Contemporary Polynesian thinking

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Many Polynesian cultures experienced a flowering in the early contact period, taking advantage of the new knowledge and technology and inspired by the opening of a wider world. Through the nineteenth century, traditional and introduced elements were synthesized to produce distinctive cultural achievements, such as Hawaiian music and the elaboration of Māori wood sculpture made possible by the introduction of metal tools.

This positive mood was, however, increasingly depressed by population decline, political and economic problems, and in places even the loss of the native language as the normal means of communication. Most important for our subject, many higher educational institutions were abandoned in favor of Western schooling. In Hawai‘i, the temples with their schools were destroyed, and the new, centralized court – unlike the courts of old – did not function as an educational institution. Important efforts were made, however, to perpetuate the old learning. The Māori established an innovative inter-tribal educational center. Samoan Christian pastors’ schools assumed many of the tasks of traditional instruction. Various crafts schools and arts academies continued to operate.

Nevertheless, the decrease in higher speculation was especially harmful because Polynesians needed to solve the intellectual and emotional problems of contact. Western influences were indeed intensifying, but contrary to general expectation, the old culture was not disappearing under its impact. Polynesians became bicultural in most fields, such as religion, medicine, the arts, and education.

The post-contact history of Polynesia is therefore potentially helpful in understanding the increasing multiculturalism of the contemporary world. We can see that cultures – even minority ones seemingly overwhelmed by larger cultures – endure, not just superficially in costumes and folk customs, but down to the level of experience. Polynesians continued to have Polynesian experiences even when missionaries and others assured them they were imaginary. The gods continued to appear, prayers and curses continued to work, and native medicine still cured.

In what mental framework could this bicultural situation be understood? The introduced views of the world – such as missionary Christianity – offered no satisfactory explanation. Polynesians were therefore left to their own resources. The author of “A Story from 1890,” probably the great Orator Chief Lauaki Namulau‘ulu, depicts the Samoan gods fighting among themselves and wounded applying for help at the home of a Christian missionary. When he sees the horribly mutilated but still living gods at his door, he flees terrified. Disgusted, one
of the gods states, "ana 'ua tonu ifo i huga mātou te pule iā te 'oe po'ua 'oti" ("Had it been ordained down from above that we should have power over you, you would die"). That is, both religions exist side-by-side in Sāmoa, but under a higher, unidentified power that regulates them both. Similarly, Tauanúu, the author of a late nineteenth-century text on Tangaloa’s extensive creation of the world, combined an astonishing number of Samoan traditions into an original scheme that continued the classical direction of Samoan cosmology while alluding to the confrontation with the foreign Bible. The highest Samoan speculation was thus perpetuated for another generation alongside Christian education.

Many problems of the bicultural situation were both practical and crucial to survival, such as the development of forms and procedures of government that would be viable in the modern world. Samoan chiefs have coordinated the chiefly and democratic elements already present in their culture to construct polities that appear to be both effective and emotionally satisfying. In the 1830s, the Hawaiian ruling chiefs commissioned a missionary teacher to lecture to them on political economy or science; they then established a form of constitutional monarchy that, with amendments, enabled them to preserve Hawai‘i’s sovereignty through most of the nineteenth century. The chiefs were following the classical method of discussing all possible historical models before choosing a course of action. However, the contemporary Hawaiian sovereignty movement appears to be carrying on its discussions in a historical vacuum with no conscious or affective ties to the polities of the past. More successfully, the Māori have been able to use their tribal identities as a powerful political base for regaining treaty rights. Moreover, their tribal system is being extended creatively to cover those who, through the dislocations of nineteenth-century history, have lost their original tribal roots.

Faced with such problems of contact, Polynesians have steadfastly affirmed the value of their traditional culture and attempted to explain it to the upcoming generations and foreigners. Often, however, much of the richness and complexity of the older cultures has been lost. Simplistic criticisms of Western culture accompany oversimplified descriptions of the native. Studies of religion identify "the four great gods of Polynesia": Tū, Tāne, Tangaloa, and Lono; but of these four, only Tangaloa is found in Western Polynesia! In Hawai‘i, God, Man, and Nature are pictured as the points of a triangle in an attempt to do justice to the importance of the environment in Hawaiian thinking. But in classical thought, both gods and human beings were contained within the framework of sky and earth. In New Zealand, the classical culture is often simplified into a diminution of mana by gradations as it distances itself from its supposed source. This curiously Neoplatonist scheme cannot be found in classical Māori texts or in the early discussions of foreigners. It seems, as do so many modern descriptions of Polynesian culture, to be a combination of half-remembered tradition and half-understood anthropology.

