been anthropologically noticed from this part of Fiji since Hocart's report in 1910 of the reminiscences of an old man from Namata, a village near Cautata.

Matairavula's further explanations continued to echo these ancient memories. As chief of the clan himself, he could not go into the chest and take out whale teeth. That was for the herald, the "face of the land" (matanivavaa), representative of the collectivity vis-à-vis the chief. A few days later, Matairavula and I and a few other men were on the ceremonial ground of Bau, together with the Cautata herald who was carrying a large whale tooth
concealed in a worn black leather briefcase. We were a delegation from the village to the funeral of a high Bauan, of the ruling war-king clan, carrying the whale tooth as our “kissing” (ai reguregu) of the corpse. My own presence as a White man on the ceremonial ground of Bau was hardly a historic first. On the contrary, I could be moved beyond telling by the whole entangled history of Whites and Fijians in the nineteenth century that had been played out in this space. History was also palpable in the ceremony. We were obliged to wear “traditional” Fijian costume on the Bau ground. Traditional costume was a cotton cloth sarong in floral print. Christian, yes, but “before the flag.” History was present too in all the villages that came contributing whale teeth to the store of the Bau war-king’s power. The Cauatatä people were there because they are traditional border warriors of the Bau kingdom. It is a status they do not forget. A recent study indicates that of the villages in the Bau dominions, Cautatatä has the highest rate of enlistment in the Fiji Military Forces.

As for the Fiji Military Forces, until the two coups d’ètart they effected in 1987 under Colonel Rabuka, this army was most famous as the mainstay of the United Nations peacekeeping corps in Lebanon and the Sinai. So after the second coup, when Fiji withdrew from the British Commonwealth and thereby abandoned the queen’s birthday celebrations, Colonel Rabuka, an admirer of the Israeli military, proclaimed as Fiji’s national day—Yom Kippur. I am told that in 1987 T-shirts could be seen in Suva with “Yom Kippur” printed in Hebrew on the front, and “Fiji National Day” in English on the back. In the same year Colonel Rabuka had himself installed as leader of the Fiji Military Forces—and de facto leader of the nation—in a “traditional” ceremony, the newspaper photos and descriptions of which resemble nothing so much as the installations of ancient war-kings. But then, “atonement” would be a fair translation for the appropriate ritual (i soro) begging forgiveness from traditional authorities for acts of usurpation—by the presentation of whale teeth.

XIV

In a genial argument of the Essay Concerning Human Understanding, John Locke says that we necessarily know things relationally, by their “dependence” on other things. 31 However absolute and entire the objects of perception may seem to us, they “are but Retainers to other parts of Nature.” Their observable qualities, actions, and powers “are owing to something without them; and there is not so complete and perfect a part, that we know, of Nature, that does not owe the Being it has, and the Excellancies of it, to its

31 John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, 4.6.11.
Neighbours.” The observation has capital applications in anthropology—
granted that philosophers have never been too happy with these “secondary
qualities, mediatly perceived.” Locke drew the fundamental implication that
it is impossible to exhaust the empirical description of any object, since its
properties can be known only through interaction with an indefinite number of
other objects. It follows that the objectivity of objects is humanly constructed,
that is, by a historically relative selection and symbolic valuation of only some
of the possible concrete referents. Essentialized descriptions are not the
platonic fantasies of anthropologists alone; they are general cultural condi-
tions of human perception and communication.

More directly pertinent here is that Locke is also saying that we know the
attributes of things historically. We know things from the changes they make
in, or receive from, other things. We know the sun by its powers of melting
and bleaching wax, even as we know wax by its melting in the sun and
hardening in the cold, and being divisible by a knife but unmarked by a feather,
impervious to water, and indigestible to people—one could wax on. So it is
with cultural orders. They reveal their properties by the way they respond to
diverse circumstances, organizing those circumstances in specific forms and
in the event changing their forms in specific ways. Here, then, in a historical
ethnography—an ethnography that extends, say, over a couple of centuries—
here is a method for reconciling form and function in a logic of meaning, for
discovering the relatively invariant and mutable dimensions of structures, for
testing the historical potentialities and limits of different cultural schemes, for
weighing and valuing conflicting contextual variations and thereby allowing a
principled description of cultural orders as systems of difference. So far as all
kinds of modern and postmodern anthropological problems are concerned,
history will decide.

But then, the days are over for an ethnography that was the archaeology of
the living, searching under the disturbed topsoil of modernity for the traces of
a pristine and “primitive” existence. The cultures thus uncovered were indeed
fossilized, but mainly by a way of knowing that abstracted them from life and
history. It was a nostalgic calling, this kind of ethnography, inspired by
theoretical conceits of progress that turned perceptions of others into glimpses
of past time—provided the others were not “acculturated.” Now history
awakens us from these dogmatic slumbers. The old conceptual oppositions on
which scientific ethnography was founded are dissolving: we discover contin-
uity in change, tradition in modernity, even custom in commerce. Still, not
all that was solid now melts into air, as a certain postmodernist anthropology
has prematurely supposed. There remain the distinctive differences, the cul-
tural differences.