Creating the Past: Custom and Identity in the Contemporary Pacific

Roger M. Keesing

Across the Pacific, from Hawai'i to New Zealand, in New Caledonia, Aboriginal Australia, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea, Pacific peoples are creating pasts, myths of ancestral ways of life that serve as powerful political symbols. In the rhetoric of postcolonial nationalism (and sometimes separatism) and the struggles of indigenous Fourth World peoples, now minorities in their own homelands, visions of the past are being created and evoked.

Scholars of Pacific cultures and history who are sympathetic to these political struggles and quests for identity are in a curious and contradiction-ridden position in relation to these emerging ideologies of the past. The ancestral ways of life being evoked rhetorically may bear little relation to those documented historically, recorded ethnographically, and reconstructed archaeologically—yet their symbolic power and political force are undeniable.

Perhaps it does not matter whether the pasts being recreated and invoked are mythical or "real," in the sense of representing closely what actual people did in actual times and places. Political symbols radically condense and simplify "reality," and are to some extent devoid of content: that is how and why they work. Perhaps it matters only whether such political ideologies are used for just causes, whether they are instruments of liberation or of oppression. In the contemporary Pacific they are being used both to recapture just rights and to deny them. The question is less simple than that.

The process of recapturing the past, of reconstructing, of questioning Western scholarship—historical and anthropological—is important and essential. My intention is neither to defend established versions of the past from a standpoint of vested scholarly interest, nor to debunk emerging

The Contemporary Pacific, Volume 1, *Numbers* 1 *&* 2, *Spring & Fall,* 1989, 19–42

political myths by comparing them to actual pasts to which I claim privileged access. Rather, in showing contradictions in this process of political mythmaking and in showing how in many ways the contemporary discourses of cultural identity derive from Western discourses, I seek to promote a more genuinely radical stance in relation to both the more distant and the more recent past—and to Western domination, of minds as well as societies.

The discourse of identity, legitimacy, and historical origins—the political mythmaking of our time—is not as different from the political mythmaking of the pre-European Pacific as it might seem.

The "invention of tradition" has been extensively explored in recent years (see particularly Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), in relation to theoretical issues of ideology and representation,[1] questions of political economy (such as the invention and evocation of a symbolically constructed Scottish Highlands culture, replete with woollen kilts from British mills as well as bagpipes—see Trevor-Roper 1982), and the dynamics of national-identity construction in postcolonial nation states. These phenomena have not been extensively explored for the Pacific.[2] Nonetheless, they have occurred in other times and places and are going on at present in other settings.[3] Contemporary Malaysia, where a mythic "Malay culture," a conflation of indigenous (but heavily Indianized) court traditions and Islam, is being used to persecute and disenfranchise Chinese and Indian minorities and indigenous ethnic groups, is a case in point.

Modern Mythmaking in the Pacific

Before I turn to some of the important theoretical issues raised by contemporary movements and ideologies of cultural identity, let me sketch briefly the range of phenomena I am concerned with.

Beginning with ideologies of *kastom* in contemporary Melanesia, I will illustrate four variants, or levels, mainly with reference to the Solomon Islands. These phenomena have counterparts in Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea.

First, at a national and regional level, are rhetorical appeals to "The Melanesian Way," and idealizations of custom (most often emanating from a Westernized elite). In Vanuatu in particular, the ideologies and charters of the postcolonial state enshrine customary law and institutions.

Second, are ritualized celebrations of custom in the form of the arts—

music, dance, "traditional" dress—as dramatically enacted in art festivals, tourist events, and rituals of state.

Third, the rhetoric of custom is invoked with reference to a particular region or island or province within a postcolonial state. This may take the form of competition for state resources and political power, regional separatism, or even secessionist demands. In the Solomons, such regional claims to customary unity go back to the postwar Maasina Rule movement (which attempted to present a common Malaita custom as a basis for legal autonomy). In the emergence of Papua New Guinea, secessionist claims by North Solomons and East New Britain were cast partly in terms of customary unity; and in Vanuatu, Nagriamel separatism similarly appealed to a common cultural heritage.

Fourth, if the field of view is narrowed to particular language groups, particularly on islands like Malaita (or Tanna) where the commitment to "traditional" culture remains strong, we find ideologies of *kastom* used to resolve the contradictions between ancestral ways and Christianity. As Burt (1982) has documented, the Kwara'ae of central Malaita have produced origin myths that trace their ancestors back to wandering tribes of Israelites and codify ancestral rules in the style of Biblical commandments. The creation of mythical customs has been encouraged and even demanded by institutions of the postcolonial state that empower and legitimize "paramount chiefs" or other "traditional" leaders: contemporary Melanesia is now filled with "paramount chiefs" in areas that in precolonial times had no systems of chiefly authority or hereditary rank.

The production of mythical versions of ancestral customs is not confined to Christianized areas. As I have shown for the pagan[4] Kwaio of central Malaita, who are still *living* their ancestral culture, an encapsulated and partly spurious *kastom* may still be advanced at the level of ideology. In the Kwaio case, producing a version of *kastom* in emulation of colonial legal statutes has been a theme of political struggle against Christianity and alien law. In the process, the Kwaio, like others, have produced nonexistent "chiefs."

Other variants of this theme are found in Fiji. In some respects, as France (1965) and others have shown, "Fijian custom" represents a political myth of the colonial period. A national version of Fijian culture was historically created through a complex collusion between British colonial rulers and Fijian chiefs. The "Fijian culture" so created, codified, and legitimated represented both a particular regional variant of Fijian socio-

political structure and the interests of a regional aristocracy in cementing their domination. Under the banners of Taukei and through the Great Council of Chiefs, the chiefly ideology of Fijian custom has been celebrated in and since the coups—used as much to disenfranchise a rising Fijian middle class as to dispossess the Indo-Fijian majority. Ironically, in the name of "Fijian custom" Indians are being forced to observe Sabbath laws.

