

# AUTOCHTHONY / LOCALIZATION / ABORIGINALITY & ISLAND PEOPLES IN THE WORLD SYSTEM

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## Abstract

Under International Whaling Commission regulations there are two types of whaling. The class of Aboriginal subsistence whaling has a preferred status in terms of access to whale resources; different criteria are used when weighing the value of whale use and the precautionary principle in terms of conservation values. The designation of which communities qualify as Aboriginal subsistence whalers and why is uneven however. Tongan whalers for example, were not designated as Aboriginal subsistence whalers, presumably because although they were using small, wind powered boats, taking very limited numbers of whales, and providing whale meat to small local markets, the Tongan whaling tradition was of relatively recent vintage, and derived from earlier European whaling traditions and technologies. By the time of the IWC moratorium on whaling, Tongan whalers represented a thoroughly localized practice, regardless of the origins of that practice. This paper examines when and where a practice becomes so localized that it becomes, for all intents and purposes of the practitioners, an autochthonous tradition. Some ideas about the notions of localization, aboriginality, and autochthony are developed, specifically in reference to hybrid practices in small island cultures, and the way these practices are characterized on the world stage.

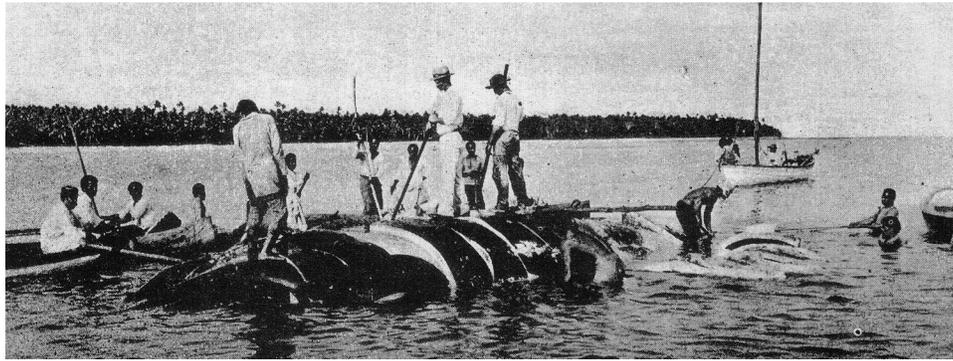
## Introduction

To the best of our knowledge (and that knowledge is pretty good) there is no pre-contact tradition of whale hunting in or around Tonga, or for that matter the rest of Oceania short of Indonesia. The archaeological evidence, oral histories, and the earliest reports indicate that there were highly developed fisheries and ocean-going transportation technology, and the opportunistic use of stranded whales, but no intentional taking of whales in the region until after American and European whalers arrived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see Heizer, 1941).

Nonetheless, it is a likelihood verging on certainty that whales were present in and around Tongan waters at least as long as the 4000 years or so people have been in the area. There is an indigenous term for whales—*Tofo'a'a* (which very likely does not reduce to 'big/dangerous animal in the ocean', that's a *Tenifa*). It is not possible to make exact or definitive statements about whale migration patterns in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it is certain that Humpbacks in particular have used the waters around Tonga as breeding grounds (between June and November) for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Though whalers visited and at times used Tonga as a whaling base, and whalers themselves migrated and sometimes stayed on the Islands, the practice of whaling itself was not localized (or at least not continuously so) until after 1890. It was then that a part Maori whaler named Albert Cook<sup>1</sup> (reputed/rumoured in Tonga to be a grandson of Captain James Cook) remained in Tonga after his whaling ship had moved on, married a Tongan woman, and developed his own local

whaling operation. According to the sources analyzed by Reeves in 2002 (that is Ruhen, 1966; Anonymous, 1981; Cawthorn, 1979; Dawbin, 1984) Cook's early operation in the Ha'apai region was partially oriented towards the production of oil which was sold to passing whalers. Cook—Kuki—moved his base of operations to the Nukua'lofa area in 1912. The domestic market for whale meat expanded and soon significant export of whale products ceased (Kennedy, 1961). The Kuki family was soon joined by a number of other small whaling operations. By all accounts the combined catch of the domestic Tongan whaling fleet was between 10 and 30 whales per year—all consumed locally, until the late 1960s. The technologies stayed more or less the same throughout this period; these were technologies taken from the first period of European whaling (though the Tongans sailed rather than rowed to their prey). The harpoon gun was not used except for a brief period in the early 1930s, though a form of gelatinite charge was sometimes used (see Ruhen, 1966: 65–71).



