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## Captain Cook as Ethnographer : The Role of Cook's Journals in the Formation of the Ethnographic Genre

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### Introduction

To study the formation of a genre is to study the evolution of human thought and expression regarding a certain element of our experience. The evolution of ethnography (the descriptive documentation of a culture) in particular is important to study in that it allows us to reflect on how we have identified with one another over time. From this we can see how we have perceived our similar and different modes of social action and our varying perceptions of the world around us, how these have changed over time, and how they have shaped our interactions and, indeed, the majority of history itself.

Captain James Cook was writing at a time (1768 to 1779) during which a significant shift in European attitudes was occurring. After centuries of major Euro-ethnocentrism (a European attitude of cultural superiority), Europeans began to take on a more accepting view of other cultures. This shift in ideology is evident in Cook's writing – in fact, Cook's words show a higher degree of anti-ethnocentrism than was common at the time or, indeed, for years after.

The evolution of ethnography is not a much-studied subject. The informal roots of formal ethnographic work lie in the information gathered and reflected upon by such early explorers as Cook, not to mention the techniques they employed to record such information, yet informal ethnographies often go unacknowledged. There have been a few writers who have acknowledged Cook's role in early anthropology, and his journals have been thoroughly studied for a variety of purposes. However, neither the journals' rhetoric nor the journals' place within the evolution of ethnography have been thoroughly studied.

Throughout the following pages I aim to demonstrate how Cook's journals constitute an early form of ethnography and how they show the formal genre of ethnography taking shape.

### What is ethnography?

Ethnography involves the descriptive documentation of a culture and is central to the discipline of anthropology. It usually involves participant observation, a method of gaining intimate knowledge of a culture's structure and character through active involvement with the individuals in their cultural environment, usually over an extended period of time. Ethnography "makes the familiar strange, the exotic quotidian," explains Clifford (599), who tweaks the much-used phrase "making the familiar strange and the strange familiar," expressing the key aim of anthropological study.

There is a good deal of variety within the genre of ethnography. Though there exists a general set of rules regarding ethnography, there is a great deal of variety within the genre, and these rules are far from concrete. There are a variety of

different theories held by anthropologists and ethnographers, which inevitably lead to variations in ethnographic rhetoric and the methodologies employed to gather information; cultural relativism, cultural ecology, structuralism, functionalism, structural-functionalism, and many more theories constitute differing viewpoints on culture and subsequently differing methods of observing and writing about culture. Different theories present different opinions as to the purposes of social actions, how cultures develop, how people think cross-culturally, and so on. Yet regardless of their theoretical bases, all ethnographies fall within one genre of ethnography, rendering it somewhat diverse.

As a genre, ethnography is somewhat complex. It is non-fiction and yet it is fiction, the word 'fiction' implying not fallacy but rather "the partiality of cultural and historical truths" (Clifford 602) stemming from the idea held by many anthropologists that absolute objectivity is impossible. The discursive 'I' is often used in ethnographies, and ethnographers usually write for an audience having at least a basic background in anthropological thought and method (though this background is not always essential to the comprehension of the ethnography). The writing is highly descriptive and thorough, sometimes centering on a specific thesis and attempting to persuade the reader to accept the thesis based on the evidence gathered while conducting fieldwork. The ethnographer strives to exude an attitude of objectivity and anti-ethnocentrism.

In general, there are eight basic elements of culture that an ethnographer must address in one way or another.<sup>1</sup> These include social organization, language, religion, methods of subsistence, methods of exchange, birth and death, housing, and clothing and housing. Obviously there are numerous topics within each of these that the ethnographer may address, as well as several other topics (such as tools and weapons), but these are addressed differently from writer to writer depending on several factors, some of which were mentioned above.

According to Janet Giltrow, genre consists of form and situation. As a result of their forms, pieces of writing can "not only serve the situations in which they arise, they also embody them, representing certain recognizable occasions" (Giltrow 23). The form of ethnography, as mentioned above, is generally thorough and descriptive, and addresses eight general issues. This form responds to a situation – that of a desire to better understand a certain group of people. The high degree of complexity of cultures necessitates an examination of a wide variety of factors; therefore, the thorough and descriptive form of ethnography serves its situation.

The role of ethnography in society is, obviously, to inform people of cultural practices. The degree of analysis of such practices varies from writer to writer, as do theories, methodologies and rhetorical style, but what all ethnographies have in common is the aim of presenting a thorough and accurate view of a culture (or segment of a culture).