At the University of the South Pacific and elsewhere, Polynesian scholars and students assert a regional identity based on a pan-Polynesian culture they supposedly share. Some important elements of this culture represent particular regional elaborations within Polynesia, and even misinterpretations by European scholars.

In Australia, idealized representations of the pre-European past are used to proclaim Aboriginal identity and the attachment of indigenous peoples to the land, and are being deployed in environmentalist as well as Aboriginal political struggles. In New Zealand, increasingly powerful and successful Maori political movements incorporate idealized and mythicized versions of a precolonial Golden Age, the mystical wisdom of Aotearoa.

Hawai'i and New Caledonia exhibit further variants on the themes of Fourth World political struggle, with idealized representations of precolonial society deployed to assert common identity and to advance and legitimate political demands. In the Hawaiian case, a cultural tradition largely destroyed many decades ago must be reconstituted, reclaimed, revived, reinvented. A denial that so much has been destroyed and lost is achieved by political mythology and the sanctification of what survives, however altered its forms. In New Caledonia, the issues are not simply the desperate struggle for political power and freedom from colonial oppression, but also the creation of both common bonds and common cultural identity among peoples whose ancestors were deeply divided, culturally and linguistically, into warring tribes speaking mutually unintelligible languages.

Some Theoretical Themes

These discourses of cultural identity in the contemporary Pacific, although they depict the precolonial past and claim to produce countercolonial images, are in many ways derived from Western ideologies.

First, Gramsci's general argument may be illustrated for the Pacific:

counterhegemonic discourse pervasively incorporates the structures, categories, and premises of hegemonic discourse. In part this is because those who are dominated internalize the premises and categories of the dominant; in part, because the discourse of domination creates the objective, institutional realities within which struggles must be fought; and in part, because it defines the semiology through which claims to power must be expressed. The Manichean conceptual structures of missionary discourse —dualities of Christian light and heathen darkness, God and the Devil, good and evil, white and black—have a continuing impress on Pacific thought, even in countercolonial discourse.

Second, contemporary Third World (and Fourth World) representations of their own cultures have been shaped by colonial domination and the perception of Western culture through a less direct reactive process, a dialectic in which elements of indigenous culture are selected and valorized (at the levels of both ideology and practice) as *counters to* or *commentaries on* the intrusive and dominant colonial culture. That is, colonized peoples have distanced themselves from (as well as modeling their conceptual structures on) the culture of domination, selecting and shaping and celebrating the elements of their own traditions that most strikingly differentiate them from Europeans (see Thomas n.d.).

Third, Pacific Island elites, and Aboriginal Australians, Maori, and Hawaiians in a position to gain leadership roles and become ideologues, have been heavily exposed, through the educational process, to Western ideologies that idealize primitivity and the wisdom and ecological reverence of those who live close to Nature. Idealizations of the precolonial past in the contemporary Pacific have often been derivatives of Western critiques of modern technology and progress; ironically, those in the Pacific who in their rhetorical moments espouse these idealized views of the past are mainly (in their political actions and life-styles) hell-bent on technology, progress, materialism, and "development."

In the process of objectification, a culture is (at the level of ideology) imagined to consist of "traditional" music, dances, costumes, or artifacts. Periodically performing or exhibiting these fetishized representations of their cultures, the elites of the new Pacific ritually affirm (to themselves, the tourists, the village voters) that the ancestral cultural heritage lives on.

Fourth, assertions of identity based on idealizations of the ancestral past draw heavily on anthropological concepts—particularly ideas about "culture"—as they have entered Western popular thought. It is ironic that

cultural nationalist rhetoric often depicts anthropologists as villains who appropriate and exploit, although that anti-anthropological rhetoric[5] is itself squarely shaped by anthropology's concepts and categories. (Doubly ironic, perhaps, that the discourse of cultural nationalism thereby suffers from some of the conceptual diseases—such as essentialism and reification of abstractions like "culture" and "society" into entities and causal agents —that plague anthropology.) Through such spurious reification and objectification, metonymically, material objects or dances can serve to represent the whole of "a culture."

European scholars are implicated in a more direct way in some of the misrepresentations of ancestral cultures. Some of the classic accounts and generalizations about the cultures of Polynesia and Melanesia by expatriate scholars—to which Islanders have been exposed through books and other media—are misleading. Western scholars' own misrenderings and stereotypes have fed back into contemporary (mis)representations of the Pacific past.

In questioning the political myths of our time, I am not defending the authority of anthropological representations of the Pacific past, or the hegemonic position of scholarly discourse in relation to the aspirations of indigenous peoples to recapture their own pasts. The past (as I have recently written in relation to colonial history) is contested ground. I am urging that in contesting it, Pacific Islanders be more relentlessly radical and skeptical—not that they relinquish it to the "experts." (We who claim expertise, too, can well reflect on the politics and epistemology of our privileged authority.)

Finally (and critically), if I seem to imply a gulf between the authenticity of actual precolonial societies and cultures and the inauthenticity of the mythic pasts now being invented in the Pacific, such a characterization in fact perpetuates some of anthropology's own myths. The present political contexts in which talk of custom and ancestral ways goes on are of course very different from precolonial contexts. Nonetheless, such mystification is inherent in political processes, in all times and places. Spurious pasts and false histories were being promulgated in the Pacific long before Europeans arrived, as warrior leaders draped veils of legitimacy over acts of conquest, as leaders sought to validate, reinforce, institutionalize, and "celestialize" their powers (to borrow a term from Marx), and as factions battled for dominance. Ironically, then, the "true" and "authentic" cultures of the Pacific past, overlain and distorted by today's political myths,

represent, in part at least, cumulations of the political myths of the ancestors.

