The long read

How to kill a god: the myth of Captain Cook shows how the heroes of empire will fall

In the 18th century, the naval explorer was worshipped as a deity. Now his statues are being defaced across the lands he visited

by Anna Della Subin

An engraving of Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg's The Apotheosis of Captain Cook by John Thane and John Webber. Photograph: Royal Academy of Arts

Tue 18 Jan 2022 01.00 EST

In a type of neoclassical painting one might call The Apotheosis of X, the dead hero is bundled up to heaven by a host of angels, usually in a windswept tumult of robes, wings and clouds. A crowd of grieving mortals watches from below as their hero becomes divine. It's a celestial scramble: in Rubens' sumptuous Apotheosis of James I, heaven is chaos and James looks terrified at having arrived.

In Barralet's Apotheosis of Washington, the dead president has his arms outstretched in a crucified pose, while Father Time and the angel of immortality bear him up to heaven. In a mid-1860s Apotheosis, a freshly assassinated Lincoln joins Washington in the sky, and clings to him in a tight hug. In Fragonard's Apotheosis of Franklin, the new god reaches back to Earth with one hand while a stern angel, grasping his other hand, drags him upward.

In 1785, in a Covent Garden theatre, a spectacle premiered depicting Capt James Cook's voyages in the South Pacific. During the final scene of Omai, or A Trip Around the World, at the words "Cook, ever honour'd, immortal shall live!" an enormous oil painting descended from the ceiling – Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg's Apotheosis of Captain Cook, commissioned for the occasion. Cook is carried up to heaven by the angels Britannia and Fame, but his gaze is directed back at the vertiginous earth, where ships and canoes are facing off in Hawaii's Kealakekua Bay. His expression is queasy and his eyes seem to plead: "Don't drop me!"

Cook had been a revered figure among British seamen. "Wherever he goes he plants English gardens," noted a Sri Lankan anthropologist, not without some disgust. Cook's ship was an ark, heavy with sheep, cattle and potted plants, ready to domesticate any savage land he spied. Whenever he took possession of a new South Pacific island for the crown, Cook would sow seeds and set loose pairs of animals "almost in a loving fashion". Among his crew, Cook was allegedly adored as a father, who cared deeply for his sailors' health, and rarely lost a man. In England, he was renowned as the navigator who determined the boundaries of the habitable world, and was praised for his humane conduct in dark, faraway waters.

But on his third voyage, on the quest to find the Northwest Passage, Cook had begun to drown in some unseen, interior deluge. He sank into a black mood, lost touch with reality and inflicted punishments on his crew at the slightest whim. He paced the deck and flew into rages that the sailors called *heivas,* after a Tahitian stomping dance. He spread terror across the islands, torching entire villages and carving crosses into natives' flesh in revenge for petty crimes. Even before he became a god, Cook had staked out the true space of divinity: violence, of the arbitrary kind. After weeks at sea, as supplies of food and water began to run low, his ship, the Resolution, sighted a paradisal shore. Rather than landing, Cook insisted, for no reason at all, that they keep sailing, interminably, around the coast. As the unhinged captain circled the island, the year turned from 1778 to 1779. Eyes watched from the beach.

On 17 January, the Resolution cast anchor at last in a black-sand bay and a crowd of 10,000 gathered to await it. Five hundred canoes, laden with sugar cane, breadfruit and pigs, glided up to the ship. Histories narrate that for the people of Hawaii, the arrival of Cook was no less than an epiphany. "The men hurried to the ship to see the god with their own eyes," wrote the 19th-century Hawaiian historian Samuel Kamakau. "There they saw a fair man with bright eyes, a high-bridged nose, light hair and handsome features. Good-looking gods they were!" An elderly, emaciated priest went on board the Resolution and led the deities ashore. Thousands fell to their knees as Cook passed by. The priest led the captain to a thatched temple, wrapped Cook in a red cloth and sacrificed a small pig to him, as the people recited lines from the Hawaii epic Kumulipo, a creation myth.

According to the late anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, among others, Cook's arrival marked an extraordinary coincidence. A ritual known as the Makahiki was taking place on Hawaii at the time, in which the god Lono is said to reappear from the distant land of his exile, and to seize power over the Earth from the king, for a period of time. As it circled the island in a clockwise direction, the Resolution had inadvertently traced the path of the effigy of Lono as it was borne in a procession around the coast. The idol is made of a pole and crosspiece with white cloth hanging from it, resembling a sail. And

Cook, as if following the script of a myth he could not have known, had landed in the bay said to be the god's home. His sailors reported that the captain was hailed variously as Lono, Orono, Rono, Eroner - "a Character that is looked upon by them as partaking something of divinity," the ship's surgeon related, echoing a biblical phrase describing Christ. Another word used to greet Cook was *akua,* a Hawaii term that was translated as "God".