## Historical Context: European Attitudes

The instructions issued to eighteenth-century voyagers to the Pacific "undoubtedly reflect a transformation in the attitude of Europeans to members of other cultures" (Bitterli 165). Bitterli quotes instructions given to Cook on July 11, 1681: "You are to endeavour by all proper means to cultivate a friendship with the Natives, presenting them such Trifles as may be acceptable to them" (Bitterli 165). The President of the Royal Society expresses similar sentiments: "[H]ave it still in view that shedding [sic] the blood of those people is a crime of the highest nature – They are human creatures, the work of the same omnipotent Author, equally under his care with the most polished European...." (Bitterli 165). The President also says that "[n]o European Nation has a right to occupy any part of their country, or settle among them without their voluntary consent" (Bitterli 165). This obviously reflects a significant shift within the European colonialist attitude. (I will give evidence for this change of attitude in my textual comparison between Cook and other early writers.)

There are several reasons for this shift. Two books written near the middle of the eighteenth century exerted great influence on European attitudes: Voltaire's *Essai sur les moeurs* (1756) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité parmi les homes* (1754). These were both ground-breaking works, directing European focus away from a sense of ethnocentrism to an awareness of the diversity and civility of other cultures, as well as the 'uncivilized' nature of Europeans' own cultural development. In addition, there was a growing trend in European religious thought that emphasized a shared humanity and a sense of evangelical responsibility with regards to cross-cultural encounters.

## Who was Captain Cook?

Captain James Cook was a British explorer, navigator, and cartographer. Cook made three voyages to the Pacific Ocean, on which he initiated the first European contact with eastern Australia, mapped New Zealand, and discovered the Hawaiian islands. "For many Europeans, Australians, and New Zealanders, Cook is part of their heritage" (Obeyesekere 4), and he is viewed by many as history's greatest explorer.

Cook is often regarded as a man of admirable morals and integrity. R.A Skelton, quoted by Obeyesekere, argues the following:

The same quality of sympathy and recognition of the right of men to be different characterize Cook's dealings with native peoples. His combination of friendliness and firmness, his success in communication on equal terms, his eager interests in the island societies of Polynesia, in the way in which their people organized their lives, in their manner and customs, and in the reasons for them – all these factors assured the safety of his expeditions.... (Obeyesekere 5)<sup>2</sup>

## Cook's Objectives

Cook was sent by the British Admiralty, who shared responsibility for the voyage with the Royal Society (a society based in London, formed in 1662 and continuing today, whose purpose has been to support scientific investigation). Some would say that the Admiralty supported the Royal Society's idea for the voyage with the aim of hiding territorial ambitions behind a scientific mission. There is a good possibility that his was true, but it may or may not have been. According to Gananath Obeyesekere, "[t]he voyages that [Cook] led heralded a shift in the goals of discovery from conquest, plunder, and imperial appropriation to scientific exploration devoid of any explicit agenda for conquest or for the exploitation and terrorization of native peoples" (5).

For his first major voyage to the South Pacific, in 1768, Cook's chief objective was to observe the transit of Venus (a rare astronomical phenomenon) in Tahiti, according to the instructions issued him by "the Commissioners for Executing the Office of Lord High Admiral of Great Britain" (cclxxix, vol. 1). His secondary objective was to search for a southern continent. Through additional instructions he was informed that he was to study geographical factors such as latitude and longitude, environmental factors such as soil, flora, and fauna, and lastly the "Genius, Temper, Disposition, and Number of the Natives" (cclxxxiii, vol.1). He was also "with the Consent of the Natives to take possession of Convenient Situations in the Country in the Name of the King of Great Britain" (cclxxxiii, vol. 1).

For his third voyage<sup>3</sup>, in 1776, the instructions were similar. His main objective was to search for a northwest passage, and aside from this he was to make scientific and environmental observations as well as observations regarding the "Genius, Temper, Disposition, and Number of the Natives" (ccxxiii, vol. 3 pt. 1), just as he was told before. He was also told "with the consent of the Natives to take possession, in the Name of the King of Great Britain, of convenient Situations in such Countries as you may discover..." (ccxxiii, vol. 3 pt. 1). In both sets of instructions, Cook was to "endeavour, by all proper means to cultivate a friendship with [the Natives]" (ccxxiii, vol. 3 pt. 1).

According to Rod Edmond, Cook's purpose of exploration was not colonialist, and "this conditioned [his] approach and response to indigenous populations" (12). This is true to an extent. As we can see from the instructions, both of these voyages were predominately for scientific purposes, but they were not without colonialist interests. Cook's major objective was indeed scientific rather than colonialist, and this likely did shape Cook's interactions with Natives such that they were different than those between, say, missionaries and Natives; the way in which Cook wrote about the Natives was also likely shaped by this. However, we must keep in mind that there was a certain degree of colonialism on the minds of Cook and his crew. Perhaps the Admiralty did indeed have a hidden territorial agenda.

