
Reviewed by John Charlot

The success of Jean-François Baré’s *Le malentendu Pacifique* (1985) has prompted a second edition with a new introduction. Deftly and elegantly, Baré traces back into post-contact history the puzzling coincidence of indigenous and introduced elements found in contemporary Tahitian culture. Foreigners and Islanders met and negotiated, puzzled and inspired, won and lost points; and from their complex encounters eventuated cultural change, conscious and subliminal, planned and astonishing. Baré focuses on an instructive aspect of the process—“working misunderstandings”—most graspable in physical objects like clothes and tools.¹ Baré adopts the concept from Marshall Sahlins, whose ideas he discusses throughout the book.

That *Le malentendu Pacifique* has been neglected by anglophone scholars reveals the language barrier that divides them from their European colleagues. In a recent American survey of the field, a sixty-page bibliography lists only six works in French, four in German, and two in Spanish.² Anglophones could surely profit from the Europeans’ broader cultural interests—for example, Renate von Gifycki’s engagement with contemporary Pacific Islands poetry. Much could be learned from Horst Cain’s scrupulous attention to native languages and from Thomas Bargatzky’s broad foundations in indigenous and foreign sources. Unfortunately, most anglophones ignore native languages as well.

The neglect of today’s French scholars is especially odd since so many anglophones depend on the theories of the earlier generation. The French discussion has moved on
from the anglophones’ translated sources, qualifying those elders’ polemical systematising and recovering a useful French sense of the ridiculous. Baré steers a French course between the functionalism that makes anglophones appear so often an academia of shopkeepers and the dogmatic structuralism that imprisons the native thinker in a baseless system.

In avoiding both extremes, Baré has good French company. Jacques Cauvin—having demonstrated that culture, not economy, drove Neolithic development—makes fun of functionalists: “… Islamic orientalists, for example, hardly claim that the arrival of the Arabs in Spain should be attributed to over-population in Arabia” (Cauvin 2000:200). The point is particularly important for understanding the Pacific today. In 1962, an American anthropologist said to me, “Until the Hawaiians solve their economic problems, all that culture stuff is just icing on the cake.” The Hawaiian resurgence, launched soon after, was in fact led by singers, dancers, and religious leaders.

Unfortunately, “culture” in the hands of structuralists can be just as coercive as “function”. Baré rejects simple ideas of “mythic thinking” (e.g., p. 146)—the mythic quantum in native thinking so often being measured by its difference from our own. As a historian, he recognises the Europeans’ own preconceptions (“Take us to your King”) and cultural shortcomings. After listing a number of British objects and practices happily adopted by the Tahitians, Baré writes (p. 188): “… mais la cuisine anglaise subira, de la part des Ma’ohi, la même injustice que celle qu’une partie importante des peuples du monde lui réserve.” Baré has a strong feeling for historical contingency and individual personality (pp. 255f.): “L’événement est irréductible à ces dispositifs: seul un concept aussi peu sociologique ou scientifique que l’ambition d’un homme peut expliquer le départ de ce processus en ses lieux et temps…”

Consequently, Baré cannot accept for Tahiti Sahlin’s positivist description of the post-contact situation in Hawai‘i: “les chefs sont aux Européens comme le peuple est aux chefs” (p. 156). Which chiefs? Which Europeans? What evidence? Baré’s positions resonate with Fernand Braudel’s conclusion to La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II:

Mais le “structuralisme” d’un historien n’a rien à voir avec le problématique qui tourmente, sous le même nom, les autres sciences de l’homme. Il ne le dirige pas vers l’abstraction mathématique des rapports qui s’expriment en fonctions. Mais vers les sources mêmes de la vie, dans ce qu’elle a de plus concret, de plus quotidien, de plus indestructible, de plus anonymement humain.

Baré and other scholars of the European tradition can help us find “la commune nature” (p. 31) that is the only possible basis of historical and cultural understanding.

NOTES
1. Language change is centrally important but largely unstudied. Repeated anecdotes are misleading because of foreign ignorance of the relevant native language. For example, Samoans have been ridiculed for calling airplanes va’a ilele. Lele means ‘flying’; the joke lies in the mistaken gloss for va’a: ‘canoe’. In fact, va’a has the more general meaning ‘vessel’. Similarly, Hawaiians’ supposed quaint misunderstanding of Western boats, “islands with trees growing on them,” is based on false glosses: moku can mean ‘island’, but also any section, and thus a boat—moku ahi was the term used later for ‘steamships’; uhu can mean ‘grow’, but also ‘rise’; and masts were indeed tree trunks. In the course of time, natives can go along with the joke, as some Samoans did with me, although they knew better.
REFERENCES


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