An engraving of a Hawaiian dancing for Captain Cook in 1788, after John Webber, 1844. Photograph: Album/Alamy

The Hawaiians fashioned a special idol in Cook's honour, recorded the sailor Heinrich Zimmermann, but using "white feathers instead of red". The mariner John Ledyard wrote that the natives "observed that the color of our skins partook of … the white from the moon and stars", and concluded that the strangers must have some connection with the heavenly bodies. The white men remained on the island for three weeks. They dismantled part of the temple at Hikiau for firewood, and turned the rest into an observatory housing their astronomical equipment, which they would take out, now and then, to stare up at the sky. Each day the priests ceremoniously presented the British with a barbecued hog. The people would gather all the fruits of their land – sweet potatoes, coconuts, bananas and taro – for these gods from a heaven where food had run out.

Can one become trapped, unaware, inside another's myth? During the Makahiki festival, after the Lono effigy has sailed around the island, a ritual is performed known as *kali'i*, meaning "to strike the king", in which Lono and the king fight a theatrical sham battle. According to Sahlins, Cook continued, unwittingly, to perform the Makahiki script. On 3 February, the Resolution departed Hawaii to continue its explorations in the north, yet was struck by a severe storm and forced to turn back. When the British anchored again in Kealakekua Bay, eight days after they had departed, a fog of suspicion and hostility settled over the island as the people attempted to discern the strangers' reason for returning. The tension soon erupted into violence; two Hawaii chiefs were killed, and Cook decided to take the king, Kalaniʻōpuʻu, hostage. When the captain waded ashore, hundreds of warriors fell upon him with iron daggers and clubs.

Following Cook's death, the captain was accorded the traditional rituals for a vanquished chief. His corpse was dismembered, his flesh roasted and his bones separated and portioned out, with his lower jaw going to Kalaniʻōpuʻu, his skull to somebody else, and so on. Among Cook's sailors, who had fled back to the Resolution, "a general silence ensued", wrote the officer George Gilbert; it was "like a Dream that we could not reconcile ourselves to". Two priests rowed to the ship with a bundle containing a large chunk of the captain's thigh.

Along with their charred offering, they brought with them "a most extraordinary question". They wished to know when Cook would return to the vessel "and resume his former station". Would it be in – a very Christlike estimate – "three days' time?" The two men "shed abundance of tears at the loss of the Erono", Lt James King recorded, and they asked, "what he would do to them when he return'd". On shore, other islanders "asserted that he would return in two months & begged our mediation with him in their favor", according to Mid James Trevenan. The German sailor Zimmermann recorded a prophecy: "The god Cook is not dead but sleeps in the woods and will come tomorrow," as translated by an interpreter. Over the following years, the idea seemed to persist that Cook would resurrect.

According to the sailor Edward Bell, who visited the bay in 1793, Cook's death had become the definitive frame for the Hawaii sense of time. "The Natives seem to consider that melancholy transaction as one of the most remarkable events in their History," Bell wrote, and reported that they use it as a date to assist their calendrical calculations. "They still in speaking of him style him the Orono and if they are to be believ'd, most sincerely regret his fate." The accounts by later British travellers to Hawaii emphasise the surprise and guilt felt by the islanders at Cook's death, as if they had imagined it to be a play, with no consequence. "The natives had no idea that Cook could possibly be killed, as they considered him a supernatural being, and were astonished when they saw him fall," reported the English explorer William Mariner in 1806; despite having killed him, "they esteem him as having been sent by the gods to civilise them".

These stories, told and retold over generations, ignore one obvious fact: Cook was killed because he acted rashly and violently, slaughtering chiefs, kidnapping the king and giving the impression the British had returned to conquer the island. The fur trader James Colnett, who arrived in Hawaii in 1791, reported that ever since the British first appeared, the islanders had been constantly at war and devastated by strange, unknown illnesses, all of which they attributed to Cook's revenge. Two volcanoes had awakened and burned night and day, the work, they contended, of the vengeful god. "They made strict inquiry of me, if ever he would come back again, and when I saw him last," Colnett wrote.

