

BRIAN STREET

CHRISTIAN REPRESENTATIONS OF THE DEATH OF CAPTAIN COOK

Introduction

ONE of the most productive periods of contact between European society and the rest of the world commenced with the voyages of Captain Cook to the South Seas at the end of the eighteenth century. While he was ostensibly sailing in search of a lost continent, or to take astronomical observations, or, in the case of the third voyage in 1778, to discover a north-west passage, one of the main effects of his voyages was to increase knowledge of the Pacific islands and to stimulate interest in 'exotic' societies. After the second voyage, a native of Tahiti was brought back to England, fêted by London society and painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds. Plays, pantomimes, poems and romances in profusion provided a range of interpretations of just what these discoveries meant for European society. Part of the reason for such interest lay in the number of carefully documented reports of 'primitive' life in the South Sea islands, ranging from the official Admiralty versions based on the logs of Captain Cook to the privately produced memoirs of the deck-hands on board. The reading of travellers' accounts became part of the learning of a gentleman and had the academic respectability of Dr Johnson's interest—'don't cant in defence of savages', he told Boswell—as well as the popular appeal of the Hollywood-like pantomimes of Tahiti produced in London theatres.

The final voyage involved the drama of the death of Captain Cook in Hawaii on 14 February 1779. Numerous versions of the events leading up to his death have been recorded, canvases painted and plays produced, all of which provide a focus for the discussion of the issues raised in this volume—from the point of view not so much of local responses to Christianity but of

Christian assumptions about such reaction. The various explanations that have been offered over the years as to why Cook died in the way he did involve different assumptions regarding Hawaiian religion and society at that time and the way such people could be expected to respond to European and Christian travellers. Although these accounts involve significant differences of both fact and emphasis, there are a number of basic elements which are fundamental. These, I shall suggest, derive from the particular Christian viewpoint of the commentators themselves.

The primary question for most writers is the extent to which Cook was regarded as a 'god' by the Hawaiians. This involved certain conceptions of what a god is to 'primitive' people in general and to Hawaiians in particular. Attention has also been focused on what was meant by the natives prostrating themselves in front of Cook and others; the meaning of certain 'ceremonies', the significance of *heiau* (shrines) and the carved images contained in them; and what native conceptions of life after death were, and how this related to the distribution of Cook's bones after his death. These features of Hawaiian life at the time of Cook are selected and interpreted, I suggest, through a specifically Christian view of paganism. It is a view that took on a particular complexion in the nineteenth century, a point that is highlighted by a comparison of texts written at this period with both earlier and later accounts.

Christian perceptions of 'primitive' religion during the nineteenth century assumed an evolutionary progression in religious thought from animism and polytheism to the final achievement of monotheism, as represented by the Christian religion. 'Primitive' peoples were assumed to have rudimentary religious conceptions but to lack the complexity and sophistication of Christian belief: they erroneously thought that all of nature was animated by spirits, and they worshipped their many gods as manifest in the form of natural objects and 'totemic' creatures. The attention paid to these manifestations was assumed to derive from ignorance, awe and fear.¹ It is from this framework, I would suggest, that the hypothesis regarding the 'deification' of Cook arose.

European travellers have frequently reported that indigenous peoples took them as 'gods', whether in the South Seas or in Africa, in Afghanistan or America. These 'real', first-hand accounts of deification were reinforced in the nineteenth century by such influential fictional representations as Ballantyne's *Coral Island*, Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* and Kipling's *The Man Who Would Be King*.² Nineteenth-century accounts of the Hawaiian deification of Cook similarly derive from the underlying assumption that 'natives' are awed and cowed by manifestations of superior culture and technology and that they will represent the objects of these confused emotions as gods. The events associated with Cook's treatment by the Hawaiians were seen, therefore, as religious rituals and ceremonies, as worship, deification, bowing before idols and so forth. It was the intensity generated by this perception and the religious context in which it was assumed to be set that are taken as leading eventually

1. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1965.

