

The Captain and His Book in the Victoria River country, and beyond

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I'm going to share a few stories with you, and in a sideways kind of fashion I want to ask questions about several different meanings we might consider in relation to the practice of holding treasures. Stories often convey meanings subtly, so I'm asking you to do some subtle listening.

I first learned about Captain Cook in Australia from Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory, starting in 1980 when I went to live in the community of Yarralin. My teacher Hobbles Danaiyarri told long and detailed stories (sagas) that were addressed both to his own people and to Whitefellas and others (in Rose 2001). He exhorted his own people to remember Cook, because that memory constituted their own history as a colonised people, and until colonisation ended, people needed to remember.

Hobbles Danaiyarri was a Mudbura man who worked for much of his life on Wave Hill Station, participated in the 1966 walk-off, and later settled in the new community of Yarralin on Victoria River Downs station.

In his saga, Captain Cook came stealing land and killing people. Starting in Sydney and continuing up the coast, around the Top End, and eventually sailing up the Victoria River, Captain Cook stopped, killed people, claimed possession of the land, and asserted the power and local presence of his 'book'. That book contained the laws of death, dispossession and oppression, and in Hobbles' telling of the Saga, one of his main points was to say that Captain Cook and his book are both still active in the lives of Aboriginal people. In parts of the saga he linked Captain Cook with Gilruth, the administrator of the Northern Territory in the early years of the twentieth century, showing continuity from Cook to his successors, and expressing frustration over the fact that Whitefellas kept following the wrong book, and didn't seem to understand that Captain Cook is dead.

But still we got it today. But I think that was finished now for the Captain Cook.... That time been gone. It's finished now. But really, it [the land] belongs to Aboriginal people. Captain Cook and Gilruth, that two fellow been on Darwin, been on Sydney Harbour, all right. I think you two fellow been stealing this country. You, Captain Cook, and Gilruth.... Steal. Kill my people no reason. You, Captain Cook, and Gilruth, you kill my people.

A great deal happens in Hobbles' vivid account: Cook 'discovers' Australia, he brings his men and his cattle, he kills people, takes

possession, and enforces the book of death and theft. Hobbles told the saga with a lot of repetitions, and in doing so he emphasised the repetitive quality of the story:

Captain Cook coming back big boss now. Bringing nother lot government belong you. Still you been bring your book, and follow your book, Captain Cook. We know you government. When you been bring it over to Sydney, there people been work it up, government been work it up. You reckon, 'white man's country.' That's the way that Captain Cook and Gilruth been make a lot of fault.

In telling the Saga for Whitefellas, Hobbles wanted both to expose the harm of conquest and to make an offer of peace. He kept reminding us that Captain Cook is dead, and so he was saying that Australia can be different now, that colonisation doesn't have to go on and on. His vision of how Australia could be was one of genuine mateship:

Right. Now we can, we can have a friend, friend together now. I'm speaking about now. We can come together, join in, make it more better out of that big trouble. You know, before, Captain Cook been making a lot of cruel, you know. Now these day, these day, we'll be friendly, we'll be love meself [one another], we'll be mates. That be better. Better for make that trouble.

Paddy's Captain Cook

Over in Arnhem Land they tell stories that are both similar and different. Paddy Fordham Wainburranga, a Rembarrnga man of Arnhem Land, was an artist, performer, and eloquent speaker. He performed a ceremony and story for Captain Cook, as well as making paintings. Paddy's story (Mackinolty and Wainburranga 1988) focussed on two waves of Captain Cook. The first Captain Cook was the good one: 'Captain Cook didn't do any wrong.... Captain Cook didn't do any bad things'. The good Cook came from Mosquito Island to Sydney Harbour with his two wives. There he wrestled with a figure called Satan; Captain Cook won the fight and Satan was killed and cast underground. Captain Cook then went back to Mosquito Island; but there his own people turned against him and attacked him. Mortally wounded he returned to Sydney Harbour and died there.

Captain Cook came back to Sydney Harbour then, and he died from the spear wounds. The old man was sick and he sat down with everything he had and died.... And then he was buried there in Sydney Harbour. Underneath. On the Island.

With his death his 'good' regime also passed away and the new wave of Captain Cooks invaded Australia.

When the old Captain Cook died, other people started thinking they could make Captain Cook another way. New people. Maybe all his sons.

Too many Captain Cooks.