In Pacific communities on the eve of European invasion, there were multiple "realities"—for commoners and for chiefs, for men and for women, for young and for old, for free persons and for captives or slaves, for victors and for vanquished. Genealogies, cosmologies, rituals were themselves contested spheres. The "authentic" past was never a simple, unambiguous reality. The social worlds of the Pacific prior to European invasion were, like the worlds of the present, multifaceted and complex.

Moreover, however the past may be constructed as a symbol, and however critical it may be for historically dominated peoples to recapture this ground, a people's cultural heritage poses a challenge to radical questioning. We are all to some degree prisoners of "real" pasts as they survive into the present—in the form of patriarchal values and institutions, of patterns of thought, of structures of power. A deeply radical discourse (one that questions basic assumptions) would aspire to liberate us from pasts, both those of our ancestors and those of (colonial or other) domination, as well as to use them as political symbols.

Let me develop these arguments.

"A Series of Negations"

Gramsci, writing of the classic situation of class struggle in Europe, wrote in the *Prison Notebooks* (1971) that "The lower classes, historically on the defensive, can only achieve self-awareness via a series of negations, via their consciousness of the identity and class limits of their enemy." Gramsci used the term *hegemony* to characterize the ideological domination whereby the consciousness of subordinate elements in society is shaped and structured by the discourse of those who dominate them. My colleague Ranajit Guha, arguing for a "subaltern" historiography of colonial India (1983), has argued that the same hegemonic process of negation operates in colonial situations: the dominated reproduce the conceptual and institutional structures of their domination, even in struggling against it. In several forthcoming papers, I have advanced similar arguments with regard to colonial experience in the Pacific (Keesing n.d.*a,* n.d.*b,* n.d.*c*).

This process operates in many ways, in the ideologies and movements proclaiming cultural identity and reappropriating, and in the process refashioning, the precolonial past. One is that the units—countries, prov-

inces, islands—whose unity and common cultural heritage is proclaimed may have acquired their reality only through the colonial process itself. What in precolonial times were politically fragmented and culturally and linguistically diverse communities, divided by warfare and raiding, became administrative units of the colonial state. These units—such as Western Solomons and Malaita provinces (of the Solomon Islands)—have become units locked in struggle for resources and political power in postcolonial states. Some of these units, notably "Papua," have a unity that is an artifact of European diplomacy and imperialist rivalry. Not surprisingly, the rhetoric of unity and solidarity, for such previously nonexistent entities that have acquired reality, is often framed in terms of common cultural identity. Colonies carved out by imperialist powers in the course of their Pacific rivalries have now become nation states, proclaiming national identities. (In other cases, the process of imperialist competition led to artificial and arbitrary separations, in relation to precolonial political structures or linguistic and cultural boundaries—as with the two Samoas —rather than artificial unities.)

The point is not that the units for which common cultural identity is being claimed do not exist; rather, it is that they have been given existence and importance through the process of colonial domination. A century ago, "wantoks" were likely to be enemies. But for decades they have been thrown together in plantation labor, providing support and solidarity; nowadays, wantoks substitute for kin in the urban jungle, and constitute electorates. The convenient administrative and economic fictions of the colonial state have become realities.

The place of language in the unity of emergent political entities merits mention. In Fiji, a national language (as well as a national culture) was created through the colonial process, out of a regional diversity that prevailed in pre-European times. In other cases (Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu), the Pidgin English created mainly by indigenous participants in contexts of domination and exploitation during eras of shipboard and plantation labor has become a vehicle of nationalism. In the Solomons, Pidgin was the principal medium of unity in the countercolonial Maasina Rule movement, but it has been undervalued as a vehicle of national unity (see Keesing n.d.*d*). In New Caledonia, the language of the colonists has of necessity become the language of indigenous unity and political struggle against colonial domination. It is worth noting that Papua New Guinea acquired a second lingua franca in Police Motu, and that this has to some extent been a vehicle of Papuan separatism.

Rather more subtle processes of hegemony, and the logic of "negations," operate at a conceptual level. The most striking example is the rhetoric of "black is beautiful," which reproduces the categories of racist discourse while reversing the valences. Pacific Islanders themselves have in recent years directed racist discourse at one another (Papuans versus Highlanders, Malaitans versus Western Solomon Islanders, Fijians versus Indo-Fijians).

The Manichean structures of missionary discourse internalized by Pacific Christians, depicting cosmic struggles of Light and Dark, God and Satan, are reproduced in their own discourse, even in their celebrations of the ancestral past. The same process has occurred in Africa. Leo Kuper wrote that "One of the resistance songs of the African National Congress . . . carried as a refrain, the missionary perspective, 'While We Were Still in Darkness' " (1978, 91). JanMohamed wrote tellingly of the continuing force in postcolonial thought of a "Manichean allegory," which defines "a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between black and white, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and other, subject and object, . . . [producing a] transformation of racial difference into moral and metaphysical difference" (1986, 100–102).

I have suggested that in the contemporary Pacific, representations of ancestral cultures are redolent with images derived from missionary discourse; so too is the rhetoric of development, depicted as a kind of rebirth. As Alain Babadzan has argued, "The world of *kastom* and the Western world are in opposition. . . . [A] new Manicheism, . . . while reversing the postulates inherited from the missionaries (the struggle of the Light of the Word vs. the Darkness of Paganism), prolongs them in an unexpected way" (1983).

The ancestral past, as ideologically represented, may seek in various ways to resolve contradictions between Christian and pagan origins (recall the Kwara'ae ancestors as wandering Israelites). In Fiji, the *kalou* or ancestral ghosts were decades ago recategorized as *tevoro* (Tongan 'devil' —cf. Solomon Island Pijin *devoldevol* 'ancestral ghost'). The "Fijian custom" now being used to oppress Indo-Fijians is the historical creation of Wesleyan missionaries[6] as well as Bauan chiefs.