2. B. V. Street, *The Savage in Literature*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1975.

to the Hawaiians turning on Cook, as circumstances changed and expectations were not fulfilled. Different authors, however, offer different interpretations of just what it meant to the Hawaiians to view Cook as a god. To the missionaries in particular, it was important to distinguish between 'primitive' forms of religion and their own, higher Christian practice and belief, so many of the accounts include analyses of the different meanings of 'god' to the respective parties. In this sense, they are approaching modern anthropological representations of religion as involving different complexes of belief from one culture to another; but the sources I am concerned with do not take their relativism so far as to threaten the superior position of their own belief. 'Primitive' religion may indeed be better understood if it is represented in its own terms but, to these authors, it has to be clearly understood as inferior, backward, 'earlier' in the evolutionary process than their own Christian religion.

I would like to suggest that Godfrey Lienhardt's work can help us make sense of these explanations for the death of Cook and of the events surrounding it. At the same time, it provides a resolution to the dilemma of how other people's religious beliefs can be described fairly and sensitively by observers deeply committed to their own, quite different beliefs. Lienhardt's account of Dinka religion sees their representations of divinity as providing ways in which people's personal experiences were linked to moral and social causes. Instead of analysing the experience of a powerful emotion in terms of a 'mental' state, as do contemporary Europeans, for instance, the Dinka interpret them through a series of complex 'representations' of divinity. Various sky spirits and gods are, in a sense, metaphors for picturing and then dealing with, at a social and public level, the feelings and experiences that we represent as mental and emotional states. This view of Dinka religion gives full weight to the variations of intellectual sophistication within the society, avoids the dilemma of whether people *really* believe in their gods and offers a fruitful model for making sense of religious pantheons with their local gods and spirits in societies other than the Dinka. I would like to follow through some of these possibilities in relation to the material on the death of Cook, both as a guide to the reading of the historical accounts and as a means of throwing fresh light on the events themselves.

Out of the numerous accounts written since Cook's death, I shall select a few that highlight opposing interpretations and that in particular give greater or less credence to the 'deification' hypothesis. I shall suggest that those which most firmly argue that the Hawaiians saw Cook as a god are informed by the kind of Christian and evolutionary framework outlined above, while some others focus more upon the 'secular' or political aspects of the way he was treated. It may be no coincidence that accounts on the one hand by such early commentators as Lieutenant King, who accompanied Cook on his voyages, and on the other by such Polynesian authors as Sir Peter Buck and David Malo (himself a convert to Christianity), place less emphasis on the 'deification' thesis than do the nineteenth-century missionary observers. The discourse within which King, Buck and Malo interpret the native perception of Cook and his followers is that of political conceptions of chiefship rather than

religious conceptions of deity. It may be that this stems from the fact that their view of paganism is less strongly influenced by the particular Christian viewpoint prevalent in nineteenth-century Europe.

The Death of Cook

The descriptions of events surrounding the death of Cook are compiled from a number of sources, in particular the account provided by Lt. King, of Cook's second ship the *Resolution*.³ On the third voyage, Cook was searching for a passage north of the land mass of Asia. By the autumn of 1778, he had taken the ships as far north as he could and had reached pack ice, so decided to go south for the winter and return the following spring. Accordingly, the ships went as far south as the Sandwich Islands, the westernmost group of which they had visited in the previous spring. They were remembered by the islanders and treated with considerable generosity as they sailed slowly from west to east, trading off shore with islanders who came out by canoe. Eventually they discovered a harbour on the island of Hawaii where it would be possible to anchor the ships for repairs and collect supplies. They entered it on January 16th amidst an immense throng of welcoming canoes. Cook was treated with great respect by all the Hawaiians, and a dignitary came aboard to make him many lavish presents. When Cook and some of his party went ashore, they were taken to a *heiau* or shrine where a 'ceremony' was performed that took on considerable importance in later interpretations of native attitudes to Cook. He was referred to as 'Erono', the name of a Hawaiian 'god', given red cloth and cooked pig and encouraged to sit amongst wooden idols and to kiss one of them. The people all prostrated themselves or hid as he passed. In return for the islanders' generosity, Cook gave out nails and iron, which they valued for use particularly as daggers. An area on shore was 'tabooed' for use by the Europeans, and friendly relations with the priests of the shrine made it easy for them to repair the sails, take astronomical observations and gather supplies.