'Cutting up a big fish' in *The Cyclopedia of Tonga* 1907: 9

This domestic whaling industry was regulated and licensed from 1956 onward; the British Consul's Biannual Report for Tonga 1958–59 (Anon, 1961a) reports 43 Humpbacks landed while the 1960–61 Report claims 31 landed (Anon, 1961b). Further, the Report notes "whale meat is regarded as a valuable article of diet and there is, as a rule, little difficulty in disposing of it" (ibid: 27). Nonetheless, the Tongan industry effectively ceased<sup>2</sup> with the almost total destruction of the humpback whale herds by Russian factory whalers by 1964, only a few short years after these reports were written (Ruhen, 1966: 122). So did the second period of global industrial whaling eliminate a local whaling industry based on the technologies of the first. The official Tongan moratorium on whaling was declared by the King of Tonga in 1979 (Anonymous, 1981). Though some stock recovery has occurred, the resumption of Tongan whaling remains controversial.

### The International Whaling Commission (IWC)

While Tonga is not now, nor has it ever been, a member of the IWC, several of the member states of the Commission are now major forces impeding even discussion of the resumption of whaling. Because Tongan whaling was never recognized as an aboriginal whaling practice, nor given special recognition, the IWC makes no distinction between Tongan whaling and the whaling of factory ships using catcher boats. In this paper I would like to argue that Tongan whaling has a great deal more in common with what the IWC now calls Aboriginal Subsistence whaling than the alternative—commercial whaling—in spite of the facts that a) whaling was clearly introduced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and b) whaling families were selling whale meat in the domestic Tongan market<sup>3</sup>. I am less interested here in how the IWC discourse plays out in terms of whether, how, and by

whom whales continue to be killed and eaten (though I am interested in that too), than I am in when and how the 'aboriginal' practices of island and other peoples are understood to be suitably distinct from 'other', 'modern', 'capitalist', or 'commercial' practices to warrant special consideration on a national or international scale. At root the question is actually 'What makes a practice or people aboriginal?' and what might this mean for understanding how people are shaped by the forces of globalization that have swept the globe over the past 500 years in particular?

### 'Aboriginal' and the IWC

There is a notable lack of definition of key terms within IWC practice. Takahashi notes that only since the late 1970s has there been a pronounced opposition drawn between the terms aboriginal or aboriginal subsistence use of whales and commercial whaling (1998). He understands this relatively recent distinction to be a politically motivated one—one drawn from the Western settler experience of the marginalization and colonization of non-Western peoples (note, in some formulations of the term Aboriginal there is an explicit assumption that the term applies only to peoples who have been colonized and marginalized by incoming settlers; see Nuttall, 1994). There has long been recognition of whaling by 'aborigines' within Whaling Conventions (see Reeves, 2002: 72<sup>4</sup>), though rather little specificity about what an aborigine, or an aboriginal whaling practice might be, except to distinguish aboriginal subsistence practices from an even more poorly defined set of 'commercial' whaling practices (see Takahashi, 1998). Both the use of English as the one and only language of discourse at the IWC (ibid, 1998) and the overlapping dominance of 'whale-centered' discourse in contemporary Western cultures, are identified as key sources of ambiguity and conflict (Reeves, 2002). Further, there seems little will within the IWC to open up current practices to scrutiny.

Interestingly enough, the current IWC language use seems to hold as equivalent the terms aboriginal, indigenous, and native (the actual term used for this class of whaling though is 'aboriginal subsistence' which, given the range of whaling practices encompassed in fact, seems to mean whaling for the subsistence needs of an aboriginal people no matter who does the whaling or how it is done). In contemporary Canadian usage these terms are also basically equivalent (with some provisos), with the root meaning being first peoples or 'people of the land', though there is slightly less consensus on how long a people must occupy and use a place before they are native to it.