The hegemonic force of colonialism has left its mark, even among those most anticolonial and fiercely culturally conservative of Pacific Islanders, the Kwaio of the Malaita interior with whom I have worked for twenty-five years. The Kwaio traditionalists who still sacrifice pigs to the ances-

tors and exchange shell valuables refer to themselves as *'itini* 'heathen', or *wikiti* 'wicked'. For them, too, "straightening out the *kastom*" remains an important goal: Kwaio customary law, codified in emulation of colonial legal statutes and Biblical commandments, would have strong (if mystical) claims to legitimacy. The Kwaio have thus come to conceptualize their culture as a "thing" that can be reduced to writing, codified in law. Moreover, as I have suggested elsewhere (Keesing n.d.*c*), the discourses of resistance against colonial rule on the part of Malaita pagans, during and even prior to Maasina Rule, employed a semiology of sovereignty—flags, emblems, parades, palisades—cast in imitation of the rituals of empire enacted at prewar Tulagi.[7]

The Indigenous as Commentary on the Exogenous

Colonized peoples have not only incorporated and internalized conceptualizations and semiology of colonial discourse at the level of thought, ideology, and political praxis, but through a less direct reactive process they have valorized elements of their own cultural traditions—decontextualized or transformed—as symbols of the contrast between those traditions and Western culture.[8]

One manifestation of this process is the evocation of an ideology of sharing and communality to distance a "Melanesian way" or a "Pacific way" or "Fijian custom" from the individualism and fragmentation of Western capitalist society. A case in point, discussed by Linnekin (1983), is the way contemporary Hawaiian cultural nationalism celebrates *'ohana* and *'āina,* the collectivist unity of the community, and the *lū'au* as a focus of symmetrical exchange (see also Thomas n.d. and Buck 1986).

The actual modes of life—as well as the rhetorically celebrated representations of traditional society—in Pacific communities have been pervasively shaped by colonial domination, in many places for well over a century. As Pacific societies were pacified, exchange and feasting were often elevated as a surrogate for warfare. As Christianity was adopted, precolonial institutions and practices were modified, in some places four or five generations ago. The practices that have become the focus of community life may reflect a historical selective process in which what is cast as indigenous is contrasted with what is foreign—thus distancing village communities from the culture of domination. Ironically, as Thomas (n.d.) has pointed out, anthropologists seeking to discover "authentic" cultural tra-

ditions and to filter out exogenous elements are prone to attribute to the "ethnographic present" (their own mythical construction) patterns of life derivative of, shaped by, or transformed radically in reaction against, colonial influence.

The symbolic themes Pacific Islanders use to assert their unity and identity have also been shaped by struggles against domination, as is most clearly manifest in the pervasive elevation of "land" as a political symbol. While I do not doubt that in precolonial times many Pacific peoples had a deep identification with and reverence for their land, this identification has become radically transformed in the course of political struggle and histories of conquest and land alienation. In Fiji, contemporary Hawai'i,[9] New Caledonia, the Solomon Islands, New Zealand, and Aboriginal Australia, land has become a powerful symbol of identity and a site of contestation. An ideology of attachment to and spiritual significance of the land could achieve such prominence only in a historical context of invasion and colonization.

Western Visions and Pacific Pasts

The portrayals that idealize the precolonial past not only incorporate conceptual structures and premises of colonial discourse and elevate symbols as reactions against colonial domination. In many respects, they also incorporate Western conceptions of Otherness, visions of primitivity, and critiques of modernity. The imagined ancestors with whom the Pacific is being repopulated—Wise Ecologists, Mystical Sages, living in harmony with one another, cosmic forces, and the environment—are in many ways creations of Western imagination.

> The relationships maintained only ten or twenty years ago by the bourgeoisie and urban elites with native cultures and with the rural milieu in general, were marked by the interiorization . . . of . . . Western racist discourse. Those who used to mock the backwardness of "savages" in the name of Progress and Civilization are now (verbally) the fiercest defenders of primitivity and archaic values.
>
> Opposing the values of *kastom* to those of the West . . . [represents] *a Western criticism of Westernization* . . . [which] borrows from the West a number of its patterns, such as missionary Manicheism (the terms of which are inverted), ruralist and ecologist ideology, and the modern Western ideology of ethnicity. (Babadzan 1983)

Maori and Aboriginal Australian ideologues are engaged in reconstructing ancestral pasts characterized by Mystical Wisdom, Oneness with the Land, Ecological Reverence, and Social Harmony. Aboriginal Australia, a land of gatherers and hunters, is being retrospectively depicted in the political mythology of our time as pervaded by reverence for Mother Earth. Warfare and violence (including Maori cannibalism) are carefully edited out of these reinvented pasts. Strikingly, what is edited out in no way violated the values of the real ancestors, as observed in the nineteenth century: what is violated are *Western* values, as represented in both Christian doctrine and idealizations of the Primitive, as foil for critiques of modernization.

These idealizations—counters to ideologies of modernization—have a character Babadzan (1983) called "philo-traditionalist." Marshall Berman (1982) depicted it as a "pastoral vision" of a simpler world. This pastoral ideology is built out of elements that are at least partial truths. The small-scale communities of tribal societies *do* make possible social solidarity, close bonds of kinship and community, continuity between generations. Neolithic technologies create and depend on a closeness with nature and a fulfilment in productive labor that are lost, with concomitant alienation, in industrialized societies. Like other anthropologists, I tend to romanticize the tribal world, so I perceive the power of the pastoral vision. It is what is edited out that distorts the picture of pre-European tribal communities: not simply violence, but domination (of women, the young, commoners) and exploitation. Moreover, the costs in physical pain and premature death of infectious diseases only crudely addressed by magical means are too easily edited out as well—particularly nowadays, when the Primitive is assigned a mystical wisdom in matters of holistic health and healing as well as ecology.