By early February, some of the friendliness appeared to be wearing thin, as the islanders found the demands on their supplies of yams, bread-fruit and pigs somewhat excessive, and they asked when the ships would leave. When a date was fixed, a collection was ordered of even more goods for the sailors. These were presented to Cook by the king and the priests, both of whom continued to treat him with the utmost respect, while the common people still prostrated themselves before him. The ships sailed away on 4 February 1779, but a mast split in a gale, and they were forced to return for repairs. The Hawaiians now proved much less friendly, and numerous acts of 'insolence' occurred. After one

3. J. C. Beaglehole (ed.), *The Journals of Captain James Cook on his Voyages of Discovery*, Cambridge: Hakluyt Society 1969 [1955].

theft from the *Discovery*, Cook resolved to teach the natives a lesson and ordered guns to be loaded; the cutter was stolen before he could act and he went ashore angrily, to take the king back on to the ship with him as a hostage until the boat was returned. The king's wife discouraged him from going, though at first he had seemed willing; then news of the death of a chief, shot from a boat Cook had sent to blockade the bay, led to a fierce affray. Cook turned to the boat, abandoning his plans, and was struck on the back by a chief brandishing an iron dagger; his body was immediately set upon by the rest, and the sailors could only struggle to escape back to the ship, leaving him to the Hawaiians. Captain Clerke assumed command and established contact with the king again in order to have Cook's remains returned for burial; parts of his body had been dismembered and distributed to priests and chiefs, but some were given to Clerke, and the Captain was buried at sea.

Lieutenant King

Lieutenant King puts these events into perspective through a detailed description of Hawaiian social life that is more sensitive to indigenous institutions than many later works.⁴ He provides a number of conjectures on religion which give depth to his explanations of Cook's death and of the natives' attitude towards him. His attempting to comprehend the 'customs' of an alien society by considering what their actions mean to them, and his explaining of social facts by other social facts, have much in common with the methods of modern anthropologists. He writes of Cook that he too believed in gaining the friendship of 'Indians...and fathoming their views'. So, he suggests, it is surprising that Cook of all people should have died in this way, and he tries to offer an explanation:

It might be said that a long course of success, which Cook had in his intercourse with Indians, had taken away as was natural part of that wise distrust he formerly had; doubtless there was every reason to lay aside all distrust of these people, and had we not returned to the bay we should have left them impressed with the highest sense of their docility, humanity and generosity; no people we had ever seen surpassed them and we placed a confidence by trusting ourselves inland far beyond what we dared to do even at Otaheite, neither will strict justice allow one to take away the merit they deserve, although they have done us so essential an injury. It is a great doubt whether the attack was premeditated and we seemed generally of opinion from Terreeoboo's [the king of Tahiti, otherwise known as Kalani 'opu'u] conduct that he did not know of the boat being stole. Nevertheless, it is not very clear but that some chiefs were glad of seeking an occasion to quarrell, for it was observed that on our returning the second time we did not receive that hearty welcome we expected and their conversation shewed sufficiently that they did not approve of it; these appearances were hardly

4. Ibid., vol. iii.



The Apotheosis of Captain Cook, by Wouwerman

observed or attended to, knowing that when they saw us get the mast out they would see for what we returned. Their thefts became more audacious and they began to be less in awe of our Soldiers and threats; but all this is to be accounted for, perhaps more naturally than from any formed plan of opposing us, from imagining we meant to stay.⁵

This explanation is consistent with the descriptions of native life offered by King; he sees his captain's death as the result of particular circumstances, themselves exacerbated by the practical political concerns of certain chiefs and the economic worries of the islanders. King's descriptions of Hawaiian religion capture more of the pragmatic aspect (which modern commentators see as most significant there) than the mystification which led many nineteenth-century writers to concentrate on the deification hypothesis. He suggests, for instance, that the Hawaiians thought their gods lived with Europeans, 'which proves that they only regard [the] images as types or resemblances of their Deities'. Where Bishop Heber was writing in the same period that 'the heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone', King was aware of the extent to which wooden images represent deities, rather than being objects of worship in themselves. As Lienhardt might express it, the material objects figure non-material entities that themselves represent abstract states of being and of experience. To other commentators, however, native images, ceremonial and ritual were much darker, more mysterious affairs than they seemed either to King or to the modern anthropologist; and those of Hawaii were frequently seen as the result of the kind of 'blindness' of which Bishop Heber writes. It is this perception of religious blindness that informs many of the explanations offered for the death of Cook.