In all such descriptions, however, can be appreciated the effort to articulate cultural values that are still deeply felt – such as the close relation to the environment, the importance of the family, and the positive appreciation of human capabilities – and to find a way to express them in the contemporary world. Because
classical Polynesian thinking is deeply religious, the forum for much of the modern discussion is Polynesian Christianity.

Today, as during the contact period, the Polynesian response to Christianity can be described as covering a spectrum. At one extreme are those who reject Christianity totally. Some Māori religious leaders call for the abandonment of Christianity as a foreign, imperialist tool. The Hawaiian religious leader Sam Lono ordered applicants to his school to step on a crucifix – the same symbolic gesture employed in Tokugawa Japan.

At the other extreme are Polynesians who attempt to abandon their Polynesian cultural heritage in order to conform completely to the Western form of Christianity with which they are familiar. For instance, one Hawaiian Christian church practices a ceremony called 'oki 'ao 'ao (cutting off the [Hawaiian] side), a sort of spiritual lobotomy.

Most Polynesians, however, can be found somewhere between these extremes, joining elements of their classical culture with elements of the new religion. They are aided in this process by the emphasis in Polynesian thought on similarities over differences – by the tendency to harmonize elements rather than oppose them to each other. Again a spectrum can be found, from those who conform to the current political-economic situation to those who want to use a native Christianity for liberation purposes, such as a new school of Tahitian Protestants.

Yet generally accepted theology has been formulated that reconciles Christianity and native religions. Nonetheless, various accommodations, from syncretism to genuine synthesis, have been achieved and reveal much about Polynesian thinking and culture at particular historical moments. Most obviously, many traditional practices continue in baptized form. On one island in precontact times, a divination ceremony was conducted before important initiatives: a priest blessed a large rock, and a strong youth attempted to lift it. The local minister officiates at the ceremony today. Many burial practices and ceremonies to reconcile the soul of the recently deceased are maintained under such shallow Christian covering.

Other developments are more conscious and intellectual and involve basic areas of Polynesian thinking. One of the most obvious areas of friction is the opposition between Christian monotheism and Polynesian polytheism. Missionaries denounced the Polynesian gods as fictions, but Polynesians have continued to experience them as real and powerful. Indeed, gods are often deified ancestors with a long history of benevolent interaction with family members. Many Polynesians began to interpret these family gods according to the Christian idea of guardian angels. Moreover, the Biblical world with its acknowledged multitudes of spirits – from poltergeists, to ghosts, to ranks of devils and angels (see, for example, I Corinthians 8:5; Philippians 2:6–11) – has more in common with the Polynesian world than with the secularized homelands of the missionaries.

One of the most basic subjects of dialogue with Christianity is the Polynesians’ positive view of the universe and of the relation of human beings to it; this view is opposed to Christian ideas of our fallen nature and of heaven as our true home. Moreover, for classical Polynesians the universe was the ultimate reality to be studied and revered. Many Polynesian Christians have been able to join their
classical view to Christianity by emphasizing God the Father, the creator of the universe, rather than God the Son, the Savior Jesus Christ. They can thus emphasize the goodness of God’s creation rather than the Fall that necessitated Salvation.

The Polynesian emphasis on the positive in the universe is reflected in the same emphasis in their view of human nature: human beings are initially good and potentially powerful rather than basically evil and powerless to achieve their own salvation. An important consequence of this view has been developed by the Hawaiian theologian David Kaʻupu (born 1934): the appreciation of cultural achievements, considered religious in themselves in the classical culture. Net-making, fishing, farming, chanting, and dancing are filled with religious values and form an important part of ka ʻimi loa, the study of the universe in order better to love and appreciate it. Religion therefore permeates the whole of culture, and the activities of that culture are themselves a form of prayer. That is, just as God creates the natural world, human beings create the cultural one, and their creativity is another sign of their having been created in the image and likeness of God. Moreover, the cultural world should not be evaluated wholly in terms of the Fall, as a distraction or an estrangement from God, but should be seen as proclaiming His glory through the achievements of His creatures. The Polynesian emphasis on family, sexuality, and beauty is in accord with the above points; they are also areas in which Polynesian thinking can contribute to contemporary Christian teaching.

