

In *Making History: Pukapukan and Anthropological Constructions of Knowledge*, Robert Borofsky draws on his nearly four years of fieldwork among the Pukapukans to explore how both Pukapukans and anthropologists acquire and validate knowledge in order to construct history. He is concerned primarily with addressing the problem of the revival of the *Akatawa*. The *Akatawa* is a division of the people of Pukapuka into two groups, each possessing certain land access rights to reserves belonging to one division or the other. Borofsky notes that this practice was revised in 1976, shortly before his arrival. The Pukapukans whom he interviewed all indicated, although sometimes in contradictory or incomplete ways, that the *Akatawa* was a traditional Pukapukan practice. Borofsky notes, however, that during the previous century five other professional anthropologists had studied Pukapukans, several with a specific interest in social organization, and had not recorded any mention of the *Akatawa*. The dilemma that Borofsky seeks to resolve is why this traditional form of social organization was not recorded, or why the Pukapukans insist that it is indeed a traditional practice. Borofsky further situates this problem of the *Akatawa* in a series of revivals of social organization that took place on Pukapuka during the mid-1970s.

What the 'Council of Important People' revived in 1975, in other words, was something that clearly had existed in the past, but the modern revival differed from the traditional patrilineal organization in an important respect. As just noted, competitions were formerly based on localized patrilineal groupings (*yoolonga*), not on designated burial sites (*po*)... Only the *po*, as a burial category, operates with any force today. Localized groupings are now based on cognatic kinship and village residence (138).

Building on the work of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, Borofsky argues that the tradition of *Akatawa* was invented, but not *ex nihilo*. In studying how Pukapukans acquire and validate knowledge, Borofsky defends knowledge in the sense that pragmatists, such as William James, use it. Knowledge is contingent, fallible and based on its usefulness.

The cultural constructs should not be mistaken for 'reality' in a correspondence sense of truth, for a set of objective facts that all can perceive and agree on. The ambiguities, manipulations, and deceptions surrounding property claims make it doubtful that individuals fully grasp all the complexities involved – even for land they themselves claim. But what the constructs do, and do quite well in my opinion, is

provide Pukapukans with guidelines for action. They offer explanations. They give present-day claims an aura of legitimacy, a sense of fairness. And they provide room for manipulation, for people to adjust social ideologies to the precarious balances that must be maintained between people and resources on a small coral atoll (32-33).

Borofsky proceeds to explain how the work of his predecessor anthropologists was excellent fieldwork, but like his own research, biased. He draws on Foucault to argue that “research occurs within an intellectual context and, certainly in the case of anthropology, this context affects the production of its scholarly literature” (59). Despite the way in which the discourse in which one conducts research affects the results, Borofsky does not see the discourse as overdetermining the outcome. He does, however, observe how two ethnographers in the 1930s reached conclusions other than those they had drawn in their unpublished notes in order to be consistent with their overall interpretive scheme. This represents the primary fault of anthropologists: by recording and interpreting a given culture, the anthropologist places emphasis on the static, unified nature, while downplaying the diversity.

Borofsky then explores the ways in which Pukapukans learn. Through numerous interviews, many presented as transcripts in the text, he concludes that “Pukapukan concerns with status and status rivalry involve two interacting principles. One focuses on hierarchy, dependency, and deference toward superiors. The other emphasizes autonomy and equality with one’s peers” (77). This affects the way in which Pukapukans can ask questions, fearing that to do so is injurious to their status. Thus “knowledge in Pukapuka is often acquired in the context of some activity. It is embedded in some purpose; it is situationally relevant” (78). The result is that

Pukapukans generally have a pragmatic orientation toward knowledge. They are interested in the application of knowledge to specific ends – to resolving problems faced in particular contexts, with particular audiences. To go beyond this pragmatic orientation, to a more correspondent sense of truth, clearly poses difficulties. Even if we assume that there is a single, correct answer to a problem, which well might not be the case, it is not immediately obvious how an individual might discover it (104).

The need to learn through experience was used as justification of the first revival of a social organization, the matrilineal *wua*: “Rather than being told in words about the matrimoieties, [the

younger generation] experienced them in operation. They learned through observation and participation” (135).