## Textual Analysis

Cook's journals are written as descriptive narratives, following Cook's encounters chronologically, encounters leading to brief analyses. He uses the discursive "I", asserting his role as conveyor of personal experience and first-hand observations.

Aside from being descriptive, Cook's style can be characterized by somewhat long sentences divided by commas into, on average, three phrases varying from approximately five to twenty words each. A typical example follows: "Tiarooa told us of an animal which had been left in the Country by this Ship, but as he had not seen it himself, from his description no sort of judgement could be formed what kind of a Animal it was" (Beaglehole 74, vol. 3 pt. 1). Cook frequently employs this sentence structure throughout his journals.

Cook was not an educated man. "The spelling and construction [in Cook's writing] are generally those of a man formally uneducated though of vigorous mind..." (Beaglehole ccii, vol. 1). His spelling was inconsistent and often incorrect, yet he had a great skill for description. He wrote pages upon pages of highly detailed observations regarding the physical appearance of Natives, their personalities, their clothing, housing, diet, methods of travel, weapons, trade, religion, women, language, various customs, social organization, and so on. Clearly we can categorize his journals as ethnographic because they are thorough and descriptive and involve the eight general topics covered by most formal ethnographies. "[I]t should be added that though Cook is not a conscious artist it is a very carefully done journal indeed. It is...the product of a great deal of writing, drafting and re-drafting, summarizing and expanding, with afterthoughts both of addition and deletion; as if Cook were determined to get down as much *objective* truth as possible, with as little moralizing or self-justification as possible" (Beaglehole cciii vol. 1, emphasis added). Cook's apparent aim of objectivity, as well as the subjects that he addresses listed above, show the genre of ethnography taking shape.

Cook writes for an audience with little knowledge of anthropological thought or method, having little knowledge of this himself, due of course to the fact that these – not to mention the field of anthropology itself – had not yet been established. In stark contrast to his presentation of scientific data, which are difficult to understand without a background knowledge pertaining to it, he presupposes little when writing about the Natives he encounters. Specifically, the audience he was writing for included the Royal Society, the British Admiralty, and the general public.

Cook characterizes the Natives he encounters as sensible and practical. The following is an excerpt from his journal in July 1777:<sup>4</sup>

The Houses of these people [the Tongans] are of various sizes and...consist chiefly of a thatched roof supported by pillars and rafters desposed [disposed] in a very *judicious* manner and the workman ship in many extremely neat...[Mats] fix up edgeways and reach from the eaves to the ground and answers the *purpose* of a wall...They have mats made on *purpose* to sleep upon, and the clothes that they wear in the day, *serve* them for covering in the night. Their whole furniture consists in a bowl or two...and some small wooden Stools which *serve* them for pillows.... (Beaglehole 168-169, vol. 3 pt. 1, emphases added)

The words I have emphasized in this passage illustrate a key element of Cook's ideology, what we might call *functionalism* if we were to apply a formal anthropological theory. Functionalists believe that human behaviour, social institutions, and cultural values can be explained according to utilitarian motives. Cook sees, as evident in this passage and throughout his entire journal, reason behind every action, perceiving the Natives as logical and practical. Another more striking example can be found in his journal in February 1777:

Polygamy is allowed amongst these people [the New Zealanders] and it is not uncommon for a Man to have two or three wives. The Women are Marriageable at a very early age and I am told that an unmarried Woman is in but a forelone state and can hardly get a livelihood at least she is in a great measure without a protector, so that *Polygamy is perhaps more justifiable here than in any other part of the World* (Beaglehole 73, vol. 3 pt. 1, emphasis added).

Here Cook makes a rather bold statement, presenting a way of life unacceptable in his society as justifiable in New Zealand society, in accord with the particular needs of women within that society. Cook clearly presents a view of the Natives' practices as playing logical roles within their particular social structure, and from this view we can see a construction of equality in the power relations between Cook and the Natives.

## Textual Comparison

Christopher Columbus, in 1492, made the following observations of the Natives of the Caribbean:

Their hair is coarse – almost like the tail of a horse – and short....They do not carry arms nor are they acquainted with them, because I showed them swords and they took them by the edge and through ignorance cut themselves. (Schwartz 163)

The comparison of Native peoples to animals ("like the tail of a horse") stands out in this passage, as does the word "ignorance." These were common to early ethnographic discourse. However, according to Turner Strong, "Cook's only recourse to the rhetoric of bestiality occurred as an analogy: 'they seem to have no fix'd habitation but move about from place to place like wild Beasts in search of food'" (180). As well, he never seems to use the word "ignorance."