When the first missionaries arrived in Hawaii from New England in 1820, they used the cautionary tale of Cook as a potent parable. "How vain, rebellious, and at the same time contemptible, for a worm" - meaning Cook - "to presume to receive religious homage and sacrifices from the stupid and polluted worshippers of demons," thundered Hiram Bingham, the Calvinist leader of the first evangelical mission. After six months at sea, the Calvinists anchored at the archipelago and found it beset by the "thickest heathenism", its sun-drenched landscapes masking terrible despair. Viruses introduced by the British were killing off entire families and villages, and survivors had taken to drinking themselves to death.

The great Kamehameha, founder and first king of the newly unified Kingdom of Hawaii, had died the previous year, and his son had recently abolished the *tabu* system, the strict codes that had structured daily life for centuries, and which had unravelled after the British arrival. A crisis of faith seemed to grip the islands, as temples fell into ruin and the totems of the old gods were destroyed. “The nation, without a religion, was waiting for the law of Jehovah,” according to one early missionary. The Calvinists blamed the rampant disease and malaise on the Hawaiians’ immorality, sexual promiscuity, idol worship and on their reverencing of Cook.

A 1784 engraving of Hawaiians bringing gifts to Captain Cook by John Webber. Photograph: Alamy

Under the stern Calvinists, the Hawaii language was alphabetised, the Bible was translated and novel Christian concepts were mapped on to old Hawaii words. Schools and seminaries were opened and draconian morality laws introduced across the islands. The queen of Hawaii was among the first to convert, and much of the population followed her; a broom dipped in water baptised 5,000 Hawaiians at once. The myth of Cook-as-Lono lived on in the history books and school primers the evangelists produced, a tale that perpetuated the whiteness of divinity, while simultaneously affirming that Cook and all those who worshipped him were idolators of the worst kind.

Along with their indignations, the Calvinist missionaries brought with them a novel concept of private property, simply appropriating whatever land they desired. They were, after all, apostles of a God who possesses the Earth. “To the LORD your God belong the heavens … the earth and everything in it,” Moses had declared. Their children went on to establish enormous sugar plantations, securing international markets for their lucrative crop. “The world is to be Christianised and civilised,” the evangelist Josiah Strong would assert, capturing the mood of the century, “and what is the process of civilisation but the creating of more and higher wants? Commerce follows the missionary.”

In 1840, with the looming threat of an invasion by France, Hawaii sought to clarify its ambiguous territorial status and seek nationhood. The king sent a delegation to the United States and Europe, and three years later Hawaii was officially pronounced an independent nation. However, the plantation owners, eager to sell their crop tax-free in the US, deeply resented the prospect of Hawaii sovereignty.

During the US civil war, with sugar production halted in the south, the wealth of the white Hawaii oligarchy soared, enabling it to consolidate its grip on the archipelago’s economy, from banks, utilities and steamships to local commerce and trade. Beset by illness and poverty, the native Hawaiian population had shrunk to a fifth of its former size. The industrialists deemed Hawaii workers to be lazy and unemployable, casting them aside in favour of labourers from China and Japan whom they could pay even lower wages. In 1893, the sugar cartel, along with a regiment of US Marines, overthrew the Hawaii queen Lili’uokalani, in an act that even the US president at the time, Grover Cleveland, condemned as unconstitutional. The American military occupation of the archipelago had begun.

In the American press, racist cartoonists deployed their anti-black arsenal of caricatures to sketch the Hawaii sovereign grinning as she heated a cannibal cooking pot. They claimed Lili’uokalani was the child of a “mulatto shoemaker”, who illegitimately lorded over her “heathenish” people. With such colouring, it was argued, she was clearly unfit by nature to rule. Along with the queen, the US occupiers arrested newspaper editors who supported her and clamped down on the opposition press. This meant that the only news that came out of Hawaii was delivered by the coup’s spokesmen, who announced that the queen had willingly surrendered her kingdom and her claim to the land.

To this day, the myth that Hawaiians passively accepted the loss of their nation, without resistance, lives on. Historical accounts make little mention of the fact that

40,000 Hawaiians petitioned against the occupation and protested in the streets. A century later, in 1993, thousands of Hawaiians marched on the queen's former palace in Honolulu, again calling for independence. Yet the American public imagination rarely questions whether Hawaii wants to be part of the US; there is the assumption that Hawaiians, in a distant paradise, must be content. Didn't they venerate a white man as a god? Didn't they prostrate themselves before him, dress him and feed him with all the fruits of their land? They killed him in a ritual but, not knowing what they had done, didn't they, with guilty tears, impatiently await his return?