Not only are these Pacific pastoral ideologies infused with Western idealizations of communal life, but there has been an increasing ideological cross-fertilization among Third and Fourth World cultural nationalist groups.[10] The Earth Mother now being appealed to in Aboriginal Australian political rhetoric may be less a direct reflection of Western countercultural ideologies than a borrowing from Native American ideologies, born in struggles for land rights and cultural identity, that were much more directly in contact with the North American counterculture.

The Fetishization of "Culture"

Not only in the Pacific are dramatizations and ritual enactments of cultural traditions being celebrated—in the form of dress, music, dance, handicrafts—while actual cultural traditions are vanishing. The two processes—the celebration of fossilized or fetishized[11] cultures and the destruction of cultures as ways of life and thought—are going on in the Soviet Union, eastern Europe, and China and also in the Andean states, Brazil, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Perhaps it is an essential element in the process of nation building, where populations are ethnically diverse.[12] Most often, a dominant national population imposes its language and cultural tradition on minority groups while appearing to value and preserve minority cultures: they are preserved like specimens in jars. In this process, the "cultures" ostensibly valorized in their fetishized forms may be the site of a double violence. In Ecuador, in festivals where indigenous Indian culture is "celebrated," Spanish-speaking *mestizos* don Indian costumes, perform Indian dances, and play Indian music—while the Indians whose "cultures" are being performed are not allowed to participate. What greater alienation than watching those who dominate and rule you perform symbolically central elements of your cultural heritage: selling *your* culture?[13]

What makes the Pacific distinctive here is the way, particularly in the Melanesian countries, the specimens in the jars are the cultures those with political power have themselves left behind. Members of the Westernized elites are likely to be separated by gulfs of life experience and education from village communities where they have never lived: their ancestral cultures are symbols rather than experienced realities. Bringing the specimens out of the jars on special occasions—cultural festivals, rituals of state—is a denial of alienation at a personal level, and a denial that cultural traditions are being eroded and destroyed in the village hinterlands. Again Babadzan's observations are illuminating:

> In this ideological representation kastom is defined as an accumulation of disjointed cultural signs, . . . an assemblage of discontinuous, observable, and thus reproducible material elements (that they should allow reproduction is of particular importance for the policies of "cultural revival"). These signs of primitivity are principally objects ("art" objects, handicrafts or implements), public singing or dancing, music, recitation of myths, or . . . ceremonies.

> . . . These disparate culture items . . . are reified as symbols of identity after being abstracted in thought from the ceremonial and liturgical contexts where they are (or were) inscribed, after being separated both from their traditional conditions of transmission and from their symbolic and institutional background. Some official policies inspired by a desire for "cultural revitalization" even endeavor to encourage the . . . reproduction of these identity symbols, which are deemed proof of the vigor of indigenous cultures and of their resistance to Westernization. (Babadzan 1983)

By the same logic, the "cultures" so commoditized and packaged can be sold to tourists. I have commented elsewhere on the way this commoditization shapes Pacific cultures to fit Western fantasies:

> Mass tourism and the media have created a new Pacific in which what is left or reconstructed from the ruins of cultural destruction of earlier decades is commoditized and packaged as exoticism for the tourists. The Pacific [is] Fantasy Land for Europe and the United States (and now for Japan) . . . to be symbolically constructed—and consumed by a consumerist society, to serve its pleasures and needs.
>
> The commoditization of their cultures has left tens of thousands of Pacific Islanders as aliens in their own lands, reduced to tawdry commercialized representations of their ancestors, histories and cultures. Beneath the veneer of fantasy, the Islanders are pauperized in village hinterlands or themselves commoditized as menial employees. Serving the comforts as well as the fantasies of rich tourists, they are constrained to smile and "be happy," because that is part of their symbolic image.

We need only think of tourism in Fiji. There, at least, the elements of culture enacted for tourists represent a version, if an edited and Christianized one (no strangling of widows in the hotel dining rooms), of a past that actually existed. The representations of "Hawaiian culture" for tourists, with hula dances (see Buck 1986), ukuleles, and pineapples, illustrate that where there is a gulf between historical realities and the expectations of tourists, the fantasies will be packaged and sold.

Invented Pasts and Anthropology

The objectification of a way of life, the reification of the customs of ancestors into a symbol to which a political stance is taken—whether of rejection or idealization—is not new in the Pacific, and is not confined to

Islanders who have learned the Western concept of "culture." The so-called Vailala Madness of the Gulf Division of Papua in 1919, where villagers destroyed cult objects in a wave of iconoclasm, and proclaimed their rejection of the ways of ancestors who had withheld material riches from them, is but one example. Other classic "cargo cults" echoed the same theme.

The political stances being taken toward the ways of the ancestors in the contemporary Pacific reflect some of the same mechanisms. When massively confronted with an engulfing or technologically dominating force—whether early colonial invaders or more recently the world capitalist system and late-twentieth-century technology and wealth—one is led to take an objectified, externalized view of one's way of life that would hardly be possible if one were simply *living* it.[14] Land, and spiritual connection to it, *could not* have, other than in a context of invasion and displacement and alienation, the ideological significance it acquires in such a context.[15]

The ideologies of our time, unlike cargo cult ideologies, are phrased in terms of "culture" and other anthropological concepts, as they have passed into Western popular thought and intellectual discourse. This is hardly surprising, given the educational experiences of Pacific Island leaders, but it is problematic nonetheless, because the concepts that have been borrowed oversimplify in ways that have bedeviled anthropology for decades. First, "culture" represents a reification. A complex system of ideas and customs, attributed a false concreteness, is turned into a causal agent. Cultures are viewed as doing things, causing things to happen (or not happen).

In the framework of functionalist anthropology, societies and cultures have been attributed a spurious coherence and integration and portrayed in a timeless equilibrium. The timelessness and integration of the ideologically constructed Pacific pasts represent in part a projection of anthropology's own conceptual simplifications into contemporary political myths.