If we think about this in terms of the Tongan whaling practices described above, one might then ask, are Tongans an aboriginal/indigenous/native people? In terms of occupancy that answer is clearly yes. But are these Tongan whaling practices aboriginal/indigenous/native? This is a far more complex question. Clearly the practices are introduced; we not only know when, but who introduced these practices. But is there a sense of the adjectives aboriginal/indigenous/native which speaks to the development and control of these practices rather than their source? Must a practice be purely and exclusively traditional in order to be aboriginal? (What sort of antiquity is required of a tradition anyway?) Must a practice be unchanged or unchanging to be traditional? If this is so then there are probably few 'traditional' aboriginal practices left<sup>5</sup>. On the face of it this is not much of a starting point, so let's begin by suggesting that what makes something aboriginal/indigenous/native is that some continuity, some consistency, and some local constituency contiguous with the past is in place and gives shape and context for a practice. Such a framing would encompass many aboriginal/indigenous/native practices that indigenous people themselves would claim to be exactly that—indigenous—though some social scientists might beg to differ (see for example Trevor-Roper, 1983; Keesing, 1989). The significance of such a framing

is the right of authentic difference; and this, I would argue, is a right that has been under siege for some time.

Let me return to the example of Tongan whaling to elucidate. Tongan whaling practice, at present at least, is not and likely would not be considered an 'aboriginal' one. Certainly the IWC has shown no interest in accepting any additional practices (in Tonga or anywhere else) into the category of 'aboriginal subsistence' whaling. Nonetheless, from Albert Cook on, Tongan whaling used Tongan built boats albeit on New England Whaler designs, used Tongan forged lances and harpoons, used Tongan crews and supplied Tongan markets. My point is that this was a thoroughly localized practice. Certainly there is some sense in which the practice can legitimately be called a Tongan one that encompassed and used the technologies of the West effectively, and locally. In this, I would argue, is a prime example of an island's incorporation of people (Cook) and technology—in other words, an island's adaptation of the things that come on the waves. It matters how we think about this process; in the contemporary social sciences there is a tendency to think about 'the local' as a product of the world system, be that a product via assimilation or resistance. Recently Mintz (1998) argued that reactions and accommodations to a capitalist system of global reach are now, and have long been, *local ones*. People living in local communities and networks of these communities have organized and mobilized via processes available to them, i.e. *largely local ones*, to make and re-make their lives in creative ways that are not reducible to the world system. Not accidentally I think, Mintz's examples were developed using islands in the Caribbean, and I think there is more to be learned via an island centric view of the globe.

To the nexus of aboriginal/indigenous/native I would like to add two terms. After Mintz (1998) is a term I have already used—localization. I think that the notion of autochthony (Mitchell and Reeves, 1980: 77) might also be helpful here. Like 'aboriginal' and 'indigenous', the term signals that something has been created in place—and indeed, regardless of the source of Tongan whaling, it was re-created over and over again in thoroughly localized and thoroughly Tongan ways. The construction of culture through the successful mixing of cultural elements has a long tradition in the social sciences as a model for assimilation. Wallace's (1970) early analysis of the synthetic roots of the Iroquoian Longhouse Societies is a case in point. As useful as the recognition of processes of hybridization may be, this should not blind us to the enduring salience of culture. Nor is the application of the concept of hybridity without a political economy of its own. In spite of the obvious influences of Aboriginal peoples on mainstream Euro-Canadian culture (for example), there is a tendency to focus on the transformations of Aboriginal cultures in contact with European ones rather than the reverse.

How exactly do people incorporate contact with new peoples and ideas? Sahlins (1981) suggests that peoples in contact situations incorporate new ideas on their own terms, even as these terms change and transform over repeated iterations of contact (see also Dening, 1995 (1988)). Such a position stands opposed to one that views both opposition and accommodation to colonial influence and/or the introduction of capitalism as leading to culture change that is derivative. For example, one could view the impact of capitalism as constitutive of a culture one of two ways: either the culture is transformed in contact with markets and social relations reformulated according to capitalist logics; or the culture is transformed by its opposition to the changes implied by capitalist relations, and thus the transformation is patterned by that which is opposed. Here, cultural elaborations on an anti-capitalist model are rooted in opposition to capitalism, rather than pre-existing ethos or relationships. As Gregory (1997) would have it, such epistemologies result in analyses based in an  $x : not\ x$  dichotomy where  $not\ x$  is definable and thus constituted only by reference to  $x$ . Against this notion, Gregory introduces the idea of coeval cultural forms. That is, sometimes at least, even where a people is embedded in a colonial, neo-colonial, or global

system, the shape of their lives is not reducible to that embeddedness. Rather, the relationship is not  $x : \textit{not} x$ , but  $x : y$ , where  $x$  and  $y$  are coeval or *juxtaposed*, but not opposed (and thus are mutually or reactively constitutive). What such a model potentiates at the level of communities within a globalized world is an appreciation of *autochthonous* (but not autonomous or isolated) identity. Simply put, people form and reform culture in place. The global system matters, but how, and how much?