James Jackson Jarves

An account which brings out this perception of native institutions is that by James Jackson Jarves in his *History of the Hawaiian or Sandwich Islands*, published in 1843. Jarves was a member of the American Oriental Society and a devout Christian; he writes of Hawaii in order to demonstrate the overthrow of heathenism and the gradual ascendancy of Christianity and civilization after the arrival of the missionaries. He learns of earlier Hawaiian custom from native authorities during a four-year stay and from a reading of earlier accounts, notably one by the London Missionary Society authority William Ellis. He claims to present the native version of Cook's activities in Hawaii in the years 1778 and 1779.

According to Jarves, the first appearance of Cook's ship off the island of Kauai in January 1778 evoked considerable surprise amongst the natives. 'They asked of one another, "What is this great thing with branches?" Some replied,

5. Ibid., p. 568.

"It is a forest which has moved into the sea." This idea filled them with consternation.' The Europeans appeared to have triangular heads, loose skin and holes in their sides from which they took out iron. Jarves claims to have heard his version of this representation from native historians who learned to write during the generation which followed the death of Cook and who 'have recorded in their simple narratives many trifling circumstances which were not thought worthy of place in the more enlightened accounts.'⁶ Keesing, noting the contribution of these early Hawaiian scholars, suggests a note of caution in taking them as straightforward representatives of the indigenous viewpoint at the time of Cook: we need, he writes, 'to sift out what is truly indigenous from the allegedly "native" Hawaiian culture as first recorded after some fifty years of contact and feudal-like development'.⁷ Jarves was less circumspect and took such authorities at their word when they claimed the natives were overawed by the Europeans and their ships and thought of them as gods. On Cook's return in November 1778, these early impressions are recalled vividly, and further evidence of deity appears: 'Gods indeed, they eat the flesh of man (mistaking the red pulp of water-melons for human substance) and the fire burns at their mouths.'⁸

However, seeing the visitors as gods was not a deterrent to trade. Jarves explains: 'The definition which civilised man applies to the word God and the attributes ascribed to the Divinity, differ materially from those of the savage. With him any object of fear, power or knowledge was a god, though it might differ not perceptibly from his own nature.'⁹ The term, then, was no more than an acknowledged superiority or the strongest expression of flattery. While they bowed down in dread to powerful deities, they worshipped many inferior ones 'whom they ridiculed or revered, and erected or destroyed their heiaus (shrines) as inclination prompted'.¹⁰ Jarves recognized the apparent inconsistency for a Christian reader in claiming that the natives see the travellers as gods and yet trade with them, since in Christianity God is not conceived in this way. His solution was to demonstrate that native perceptions of deity were different. Their religion had a more pragmatic quality than did the Christianity he espoused: the emphasis, as later writers have also noted, 'was not on a moral code but on securing the favours of the gods for one's own advantage through the correct ritual'.¹¹ It is this, according to Jarves, that accounts for the Hawaiians' 'willingness to fight Cook, or their god Lono, as they deemed him; the readiness with which they were diverted from their purpose to try more

6. James Jackson Jarves, *History of the Hawaiian or Sandwich Islands*, London: Edward Moxon 1843, p. 108.

7. F. M. Keesing, 'Acculturation in Polynesia', *Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin*, Vol. CXCIII (1947), p. 35.

8. Jarves, *History*, p. 111.

9. Ibid., p. 112.

10. Ibid.

11. D. C. Starzecka, *Hawaii: People and Culture*, London: British Museum Publications 1975.

winning means to gratify him and the alternative love, fear and hostility with which he was afterwards regarded'.¹²

This perceptive explanation of Cook's treatment by the Hawaiians, which might also satisfactorily account for his death at their hands, is, however, marred for a modern reader by the scorn with which Jarves views such pragmatic versions of religious belief. His account remains strongly coloured by nineteenth-century conceptions of social evolution and of progress, in religion as in technology and other aspects of contemporary life. Jarves's appeal to the different meanings of 'god' in Hawaiian society and within Christianity, which might suggest that he was adopting a less ethnocentric approach, is nevertheless couched in terms of the dominant Christian view of paganism: he continued to represent Hawaiian belief in his own rather than in their terms.