Discussions of values are, of course, conducted in non-theological contexts as well. For instance, development projects almost inevitably raise questions of proper land use, which must ultimately be referred to one’s view of the universe and the place of human beings within it. Western environmentalism is often based on arguments from logic and from the broader, long-term self-interest of human beings; it therefore lacks the emotional power to counter more focused selfish interests. In contrast, Polynesian thinking and literature are inspired by – and stimulate in turn – a deep emotional commitment to the land and to its care. Thus they can help non-Polynesians achieve the emotional restructuring needed for a successful reform of world environmental practices. In this area, ancient worldviews often prove more effective than post-Enlightenment Western thinking.

In fact, the difference between Western and Polynesian thinking is often identified as the foundation of all cultural differences and frictions. Again, in these discussions the descriptions of each type of thinking are often oversimplified, one-dimensional, and even incorrect – for example, in the contrast of a linear Western mode of thinking with a circular Polynesian mode. One political activist even proposed recovering Hawaiian thinking by emptying her head of all traces of Western thinking! Nevertheless, Polynesians are directed by such discussions to a renewed study of their intellectual heritage, which involves a determined educational effort. Such an effort is in accord with classical Polynesian culture even if it clashes with the modern stereotype of the unthinking native, based on the difficulties Polynesian students have had in Western schools.

In some places, such as Hawai‘i and New Zealand, this educational effort must begin at the basic level of language recovery. The Māori kohanga reo (language nests) – and the Hawaiian pūnana leo based on them – start their students at a
sufficiently early age that the native language will be their mother tongue. For places like Sāmoa and Tonga, where language knowledge is stronger, training must still be offered in correct, polite, and classical usage.

For most Polynesians, if not for most Western academics, knowledge of the language is a prerequisite for any authentic knowledge of the culture and ways of thinking. Language must not, however, become a veneer for Western thinking. The student must also be familiar with the riches of the literary tradition. Thus language and literature are taught inseparably in Sāmoa; and through the nineteenth century, Hawaiian writers constantly stressed the need to record and teach the classical literature as the main communicator of their cultural ideals: love of the land, respect for chiefs, pride in accomplishments, piety, and hospitality. Without such a background, youngsters were beginning to talk and even to think like foreigners. Unfortunately, opportunities to study Polynesian literature academically are rare, and the creation of appropriate courses and the development of faculty to teach them are urgent tasks.

Finally, renewed appreciation of Polynesian culture must be coordinated with knowledge of world cultures, just as the Polynesians of the early contact period found their islands on the map. This coordination is often done superficially, with slogans and slaps. But the task itself is mentally and emotionally important; it is a task imposed on everyone in this multicultural world.

One who addresses the problem of cultural understanding at its deepest level is the modern Tongan educator Futa Helu (born 1934). In his view, our contemporary world is the result of millennia of increasing and intensifying intercultural contact, the problems of which have been felt more keenly than the opportunities for greater knowledge and communication. Education and the arts are the means to seize those opportunities and need, therefore, to be developed for their multicultural purpose. At the 'Atenisi (Athens) Institute, which he founded, Helu has been a pioneer in the academic study of Tongan literature and in its incorporation into the curriculum. His curriculum includes also Greek and Latin, so that students can compare, in the original languages, Western and Tongan classics. In his view, true education must be based on the classics, and the classics of all cultures are mutually reinforcing. Moreover, as does any learned Polynesian, he realizes that the classics must be studied in their original languages. Similarly, in the 1830s, an experimental course in Greek was taught at the only high school in Hawai‘i in order to equip the students for Bible translation, but also to train their minds. That is, they would be taught Western thought from its very roots rather than superficially.

The best Polynesian thinkers clearly have a good comprehension of and much respect for Western culture and thinking. Their continued appreciation of their native heritage as more than folklore or an inducement to nostalgia invites the foreign thinker to treat Polynesian intellectual culture with equal respect: to consider Polynesian thinkers, not objects of ethnographic investigation, but peers in the worldwide quest for knowledge and understanding.

Indeed classical Polynesian literature – like that of Japanese Shintō – can take us back to the youth of human thinking, when ideas like the mating of sky and earth were fresh and inspired intense reflection. We can observe how those ideas work in
people's lives rather than having to excavate them imaginatively from artifacts and texts. Moreover, seeing how those ideas enable people to confront modern problems and devise novel solutions, we can retrace the long history of our Western thinking back to its foundations, gaining some further perspective on our own intellectual stage. Perhaps we will find – as Polynesians have – that our ancestral ideas can help us understand ourselves and our place in the world and rejoin much that has been alienated. Classical Polynesian thinking has not lost its connection to the primary sense of awe and wonder that inspires its vision of life as an appreciative quest for understanding. Polynesian culture is the creative response to the discoveries of that life-long search.