Western representations of Otherness, anthropological and Orientalist,[16] have been essentialist, in seeking to characterize the fundamental character—the "essence"—of the Other. Whether it be the Oriental Mind or Trobriand Culture, essentialist discourse seeks to characterize in the Other what pervasively and eternally distinguishes Them from Us.[17] It is no wonder that indigenous peoples seeking to characterize Themselves and their differences from Us have adopted a similar essentialism. Pacific

Island peoples asserting their identity and their continuity with the past are led to seek, characterize, and proclaim an "essence" that has endured despite a century or more of change and Westernization.

In a different and older anthropological tradition—one that lives on in anthropology museums, hence is represented in the contemporary Pacific—a culture is metonymically represented by its material artifacts. This museological tradition, which has old roots in the nineteenth-century folklorism of Europe, has fed as well into the discourse on cultural identity, as I have noted. From it derives the view that in preserving the material forms and performance genres of a people, one preserves their culture.[18]

In borrowing from anthropological discourse, ideologies of cultural identity in the contemporary Pacific have not only acquired conceptual oversimplifications but have incorporated some empirical distortions and misinterpretations for which anthropologists (and other European scholars) are ultimately responsible.

It is not that Aboriginal or Maori activists, or contemporary Samoans or Trobriand Islanders, are uncritical in their acceptance of what anthropologists have written about them. In Aboriginal struggles for land rights, for example, one of the battles has been waged against orthodox views, deriving ultimately from Radcliffe-Brown, of the patrilineality of local territorial groups—views incorporated into federal land rights legislation. The ironies and contradictions of Aboriginal peoples being denied rights they believe are culturally legitimate on grounds that they do not fit an anthropological model have chilling implications for those of us who would claim privileged authority for our "expertise" or *our* constructions of the past.

There is a further twist of irony when scholarly interpretations that may be faulty, or at least misleadingly oversimplified or overgeneralized, have been incorporated by Pacific Islanders into their conceptions of their own pasts. Let me illustrate with the concept of *mana* in Oceanic religion, on which I have recently written (Keesing 1984, 1985). When I was at the University of the South Pacific in 1984 and spoke on *mana,* I discovered that Polynesian students and faculty had been articulating an ideology of a common Polynesian cultural heritage and identity in which *mana* was central. Yet, as I pointed out, in many languages in Western Polynesia *mana* is used as a noun only to describe thunder, lightning, or other meteorological phenomena. Where *mana is* used as a noun to refer to spiritual power,

in a number of Polynesian languages, it seems to be a secondary usage, less common than its usage as a stative verb ('be effective', 'be potent', 'be sacred').

Mana in the sense it has acquired in anthropology seems centrally important only in a few languages of eastern Polynesia, notably Maori and Hawaiian. Douglas Oliver (personal communication) has told me that in the thousands of documents on the early Society Islands he has gone through, *mana* occurs very rarely. Greg Dening (personal communication) has told me the same is true for the Marquesas. We must infer, if we look carefully at the early texts, that in many regional variants of Polynesian religion, *mana* was not a crucial concept—except in the interpretations of anthropologists like Edward Handy (1927), intent on imputing philosophies of cosmic dynamism to the Polynesians.

The imputation of mystical wisdom to Polynesians (who in the process were distinguished from their dark-skinned, savage, cannibal neighbors to the west) has roots in European theories of race. The construction of the Polynesians in European thought, a process going back to the early explorers, has been brilliantly examined by Bernard Smith (1969). Most striking has been the construction of Maori culture in European imagination, by such scholars as Sir George Grey. The cosmic philosophy of the Maori, the mystical worldview, is as much a European as a Polynesian creation.[19] Even though contemporary Maori ideologues attempt to discredit some aspects of the representation of Maori culture by Western scholars, the counterrepresentation advanced as authentic seems deeply infused by early Western romanticizations of the Maori (as well as contemporary Western pastoral myths of primitivity).

Political Mythology and Cultural "Authenticity": A Wider View

So far, I have implied that there is a wide gulf between the authentic past —the real ways of life that prevailed in the Pacific on the eve of European invasion—and the representations of the past in contemporary ideologies of cultural identity. This gulf requires a closer look.

I do not at this stage intend to imply that pre-European Pacific peoples were mystical sages, holistic healers, or wise ecologists. The gulf to which I have pointed is real and important. My point is rather that the real past was itself highly political. Pacific societies, in pre-European times, were

far from stable and static (functionalist models notwithstanding): they were, as the archaeological record makes very clear, marked by political expansions and contractions, regional systems, warfare, trade—and change. Anthropological models have by and large failed to capture the dynamics of cultural production and change. Cultures are often imagined to be like coral reefs, the gradual accumulation of countless "polyps." I have argued (1987), to the contrary, that cultural production is a highly political process. The symbolic material of cultures—rules imputed to ancestors, rituals, myths—serves ideological ends, reinforcing the power of some, the subordination of others.

From such a viewpoint, the authentic ancestral cultures of the past begin to appear in a different light. The rituals, the myths, the ideologies of hierarchy and the sanctity of chiefs, served political purposes. Conquering chiefs—or their priestly retinues—invented genealogies connecting them to the gods, and discrediting fallen rivals. Those individuals or classes acquiring sufficient political power to control symbolic production could bend cultural rules and roles to their own ends, reinforcing and legitimating their power. (The old Polynesian process whereby ascendant chiefly factions produce and impose versions of the past that legitimate their ascendancy in cosmic and genealogical terms has clearly continued into the latter twentieth century, notably in Tonga.) "Ancestral cultures" themselves represented legitimations of political power and aspirations; cultures were contested spheres. In this sense, the political myths of the contemporary Pacific that refashion the past to advance the interests of the present are not so different from the political myths of the past, dutifully recorded by the early ethnographers.