He uses, for instance, the terminology of Christian religion to describe the events that took place when Cook landed and the activities of the Hawaiians with regard to him: 'A priest saluted Cook with the greatest veneration and threw over his shoulder a piece of red cloth. Stepping back he offered a pig and then pronounced a long harangue. Religious ceremonies similar to this were frequently performed before the commander.'¹³ He assumes a 'religious' content to activities that other commentators have viewed in more secular terms, and he goes on to denigrate 'primitive' versions of such belief. 'The punctilious deference accorded Cook when he first landed was both painful and ludicrous.' His description makes the activities appear foolish and debased. The people hid or prostrated themselves as Cook walked by, but since he walked quickly and since people stood up as he passed and followed him, the latter were tripping over those still bowing; the difficulty, says Jarves, was resolved by 'adopting a sort of quadruped gait and 10,000 half-clad men, women and children were to be seen chasing or fleeing from Cook on all fours'.¹⁴ The initial ceremony at the *heiau* is described equally scornfully: Cook was 'presented in great form to the idols', a hog was 'offered...to him in sacrifice', and praises were chanted in honour of Lono, 'after which they led him to the chief idol, which, following their example, he kissed'.¹⁵ Finally, 'the disgusting rites were completed by drinking awa, which was first prepared in the mouths of attendants and then spit out into a drinking vessel', and by drinking swine-meal, 'which, as the greatest mark of civility was first chewed for him by a filthy old man'.¹⁶ The scornful tone is reinforced by the intended ironical contrast between the 'filth' and spitting of the action and the commentary on it as the 'greatest mark of civility'.

This activity is then related to the issue of Cook's deification: 'It seems impossible that any one in the least acquainted with the customs of Polynesia, could for a moment have doubted that all this form was intended for

12. Jarves, *History*, p. 112.

14. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

adoration.' King, he notes, only surmises such a possibility in his account and 'affects to consider it as evidence of great friendship and respect'. Jarves, however, asserts that Cook must have known what it 'really' signified:

The natives say that Cook performed his part in this heathen farce without the slightest opposition. The numerous offerings, the idols and temple to which he was borne, the long prayers, recitations and chants addressed to him, must have carried conviction to his mind that it was intended solely for religious homage and the whole form a species of deification or consecration of himself. If this were not enough, the fearful respect shown by the common people who, if he walked out, fled at his presence, or fell and worshipped him, should have convinced the most stupid mind.¹⁷

Jarves's use of terms is central to this conviction. By using words taken from a religious context in his own society, such as worship, sacrifice, temple, idol, adoration, prayers, ceremony, he immediately suggests a comparison with elements of Christian belief, which serves as an implicit standard by which to judge Hawaiian 'customs'. Couched in this way, it appears obvious, certainly to a Christian reader, that the treatment of Cook is part of a 'religious' process within which the Hawaiians believed that Cook was a god. Jarves appears to prove his hypothesis in the very stating of it. However, if we were to apply different terms and different assumptions to the events, as have a number of commentators, then they would be open to other interpretations and not necessarily classifiable as 'religious', at least within the range of meanings that concept had for many nineteenth-century Christians. As Jarves himself notes at one point, to refer to gods in Hawaii is to refer to a different set of beliefs than is implied by reference to God in Christian terminology. While appearing to take a step in the direction of a less ethnocentric explanation of Hawaiian cultural responses to European travellers, Jarves is ultimately constrained by the Christian conception of paganism which informs his work to represent such responses as 'primitive' religious misunderstanding.

Abraham Fornander

A similar ambivalence is also to be found in later writers. Towards the end of the nineteenth century we find the deification thesis still prominent, but there is a greater degree of self-consciousness in some authors regarding the application of Christian terminology to pagan belief. A major example of this more sophisticated approach is represented by the work of Abraham Fornander. He was the son of a long line of clergymen scholars in Sweden, who, after a classical education at the gymnasium of Kalmar and the University of Uppsala, came to the Sandwich Islands in 1838, married a chieftainess there, and became editor of the newspaper *The Polynesian* and

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 114-15.

circuit judge of Maui until Kamehameha V appointed him Inspector-General of Schools in 1865. He spent the last thirty years of his life studying and collecting Polynesian legends, and helping to preserve history and folklore. His three-volume work *The Polynesian Race*, published in 1880, is a constant source of reference for students of Polynesia. It records many of the supposedly native versions of the events associated with the death of Cook, adding footnotes and comments from his own enquiries but leaning heavily on David Malo, a Hawaiian convert to Christianity whose *Hawaiian Antiquities* had been published in 1793.