I would argue that the shape of culture/society/community is neither disconnected from, nor determined by, processes of globalization—even where identity processes take on overt oppositional elements. Again, accepting that once incorporated, Tongan whaling practice was just that, incorporated and recreated in place on the Islands, this does not mean that the world system didn't or doesn't matter. Large scale global whaling interests destroyed the South Pacific whale herds, and with them local Tongan whaling practice with disastrous consequences in terms of the health of both the Tongan economy and the Tongan people (see Evans et al., 2001). Today, large scale global environmental/conservation movements actively oppose even discussions of the resumption of whaling in Tonga, in part on grounds that the practices are not traditional or aboriginal but rather introduced. Nonetheless, in Island peoples like those in Tonga we see the capacity to incorporate and re-create as autochthonous practice, things from elsewhere. This is not unique to islands, but it is, perhaps easier to spot.

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#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> See also 'Vailima Meannata' ([http://www.pcf.org.nz/events/tonga\\_photo\\_gallery](http://www.pcf.org.nz/events/tonga_photo_gallery)), and Mike Cooper's, 'Bill Sevesi New Zealand's King of Steel' (<http://hometown.aol.co.uk/cooparia/disc.html>). Cooper writes "Bill is under the impression that he is in some way related to Captain James Cook but I'm afraid he might be wrong. The Captain did have six children but they all died without having children of their own. However, there are lots of Cooks in the world and his great grandfather was indeed a Cook but he was a whaler and trader who married a Maori woman from Russell in the Bay of Islands in New Zealand. One of his sons, Albert Cook, migrated to Tonga where he lived and died. I saw a copy of his death certificate stating that he died from 'exhaustion of life'. Albert Cook, half English half Maori, married a Tongan woman and their daughter was Bill's mother. At the age of eleven he was sent to New Zealand to go to school. "I preferred to go out with the boats to go harpooning whales. My family were whaling people. But they made me go to school. But I did love music."

<sup>2</sup> According to Cawthorn (1979), sporadic subsistence whaling did continue in Tonga after the IWC ban on Humpback whaling in 1965. Concern over this both inside and outside Tonga sparked a moratorium declared by the King in 1979, bringing whaling in Tonga to an absolute end.

<sup>3</sup> It is clear from anecdotal evidence I collected in the early 1990s in the Ha'apai region that some portion of Tongan whale production went into local gift exchange circuits; it is also likely that there was a variable influence on price exerted via the moral economy, though there is no systematic appraisal of either. According to Ruhen (1966: 158–159) describing the disposition of one of the whales landed in 1964, every bit of the whale was used. Most was sold, except for the heart, which was customarily given to a member of the Royal family, consumed by the whalers, or gifted to someone else - in this case part was given to Ruhen (1966: 158–159).

<sup>4</sup> Referring to the IWC decision to ban certain aboriginal whale hunts in 1977, Reeves notes: "This decision was a departure from a concept first embraced by the 1931 Geneva Convention for the Regulation of Whaling, which exempted coast-dwelling 'aborigines', provided that they used only 'canoes, pirogues or other exclusively native craft propelled by oars or sails', did not carry firearms, were not 'in the employment' of non-aboriginal persons and were not 'under contract to deliver the products of their whaling to any third person' (Mitchell & Reeves, 1980). The International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW), signed in Washington in 1946, superseded the Geneva Convention and established the IWC as the global management body for managing the whaling industry ... in place of the 1931 wording, the ICRW simply stated that it was illegal 'to take or kill grey whales or right whales, except when the

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meat and products of such whales are to be used exclusively for local consumption by the aborigines', thus the concept of according special status to 'aboriginal subsistence whaling'." (2002: 72).

<sup>5</sup> There is a massive recent literature that revolves around the notion of tradition (see for example Shils, 1971; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Handler and Linnekin, 1984; and Hanson, 1989 to name just a few), but a through going review of this literature is beyond the scope of this paper.

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