There are political contexts where it is important for an idealized vision of the past to be used as counter to the present: to the world capitalist system as it incorporates poor Third World countries on its margins as primary producers and consumers; to mindless materialism, disintegration of bonds of kinship and community, narcissistic individualism, destruction of environments for short-term profit. There is a place for pastoral visions, in the West and in the Pacific.

And there is certainly a place for discourses of resistance cast in terms of cultural identity. For Fourth World indigenous minorities in the Pacific—Maori, Aboriginal Australians, Kanaks, Hawaiians—a reverence for what survives of the cultural past (however altered its forms), and for a lost heritage, is a necessary counterpoint to deep anger over the generations of destruction.

But such ideologies become self-delusory if they are not interspersed with visions of "real" pasts that cast into relief not simply their idealized virtues, but their cracks of contradictions. Guha's "subaltern studies" and radical feminism provide models of such a critical perspective.[20] European scholars of the Pacific have been complicit in legitimating and producing male-oriented and elitist representations of societies that were themselves male- and (in many cases) elite-dominated. A critical skepticism with regard to pasts and power, and a critical deconstruction of conceptualizations of "a culture" that hide and neutralize subaltern voices and perspectives, should, I think, dialectically confront idealizations of the past. I am encouraged by the emergence, in the last several years, of critical writings in this vein by Pacific Islanders, including Epeli Hau'ofa and a number of feminist critics.

This is not the time to leave the past to the "experts," whether of the present generation or their predecessors. Scholarly representations of the Pacific have in many ways incorporated premises of colonial discourse and Orientalism,[21] in assigning a "fixity" to Otherness, in typifying, in essentializing, in exoticizing. A more radical Pacific discourse with regard to the past would place less, not more, faith in scholarly representations of the past.

A more radical Pacific discourse would also be more deeply self-reflexive about the hegemonic force of Western education, of Christianity (an integral part of the colonial-imperialist project), of Western pastoral myths as appropriations of Otherness. I see encouraging signs of a deepening critical consciousness regarding these issues, as well, in some recent writings by Pacific Islands scholars.

A similar self-reflexivity is a continuing challenge for scholars working in the Pacific. Both the political implications and epistemology of our projects and representations are deeply problematic. The frame of certainty that surrounds scholarly expertise—like mythical history—is less solid than it seems: it dissolves in the right mixture of astute skepticism and self-reflexivity. But specialists on the Pacific do not best serve the interests of a less hegemonic scholarship or best support the political struggles of decolonizing and internally colonized Pacific peoples by suspending their critical judgment or maintaining silence—whether out of liberal guilt or political commitment—regarding mythic pasts evoked in cultural nationalist rhetoric. Our constructions of real pasts are not sacrosanct, but they are important elements in a continuing dialogue and dialectic.

I AM INDEBTED *to Sarah Williams for an unusually searching critique of the first version of this paper, and to Brij Lal and two anonymous reviewers for useful suggestions for revision.*

Notes

1 See e.g. Eisenstadt 1973, Wagner 1975, Shils 1981, Handler and Linnekin 1984, and Clifford 1988.

2 But see, e.g., Linnekin 1983, Finney 1979, and Buck 1986 on Hawai'i.

3 Indeed, Kajsa Ekholm and Jonathan Friedman have recently suggested that the burgeoning of contemporary movements and ideologies of cultural identity can be interpreted partly as a world-system phenomenon, reflecting a partial breakdown of a postwar world system.

4 I use this term reluctantly, for want of a better alternative, for contemporary populations like the Kwaio of the interior of Malaita, incorporated into pervasively Christian nation states, who continue to practice their ancestral religions. I use the term in the original Roman sense, without pejorative implications, to denote people practicing local religions within or on the margins of a state, to contrast them with those practicing the dominant religion of the state.

5 And local attempts to record custom and oral tradition, hence to render anthropology unnecessary.

6 Including my great-great grandfather Thomas Jaggar.

7 When, in 1939, a Kwaio cult prophet challenged colonial power, it was by erecting palisades and raising a *fulake* 'flag' to the ancestress La'aka (see Keesing 1980; Bennett 1987, 279; and Fifi'i n.d.).

8 It is worth reflecting that the process of symbolically distancing one's own culture from those of other peoples has been one of the dynamics generating linguistic and cultural diversity in the tribal world. One's own ways of speech, dress, and so on are simultaneously commentaries on those of surrounding peoples.

9 See Linnekin 1983 regarding the contemporary Hawaiian ideology of land, and Kaho'olawe as a symbol of the alienation and destruction—and original sanctity—of the land.

10 For such a cross-fertilization in regard to Hawaiian cultural nationalism, see Linnekin 1983, 248.

11 The reference is to Marx, not psychopathology.

12 At a 1987 workshop at the East-West Center a number of Asian and Western scholars discussed the creation of "national cultures" in such countries as Malaysia and the Philippines. Several of the Asian participants contrasted their young countries, built out of colonial states, with the countries of Europe, with

the implication that the latter had existed (to use a phrase borrowed from the genre of colonial travelogues) "from time immemorial." That many European countries which emerged as nations only in the nineteenth century and several which emerged in the twentieth century have so successfully covered themselves with a veneer of eternity attests to the power of national ideologies.

13 Laurie Price, personal communication. This same sense of alienation fuels hostility to anthropologists, where they are imagined similarly to be appropriating and profiting from other people's cultures—though from the perspective of the culture of academe, this interpretation seems wildly inappropriate.

14 Nonetheless, even in precolonial societies one's own culture and language were probably to some degree objectified as symbols of differentness, and sometimes authenticity. See note 8.

15 Some Pacific Islanders doubtless were displaced from their land through invasion and conquest by fellow Islanders prior to the invasion by Europeans, so in some places these issues may have histories going back to precolonial times.