On Cook's first visit to Kauai in January 1778, Fornander quotes Malo: 'And that same night guns were fired and rockets were thrown up. They [the natives] thought it was a god, and they called his name Lonomakua and they thought there would be war.'¹⁸ Fornander then adds, 'Kamakau relates that Kuohu, the priest, had his doubts whether the newcomers were gods or mortal men', and that having tried to ascertain by means of the sacred cup, he came to the conclusion that 'they were not gods but Haole "foreigners"; but the young people and the majority look upon Cook as the god Lono'.¹⁹ News of the foreigners was sent to other islands, so that when Cook returned in November his fame had preceded him:

and the people were fully prepared to receive him as an impersonation of Lono, one of the great gods of the Hawaiian trinity [*sic*: there were actually four major gods; this version stems from the attempts of Christianized natives to adapt native tradition to Christian teaching] and render him the homage and worship due to so great and mysterious a visitant until his long sejour at Kealakekua Bay and his ill-advised projects destroyed the illusion and caused his death.²⁰

Fornander similarly quotes 'native' accounts of Cook's reception when he reached Hawaii in November 1778 and then adds his own interpretation:

After these detailed accounts of the reception of Cook by the chiefs, priests and common people, there can be no doubt that, so far as the latter were concerned, they looked upon him as a god, an Akua possessed of hitherto unknown and terrible powers of destruction, and of an inexhaustible mine of that metal which they so highly coveted, accompanied by a crew of wonderful beings, 'Kupueu' of different colour, speech and customs than their own who had come from another and unknown world. Coming to them from over the sea and apparently having the thunder and the lightening at his command, no wonder that the natives regarded Captain Cook as an avatar of the great Lono-noho-ik-a-wai of their religious creed, ...and their adoration was as natural as it was spontaneous.... But that Captain Cook should have permitted himself to foster and keep up that delusion into which the natives had naturally fallen, by complacently receiving and assisting at the adoration which he must have perceived and known was only intended for the Divine Being, however gross the native conception of that Being might have been, that is the great blot which some of Cook's critics, native and foreign, Malo and Jarves, have thrown upon his character and...penetrating the

18. Abraham Fornander, *The Polynesian Race: Its Origin and Migrations and the Ancient History of the Hawaiian People to the Times of Kamehameha I*, London: Trübner & Co. 1880, vol. ii, p. 168.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., p. 170.

designs of Providence they have not failed to consider his violent death as an act of Divine punishment.²¹

Fornander himself is less critical of Cook and takes account of the state of ethnographic knowledge and understanding at that time:

That intelligent men, writing long after the event, when the religious customs and modes of thought of the natives were well understood and their intentions in the matter were well known, would not have lent themselves to 'perform a part in this heathen farce', as Jarves calls it, is perfectly intelligible; but that, before giving their verdict, they should not have been able to place themselves in the position of Cook who was ignorant of those customs and modes of thought, and naturally enough construed their intentions as those of goodwill, respect and friendship is a lamentable defect in a critic.... To Captain [*sic*] King, who seems to have been not only a kinder man but also a gentleman of finer susceptibilities than Captain Cook, these ceremonies 'seemed approaching to adoration', though he had no doubt that on the part of the natives they were 'expressive of high respect'; and so little did he perceive the blasphemous act of self-deification in what transpired that he actually took an active part in the performance, not exactly understanding 'the meaning of the various ceremonies' but certainly not apprehending that a damaging judgement would be passed upon Captain Cook and himself for so doing.²²