When news of Cook's death finally reached London in January 1780, 11 months after the captain was killed, it was met not with a public outpouring of grief but a rather morbid fascination at the exotic details. The success of Omai, which starred alongside the Apotheosis painting 80 dancing "savages", some in blackface, inaugurated a new European ritual of slaying Cook onstage. In 1788, the wildly popular Death of Captain Cook; A Grand Serious-Pantomimic-Ballet premiered in Paris, before going on to tour the continent, England, and the US.

By all accounts, the ballet was violent, chaotic, "horrid", overwrought with emotion – and a great triumph. Year after year, it was revived, and the captain's death re-enacted, like a blood offering the imperial powers continued to make to guarantee their own ascendance. Cook was killed in Yarmouth, Bungay, Leeds and nine times in Norwich; he was bludgeoned to death in Dublin, clubbed in Quebec, speared on Greenwich Street in Manhattan and again in Charleston, South Carolina. Navy men got death-of-Cook tattoos and aristocratic women wore dresses inspired by "the Indian who killed Capt'n Cook with His Club", as the society diarist Mrs Hester Thrale noted.

By the mid-19th century, PT Barnum would joke that the celebrated blunt instrument had multiplied itself, securing a treasured place in every museum vitrine. The poet Anna Seward heaved the captain up to heaven in her 1780 Elegy on Captain Cook, To Which is Added, An Ode to the Sun. "To put it bluntly," wrote the anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere, "I doubt that the natives created their European god; the Europeans created him for them."

A defaced statue of Captain Cook in Melbourne, Australia, January 2018. Photograph: David Crosling/AAP

An apotheosis can arise in an epiphany or in an act of prostration, and it can also happen through poetry and painting, through pantomime and translation. What word do you take for God? The Hawaiian syllables were *akua*, but this is misleading, for in its original sense the word could refer to any number of sacred beings, objects, or living persons - anything possessing immense power. So, too, with the word Lono: the crew of the Resolution was never able to figure out its precise meaning. “Sometimes they applied it to an invisible being, who, they said, lived in the heavens. We also found that it was a title belonging to a personage of great rank and power in the island,” Lt King recalled. Not only Cook but the Hawaiian king, too, was greeted with shouts of “Lono!” Misinterpretations create gods.

Kamakau, the historian, wrote of the coming of Cook in his 1866 *Mo’olelo* or “History”, a text widely esteemed as the authoritative “native” account. It was eventually published in English in 1961, after decades of work by a team of translators that included the 19th-century Australian-born settler and former sugar plantation worker Thomas Thrum. In the English edition, the story was heavily doctored, ostensibly to conform to “western” standards of history-writing, as the Hawaiian scholar Noenoe Silva has shown. Before his description of the arrival of Cook, Kamakau details, over 17 pages, other foreigners who had already arrived by sea, some with pale skin, some with brown. The translators, however, omitted the entire section, transforming the narrative of the appearance of Cook and his ark into a magical, utterly unprecedented event. In the original, Kamakau emphasises the violence, fighting and hostage-taking that culminated in the killing of the captain, and concludes with a list.

"The fruits and seeds that Cook's actions planted sprouted and grew, and became trees that spread to devastate the people of these islands:

1. Gonorrhea together with syphilis.
2. Prostitution.
3. The false idea that he was a god and worshipped.
4. Fleas and mosquitoes.
5. The spread of epidemic diseases.
6. Change in the air we breathe.
7. Weakening of our bodies.
8. Changes in plant life …"

"The best part of Cook's visit was that we killed him," the Hawaiian activist Lilikalā Kameʻeleihiwa writes. If man imagines that a god resembles himself, then the god, eventually, must die. Cook has been killed again and again, on the beach, in the theatre, on the page, but the myth of his alleged divinity lingers. With every new death, it lives on.

Deicide is on my mind. How do you kill a god, if not by bludgeoning, stabbing, piercing, splitting, dismembering, boiling, roasting, distributing? Is it through rewriting history, by exposing the machinations beneath myths, by breaking open syllables so that whatever is sacred inside spills out?

Is it by tearing down His image? In the 21st century, across New Zealand, Australia and Hawaii, statues of Cook have been defaced. Strutting across a pedestal in his breeches, telescope in hand, a defaced Cook wears a spray-painted bikini; around the neck of another Cook hangs a large, canvas sign that reads, simply, "Sorry". The forecast calls for more. White gods will fall like raindrops. It feels as though the heavens are about to open up.

This is an edited extract from Accidental Gods: On Men Unwittingly Turned Divine, published by Granta. To order a copy, go to guardianbookshop

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