They started shooting people then. New Captain Cook people....

They have made war. Warmakers, those New Captain Cooks.

It seems that the old Captain Cook should never have gone back to Mosquito Island, for it turned out to be a fatal return. But, he made it back to Sydney and he remains there still. His blood soaked the sands of Garden Island, now a naval dockyard across the water from a site with the almost preternatural name Captain Cook Graving Dock. The story suggests that still today there exists the possibility of a different Australia. The Old Captain Cook who never did wrong things is still here, and his presence seems to hold open the possibility of an Australia founded in just relations.

Islanders' Cook

Anne Salmond's book *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog: Captain Cook in the South Seas* (2003) tells about how Cook died in Hawaii. Not least of the causes was Cook's re-appearance not long after having been lavishly sent off. It was another fatal return.

Cook had been incorporated into societies across the sea of islands, and thus had been brought into a continuum of kinship, ancestry and creation beings. He exchanged names, titles and power with chiefs who were at the godly end of the continuum, and in being transformed from stranger to kin, he was also brought into relationship with ancestors and other figures of power. At the same time, he was expected to behave according to custom. In Hawaii he was farewelled, and when he returned, in contradiction to people's wishes, he did not receive a welcome. Fighting broke out, Cook was clubbed down, or stabbed, and fell into the rocks and the sea. Over the next few days various parts of the body and clothing were returned to Cook's men – a hunk of thigh flesh, his hat, bits of skull and scalp, hands and so on. The pieces were buried at sea with military honours, and some of the bones reportedly were kept by islanders and circulated as sacred objects (420-427).

The lost body of Captain Cook makes a strange contrast with a body that settles into country, like Paddy's Old Captain Cook. In the islands where Cook died, pieces of his body were passed around, stored here and there, roasted, severed, given a sea burial, and transacted from sacred site to sacred site. Hobbles' insistence that Captain Cook is dead can be heard as a ghostly counterpoint to these Islander stories of the restless and missing body. A great deal happens, in Hobbles' stories, and, like pieces of the dead body in the Pacific, Captain Cook keeps happening again and again. This law is on-going, he is telling us:

And still that book never finish. He still belong to Gilruth and Gilruth been have that book from Captain Cook... And that man, this one Gilruth, said to all the people, Aboriginal: 'This not your land. This mine. This here my building. Here my cattle and horse. This my land.' Really, belong to him [Aboriginal people], it's just for Aboriginal. But that book was go new way, coverem over [conceal the knowledge].

All these bodies and books

For Paddy Wainburranga, the Old Captain Cook is well and truly located, buried in Australian soil. His burial constitutes the possibility of a different Australia. Similarly, Hobbles indicated ways that the story could be re-made. He asked: 'Why didn't you give me fair go for my people? Why didn't you give it me fair go?'

Hobbles and others spoke of an Australia that could have happened and that could still happen. Another of my teachers, Old Jimmy Manggaiyarri, spoke the possibility as a question. It is rhetorically addressed to Captain Cook, and it is specifically addressed to contemporary Whitefellas. 'Why he never say: "Oh, come on mate, you and me live together. You and me living together, mates together. You and me can work for the country all the same then"' (in Rose 2000: 194).

Jimmy's question remains unanswered: it is the one the great questions facing all of us today. It calls for ethical proximity amongst people and country: for shared care of country, for us becoming mates in a zone where care includes all of life, and equally where that which dies can be laid to rest because new life is thriving and colonising harm can be relegated to the past because it really is over. Without this mateship, it seems that we Whitefellas, like Captain Cook in the islands, may continue drifting unquietly, never fully here, never fully gone. These stories tell us that in our restless and rootless drifting we continue to wonder which book to hold on to, and which Captain Cook to follow.

References cited

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The country beyond. Chapter I. Not far from the rugged and storm-whipped north shore of Lake Superior, and south of the Kaministiquia, yet not as far south as the Rainy River waterway, there lay a paradise lost in the heart of a wilderness world--and in that paradise "a little corner of hell." In the whiteness of winter one could look off over a hundred square miles of freezing forest and swamp and river country, with the gleam of ice-covered lakes here and there, fringed by their black spruce and cedar and balsam--a country of storm, of deep snows, and men and women whose blood ran red with the thrill that the hardship and the never-ending adventure of the wild. But this was spring. And such a spring as had not come to the Canadian north country in many years.