Fornander, then, suggests that earlier explanations of the death and deification of Cook are based on a misunderstanding of indigenous 'custom and modes of thought'. The understanding that Fornander, on the other hand, lays claim to is largely premised on a Christian and evolutionary framework of thought which sees 'primitive customs' as inferior and backward—given their state of awe and ignorance, it is 'no wonder' that the natives regarded Cook as a god. But in tension with this rather crude interpretation of native belief, Fornander recognizes the possibility of a more complex analysis. He provides, for instance, a gloss on the word 'Akua', as it might have been applied to Cook, which could potentially have moved him beyond the deification hypothesis:

It should be borne in mind that to the heathen Hawaiian the word Akua did not convey the same lofty idea as the word God or Deity does to the Christian. To the Hawaiians the word Akua expressed the idea of any supernatural being the object of fear or of worship. This term was also, as Judge Andrews says in his Hawaiian dictionary, 'applied to artificial objects, the nature and properties of which Hawaiians did not understand, as the movement of a watch, a compass, the self-striking of a clock etc.'²³

This appears to recognize that certain key words in a language need to be understood in their range of meaning and context in order to understand what their *activity* means to the actors. Thus, the word used by the Hawaiians to describe Cook cannot simply be glossed as 'god', with all the connotations that has for a Christian reader, but must be related to its other uses and glossed by a word that located it within the user's specific conceptual system, rather than

21. Ibid., p. 180.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., p. 179.

within that of the observer. This might seem to place Fornander in a different tradition from that of some of the cruder missionary writers, of whom Luomala writes, 'Ethnographical accounts are secondary in most journals and presented mostly in the context of missionary efforts to bring the cultures into conformity with Christian and European standards of the nineteenth century.'²⁴ Indeed, Fornander is recorded as being very unpopular with the missions, despite his own clerical background; his long experience of Hawaiian culture and his marriage to a local chieftainess who knew the genealogies well had led him to fear the way in which missionaries were succeeding in replacing Hawaiian culture with their own.²⁵ According to a later ethnographer, W.D. Alexander, Fornander 'did more to preserve the history and traditions of the Hawaiian race than any other man'.²⁶ And yet, like Jarves, who also recognized that the word 'god' had a different meaning for Hawaiians than for Christians, Fornander continues to assume that this meaning stems from 'fear' and that Hawaiians 'worship' the objects being represented; their beliefs are, therefore, seen as inferior to that implied by a Christian's belief in God. This ambivalence stems, I would argue, from the deep influence of nineteenth-century Christian conceptions of paganism upon these writers.

A more complex analysis of varying conceptions of divinity is developed in Godfrey Lienhardt's work on the Dinka people of the Sudan. The insights of *Divinity and Experience*, in which the various gods, spirits and supernatural beings can be interpreted as a system of representations, more like metaphors for expressing complex ideas and feelings than 'primitive' stages of religious development, could fruitfully be applied to the Hawaiian beliefs hinted at by Fornander. If *akua* refers to those things that Hawaiians found new or difficult to understand, such as the workings of a compass, then its application to Cook, who brought such things to the island, might appear reasonable and mundane enough, without having to assume that he was being deified. The term could be glossed in English to focus upon the 'alien' or 'strange'. The representation of Cook as *akua*, the treatment of him at shrines and in public places, the use of the name Lono and the giving of gifts could all be understood as complex forms of representation for his special strangeness. In this way the Hawaiians, like the Dinka, were perhaps able to link personal experience of strange people and events to wider and more familiar moral and social issues. The questions that this approach might lead us to ask would not be whether Cook was seen as a god, but what meaning did the words the Hawaiians used to describe Cook have for them, how did this use relate to their use in other contexts, and how did people's perceptions of Cook fit into their wider conceptual system.

Interestingly enough, such questions and the less mystifying explanation of the treatment of Cook associated with them have been developed more fully by

24. K. Luomala, 'Missionary Contributions to Polynesian Anthropology', *Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin*, Vol. CXCI (1947), p. 10.

25. Helen Doty, 'Introduction' to new edition of A. Fornander, *The Polynesian Race* (Rutland, Vermont, and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle 1969), p. x.