16 See Said 1978 and 1985; and, for the Pacific, Carrier, n.d. and Keesing n.d.*b*.

17 As Shils 1981 and Handler and Linnekin 1984 have observed, such an essentialism is inherent in the concept of "tradition."

18 It was precisely this metonymy, and the sense that in displaying material embodiments of a way of life one was valorizing it, that led to the growth of folkloristic and ethnological museology in nineteenth-century Europe.

19 One that, as in the endless debates about the *hau* as the "spirit of the Gift," has fed back into anthropological discourse.

20 Such counter-hegemonic discourses cannot themselves be fully free of contradiction. For example, where, as in recent feminist anthropology, attention is focused on "women's lives," there has been a strong tendency to universalize, to invest women on such-and-such island with a generalized significance in relation to Western feminist ideologies of women in general, and Third World women in particular. There is an urgent need for alternative feminist perspectives that grow out of *experience* in non-Western societies, rather than Western representations of that experience (see Mohanty 1984).

21 Keesing n.d.*b;* Bhabha 1983; Said 1978, 1985, 1987.

References

Babadzan, A.
1983 *Kastom* and Nation Building in the South Pacific. Paper presented at Rothko Chapel Colloquium on Ethnicity and Nation, Houston, TX.

Babha, H. K.
1983 The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse. *Screen* 24(6): 18–37.

Bennett, Judith A.
1987 *Wealth of the Solomons: A History of a Pacific Archipelago, 1800–1978.* Pacific Islands Monograph Series no. 3. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Berman, M.
1982 *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

Buck, Elizabeth
1986 English in the Linguistic Transformation of Hawaii: Literacy, Languages and Discourse. *World Englishes* 5: 141–152.

Burt, Ben
1982 Kastom, Christianity and the First Ancestor of the Kwara'ae of Malaita. In *Reinventing Traditional Culture: The Politics of Kastom in Island Melanesia,* edited by R. Keesing and R. Tonkinson, 374–399. *Mankind* Special Issue 13 (4).

Carrier, J., ed
n.d. History, Tradition and Articulation in Melanesian Anthropology. Forthcoming manuscript.

Clifford, James
1988 On Collecting Art and Culture. Chapter 10 in *The Predicament of Culture.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Eisenstadt, S. N.
1973 Post-Traditional Societies and the Continuity and Reconstruction of Tradition. *Daedalus* 102(1): 1–27.

Fifi'i, Jonathan
n.d. From Pig-Theft to Parliament: My Life Between Two Worlds, edited and translated by R. M. Keesing. Forthcoming manuscript.

Finney, Ben R.
1979 *Hokule'a: The Way to Tahiti.* New York: Dodd, Mead.

France, Peter
1969 *The Charter of the Land: Custom and Colonization in Fiji.* Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

Gramsci, Antonio
1971 *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* edited and translated by Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
Guha, Ranajit
1983 *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
Handler, Richard, and Jocelyn Linnekin
1984 Tradition, Genuine or Spurious. *Journal of American Folklore* 97: 273–290.
Handy, E. S. C.
1927 *Polynesian Religion.* Bulletin 34. Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press.
Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger, eds.
1983 *The Invention of Tradition.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
JanMohamed, Abdul R.
1986 The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature. In *"Race," Writing and Difference,* edited by H. L. Gates, 78–106. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Keesing, Roger M.
1980 Antecedents of Maasina Rule: Some Further Notes. *Journal of Pacific History* 15: 102–107.
1984 Rethinking *Mana. Journal of Anthropological Research* 40: 137–156.
1985 Conventional Metaphors and Anthropological Metaphysics: The Problematic of Cultural Translation. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 41: 201–217.
1987 Anthropology as Interpretive Quest. *Current Anthropology* 28: 161–176.
1988 *Melanesian Pidgin and the Oceanic Substrate.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
n.d.*a* Racial and Ethnic Categories in Colonial and Postcolonial States: Sociological and Linguistic Perspectives on Ideology. Forthcoming in *Theories, Paradigms and Assumptions in the Social and Human Sciences,* edited by M. O'Callaghan. Paris: UNESCO.
n.d.*b* Colonial Discourse and Codes of Discrimination in the Pacific. Forthcoming in volume from UNESCO Division of Human Rights and Peace.
n.d.*c* Colonial and Counter-Colonial Discourse in Melanesia. Forthcoming in *Anthropology and History.*
n.d.*d* Solomons Pijin: Colonial Ideologies. In *Language Planning and Education in Australia and the South Pacific,* edited by Richard B. Baldauf and Allen R. Luke, 149–165. Clevedon, Avon, England: Multilingual Matters. In press.

Kuper, Leo
1974 *Race, Class and Power: Ideology and Revolutionary Change in Plural Societies.* London: Duckworth.

Linnekin, Jocelyn S.
1983 Defining Tradition: Variations on the Hawaiian Identity. *American Ethnologist* 10: 241–252.

Mohanty, Chandra T.
1984 Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses. In *On Humanism and the University I: The Discourse of Humanism,* edited by William V. Spanos. *Boundary 2* 12(3): 333–358.

Said, Edward W.
1978 *Orientalism.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
1985 Orientalism Reconsidered. *Cultural Critique* 1: 89–107.
1987 Representing the Colonized. Invited lecture to American Anthropological Association, Chicago, 21 November 1987.

Shils, Edward A.
1981 *Tradition.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Smith, Bernard W.
1969 *European Vision and the South Pacific, 1768–1850: A Study in the History of Art and Ideas.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Thomas, N.
n.d. Substantivization and Anthropological Discourse: The Transformation of Practices into Institutions in Neotraditional Pacific Societies. Forthcoming in *History, Tradition and Articulation in Melanesian Anthropology,* edited by J. Carrier.

Trevor-Roper, H.
1983 The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland. In *The Invention of Tradition,* edited by E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wagner, Roy
1975 *The Invention of Culture.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.