

REVIEW

Juri Mykkänen 2003. *Inventing Politics: A New Political Anthropology of the Hawaiian Kingdom.*
Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

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During the past two decades, anthropology has changed dramatically. We once studied “isolated” tribes and communities to reveal their organization and illustrate a theory we devised or adopted. Through most of these years our mantra was “cultural relativism.” In the 1970s, partly through a greater cognizance of political economy, we began to study the impact of Western ideas and practices on (what had never been) those isolated “others.” This perspective was soon followed by ideas about the effects of imperialism, post colonialism, and reflexivity as we began to investigate the impact of the “West” and look critically at the concepts we were using to interpret others. In recent years, there has been a turning to the use of historical voices and documents, to broadening what we mean by ethnography, and to a fresh look at the culture concept. Culture, many of us now agree, is not a static grid of categories and beliefs but a process; culture is always in the making as people rearrange a heritage and create a new one in the quest to make their practices and encounters meaningful.

Studying moments of encounters provides one way to bring these important issues together.

Juri Mykkänen's study of the Hawaiian kingdom in the earlier 1800s provides an example. He focuses on the contact between Hawaiians and American Protestant missionaries to show how they both changed through the encounter as cultural invention took place in the context of a power differential. Chiefs lost many prerogatives, as well as wealth and land; new laws were erected and government was regularized as the missionaries with their religious and political imagery wrought change. Through their impact and the spread of markets, local folk were subjected to increased work obligations while epidemics wrought a toil. Visiting warships could quell resistance just as their visits elicited prostitution.

Mykkänen focuses primarily on the recorded contacts between the local rulers and the visiting missionaries who experienced the encounter through their differing but shifting ideas about divinity and virtue. Each absorbed ideas of the other as they changed their own. For Hawaiians, "politics" was not a cultural category. But that situation altered through the interaction. The result was not syncretism, or a blending of one with the other, but something different and unfinished. I would consider this interaction as a long conversation or dialogue between the missionaries and Hawaiians, especially the chiefs. Each came to the conversation with an historical context or background, and in the engagement began to build a view of the other as positions shifted. On this perspective, the author pieces together and resurrects a dialogue that had both a verbal and material form.

For the Hawaiians, humans were usurpers of divine powers. A chief encapsulated life on earth and had command over the distribution of land. The death of a chief was followed by a period of release from the tabus that were legitimated by gods so that the death of a chief brought a period of contestation and sometimes war. Subsequently, through a sacrifice, a new chief created a "government" (*apuni*) or society. He appropriated a land area that became identified with him, and the people in a territory were united through the chief whose identity became theirs. Outsiders or foreigners, as a result, were potential rivals of a chief. But this conception of the presence of the divine on earth hardly fit the missionaries' Christian notion of an almighty who was the ultimate source of rationality in individual humans.

The missionaries' larger calling was to bring God and civilization to Hawaii, which led them to try to understand what they were

encountering and evince a touch of cultural relativism. But they were deeply committed to Evangelical Protestantism. As Mykkänen remarks, “This relativistic orientation, coupled with abominations of heathenism of all kinds, resulted in a feeling of ambivalence regarding the worth of Hawaiians” (p.18). The missionaries defended Hawaiian culture for one part but found it filled with vice for the other.

Mykkänen observes that most anthropologists assume that the category politics refers to a real domain on the ground, which is found in any grouping. But no local Hawaiian word directly referred to the political sphere, and the nature of the political was contested among the missionaries as well. One part of the encounter concerned how activities, such as church-building, were to be interpreted: under missionary influence chiefs built churches but as monuments to their power while the missionaries wanted them as places of worship in honor of the divinity.

The missionaries were not directly political or interested in politics, yet they believed in a society that was based on virtuous behavior toward others rather than one founded on individual rights. They adhered to the idea of virtuous citizenship. In a word, they believed in a covenant rather than a contract society, which put them at odds with cultural notions at home. Their political convictions followed from their theological framework in which communal awareness and responsibility were esteemed. The missionaries believed in the miracle of grace, which was a private and not a public or mass expression; and they held that only in this social situation could human rationality emerge and overcome superstition and custom. Society’s form could not be dictated by what they saw as superstitious beliefs or absolutism. Hawaiians had to be saved from their false notions of divinity and from their ignorance.

Hawaiian ideas were different, and if the missionary notion of the “political” was encompassed by their theological perspective, the Hawaiian notion of the “political” was even more encompassed but indirectly expressed. Here the word “apuni” was crucial. Hawaiians used the term when referring to the politics of foreigners but its local meaning was broader. To some degree it meant government or kingdom, but if so, it meant a territory of peace that was safe and assured by the life-giving powers of a chief. The chief’s life was the life of the people. Apuni also meant a place of control, while its opposite meant to overturn a kingdom. Through the divine the chief’s person and control brought local stability that was partially assured by his

command over land. The political in this sense fanned into economy, religion, and ritual in addition to power.

For both sides a cosmological understanding was central to how they thought society should be constituted. The missionaries viewed Hawaiian chiefship through the Western notion of the separation of church and state so that the Hawaiian idea of *apuni* was seen by them as oppressive and a barrier to the expansion of civilization. Only free individuals could organize themselves into a hierarchy. Yet, over time, as traders became increasingly present and market possibilities opened, the chiefs used their powers to extract ever more labor and goods for personal benefit: sandalwood became a source of chiefly wealth. As the chiefs increased their extractive powers, often for personal display, they increasingly left off caring for their people as promised by the traditional notion of *apuni*. The missionaries saw this increased use of chiefly powers as abusive, but in voicing their reservations and concerns, they increasingly participated in the sphere of political economy which was not their original purpose. Eventually, a monarchy was built and a more comparative political language emerged, while the missionary movement began to collapse by the mid-1800s.

Thus, the author shows how a comparative political discourse emerged from the confrontation between the Hawaiian notion of *apuni* and the Western idea of government. This encounter was anthropological, because both sides learned from, addressed and adapted to the vision of the other, just as the book – though about an historical epoch – is anthropological with its emphasis on local meanings and contexts. As an anthropologist who is interested in local meanings of economy, I am sympathetic with Mykkänen's insight that "the political" is not a comparative category, but I also wondered about the changing meanings of "the economic" in the encounter, especially considering the impact of traders with their new goods and suggested wants, and the way the local economy was altered toward market production. In this respect, the author – while rightly observing that "the political" is not a given category of analysis – treats the political as if it were a domain that could be studied independently of economy. Still, the presentation is very scholarly and thoughtful.