26. Quoted by Doty, *ibid.*, p. xii.

an indigenous commentator. Sir Peter Buck, a Polynesian ethnologist, son of a Maori mother and attached to the Bernice P. Bishop Museum in Hawaii, wrote an article in the *Museum Bulletin* for 1945 challenging the deification hypothesis:

Another popular fallacy associated with Captain Cook is the theory of his alleged deification by the people of the island of Hawaii. The theory that Cook was regarded as a god seems to have been based primarily on the fact that the Hawaiians gave him the name of Lono. However David Malo (*Hawaiian Antiquities*, 1898) stated that the name of Lono was given to Captain Cook because of the resemblance the sails of his ship bore to the tapa of the god. In the course of time, however, Lono the man and Lono the god have come to be identified as the same individual. The popular version is that Cook was thought by the Hawaiians to be the god Lono returned. A ceremony conducted on a heiau and the acts of prostration before Cook have been accepted as further evidence that he had been deified. These incidents, however, may be interpreted in another way.

Proper names which had been applied to gods were given to chiefs, and the ceremony conducted with religious ritual, including offerings of pigs, was also observed in the installation of high chiefs. The prostration attitude, termed kapu moe, was given to mortal chiefs of the highest rank, and it is certain that Captain Cook was elevated to the highest rank of chieftainship. On the other hand, the contention that a living man was made a god does not accord with native custom and usage. If he was thought to be a god, why should the heiau ceremony be conducted to make him one? The fact that the Hawaiians eventually killed Cook does not detract from the fact that he was made a high chief, for high chiefs were killed when circumstances demanded. When the Hawaiians took away Cook's body and stripped the flesh from the bones he was nearer deification than he had been in life, for the Hawaiian custom of deification of selected high chiefs was a post mortem event not an ante mortem one.²⁷

David Malo's account of the treatment of the bones of dead Hawaiian kings, the placing them in a shrine and performance of certain rituals 'to secure their deification', accords with Buck's views here and is similar to other accounts of the regard for Cook's remains. There existed ceremonies for the deification of the dead to which the treatment of Cook's body can be compared, whereas it is more difficult to find Hawaiian rituals for deification of the living. Similarly, the ceremonies for the installation of a king are much more elaborate and longer lasting than those described when Cook first landed, involving taboos on sounds and on fishing.²⁸ As Buck points out, there were elements in common between this and the treatment of Cook, notably the offering of a pig, the prostration of the people and the chanting of prayers. But these elements hardly constitute a kingship installation, much less a deification ceremony. That many commentators have assumed that they do stems, I have

27. P. Buck, 'Cook's Discovery of the Hawaiian Islands', in 'Report of the Director for 1944', *Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin*, Vol. CLXXXVI (1945), pp. 26-7, quoted in J. C. Beaglehole, vol. iii, p. cxliv.

28. W. D. Alexander, *A Brief History of the Hawaiian People*, New York etc.: American Book Co. 1891, p. 56.

suggested, from the persistence of a particular Christian perception of paganism that underlies the work even of authors deeply versed in Hawaiian life and who wish to avoid, at least overtly, the simple biases of the 'mission' view.

These conceptions cannot be attributed to Christianity alone, since many authors who remain free of them are themselves Christian, as in the case of King and Malo; but the alliance of a particular nineteenth-century evolutionary conception of human progress with deeply held Christian convictions does seem to have produced a framework of thought that has seriously affected the representation of Hawaiian life at the time of Cook's voyages. It is to this framework that we owe the notion that Cook was seen as a god by the Hawaiians and the explanations of his death at their hands. More precisely, many Christian writers have seen native ritual and ceremonial as grand, hushed and awesome affairs: within this tradition, the giving of a cloak to Cook by a native chief becomes deification of him, while the giving of his shirt by Cook to a native chief is merely a trivial gift. Such mystification of alien activity and symbolic life lies behind many of the problems writers have encountered in trying to explain the death of Cook. The language of Christian religion, with its awed reference to God, worship and ritual, has heightened the drama of Cook's encounters with the Hawaiians and provided a framework within which to explain his death and to make it part of a pattern more comprehensible to at least certain categories of reader than if it were considered simply a random event. It was, no doubt, part of a pattern, but not necessarily that elaborate and dramatic pattern of native mystery and awe to which a variety of writers have referred it, interpreting pagan action and belief through the discourse of Christian religion.

PART III

NEW VERNACULARS ON THE CHRISTIAN FRONTIER