In 1697, English explorer William Dampier made the following observations regarding the Natives of Australia:

The Inhabitants of this Country are the miserablest People in the world. The Hodmadods of Monomatapa, though a nasty People, yet for Wealth are Gentlemen to these; who have no Houses and skin Garments, Sheep, Poultry, and Fruits of the Earth, Ostrich Eggs, etc. as the Hodmadods have: and setting aside their Human Shape, they differ but little from Brutes. (Turner Strong 177)

The following are some of Cook's observations of the same people:

From what I have said of the Natives of New-Holland [Australia] they may appear to some to be the most wretched people upon Earth, but in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans....They live in a Tranquillity which is not disturb'd by the Inequality of Condition....[T]hey live in a warm and fine Climate and enjoy a very wholesome Air, so that they have very little need of Clothing and this they seem to be fully sencible of....In short they seem'd to set no Value upon any thing we gave them...this in my opinion argues that they think themselves provided with all the necessarys of Life and that they have no superfluities. (Turner Strong 180)

Clearly there is a vast difference in attitude between the two explorers. Again we can see Cook's utilitarian point of view, explaining the Natives' lack of clothing as "sencible" in the context of their environment. Not only does Cook not exhibit an attitude of European superiority, he goes as far as criticizing European culture, with its "social conflict engendered...by inequality and the pursuit of luxuries" (Turner Strong 181).

There are a few instances of rhetoric in Cook's journals that seem to reflect the ethnocentrism that was still pervading Cook's era. These are subtle, taking the form of such words as "miserable" and "jealous." This can be attributed to the fact that Cook himself was inevitably ethnocentric to some degree, having been immersed in such an attitude throughout his life. Also, they can be attributed to the fact that, according to Brian M. Fagan, "[t]o [Cook] the Tahitians were just like other people – both good and bad" (103); he therefore recorded negative characteristics in combination with positive ones, though the positive ones are indeed more dominant in his writing. Phrases such as "truly admirable" and "respect and modesty" overshadow the more negative words employed.

We need not compare Cook's writing with contemporary ethnographic writing for the purpose of comparing attitudes since, as previously stated, an anti-ethnocentric view is inherent to the modern genre of ethnography. In regard to form, Cook's writing is perhaps even more descriptive than most contemporary ethnographies, though it is not as analytical. Cook does, however, analyze to a certain extent, and he draws conclusions from his observations that were uncharacteristic of the time, echoing modern anthropological thought.

## Conclusion

It is clear from the previous textual analysis and comparisons that Cook rejected Euro-ethnocentric notions. Despite a beginning change in attitude in Europe, traditional ethnocentric attitudes were still strongly present during Cook's time as well as years after, rendering Cook somewhat ahead of his time in his views of Natives as sensible rather than savage. Cook's description of various facets of the cultures he encountered, as well as his discussion of the Natives on equal terms and analysis of their various practices as serving specific purposes, demonstrate that Cook holds a key place in the evolution of the ethnographic genre.

## About the Author

Erica Lind is in her fourth year of study, majoring in anthropology. She wrote this research paper last year for her Writing 3850 class.

## Endnotes

1. Here I am referring to ethnographies concerning alien cultures - cultures with which the audience has little or no prior understanding. Some ethnographers study certain groups of people within their own cultures; for instance, *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* by Paul Willis examines counter-school culture in England. Since it was written for a Western audience there was no need to examine such elements as methods of subsistence or birth and death, of which the audience is already aware. Since Cook studied alien cultures I chose to focus on the norms regarding the ethnography of alien cultures.

2. It should be noted that Cook's personality did not "assure the safety" of his final voyage in which he travelled to Hawaii. He underwent a strange and unfortunate personality transformation during the course of this voyage, and he no longer exhibited nearly as friendly or respectful a disposition toward the Natives or his crew. On this voyage he was, in the end, killed by the Native inhabitants. Cook's personality transformation will not be further discussed as I will be analyzing his journals prior to it, during which he was of sound mind and conducted the majority of his work.

3. I was unable to gain access to Cook's journal of, or instructions for, his second voyage.

4. Due to the frequency of Cook's spelling and grammatical errors, I will not insert "[sic]" or my own corrections following errors unless absolutely required for textual comprehension. These words have been transcribed exactly as they exist in Beaglehole's compilation of the journals and the reader should assume all errors to be inherent to Cook's discourse.

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