Borofsky indicates that Pukapukans not only learn in the context of meaningful action, but through numerous examples posits that “social harmony often implicitly suggests validity...truth resides in the consensus of the community” (114). That is not to say that when consensus is reached that all members of the community are placated. Rather, it delimits what can be accepted as public knowledge. So while “diversity is a significant element in the organization of cultural knowledge,” (122) “ridicule and challenges put limits on what constitutes publicly acceptable knowledge” (123). Pukapukans are, to use James’ words, hemmed in by a variety of factors, including past knowledge and shared knowledge, as to what may be contested and what is regarded as fixed. This type of pragmatic knowledge is not concerned with what actually happened, but “people remember experiences from the past in light of what seems plausible to them today” (118). This is how Borofsky is able to see the invention of the *Akatawa* social organization, namely, a situation in which the *Akatawa* was called into being and people began to remember occasions and genesis myths in which the population of the island had been divided in two. Given that the *Akatawa* provided favorable results for most, if not all, of the Pukapukans, it became expedient to accept it as traditional.

The myriad explanations of the actual time when *Akatawa* had last taken place on Pukapuka can be understood in light of the interpretive and inductive logic that accompanies a pragmatic epistemology. “In relying on their own opinions, Pukapukans often extrapolate (as noted) from a limited corpus of data, about which they possess some knowledge, to a far broader corpus of data, about which they lack information” (119). The result is that “people creatively synthesize materials in formulating their accounts of the past” (125). Borofsky, along with other theorists

such as Lord, do not see a contradiction between invention and preservation of a tradition. In fact, “the picture that emerges is not really one of conflict between preserver of tradition and creative artist; it is rather one of the preservation of tradition by the constant re-creation of it” (125).

Citing Sahlins, Borofsky makes a claim that seems consonant with that of Bourdieu: “The reproduction of a structure [can become] its transformation” (142). The very act of carrying out or embodying a traditional action can transform it. So, as with Bourdieu, it is paradoxically through the reproduction of social structures that mutations can occur. “Thus Pukapukan traditions, in being preserved, are being altered. But in being altered, they are also being preserved. The past is being made meaningful to those upholding it in the present. Perhaps Pukapukans and anthropologists preserve a past that never was, but they preserve it in a way that is meaningful to present-day audiences” (144). Anthropologists, Borofsky notes, play a role in this. One of Borofsky’s informants credited one of the earlier anthropologists with the idea of reviving social forms. By translating cultural practices, a *habitus* if you will, from the everyday embodied medium to that of text, the practices are transformed:

The traditional knowledge that is being preserved is also being altered. By recording traditions in a book, we, as outside anthropologists, are helping to make the knowledge less fluid and diverse that it in fact is. By encouraging public competitions and displays, we are helping to alter the informal patterns of education. In assisting in the preservation of Pukapukan traditional knowledge, we are helping to transform it into a more static, uniform body of data. But if there is irony in the fact that, in preserving traditional knowledge, both Pukapukans and anthropologists are altering it, there is greater irony in another fact. Pukapukans and anthropologists often succeed to a certain degree in their preservation efforts. Both preserve important aspects of traditional Pukapukan knowledge – in spite of the alterations they make in it (144).

In comparing how Pukapukans and anthropologists formulate notions of history, Borofsky notes, “Though there may be differences between Polynesians and Westerners, for both of us contextual considerations shape the way we present knowledge to others” (127). Like contemporary anthropologists, “the contexts within which Pukapukans acquire knowledge help

to shape this knowledge” (130). Both have an interest in preserving the past, which requires a formulation of *a* past. This past is contested and dynamic. This past is seen as traditional, yet there is no one moment that may be identified as the Golden Age of Pukapukan culture.

“Traditional knowledge must continually adjust to changing circumstances, must continually adapt, so as not to die out (or become buried away in some archive). What is at stake is a pragmatic rather than correspondent sense of truth – meaningfulness to the living rather than precise accuracy to the past” (145). By reviving traditions, Pukapukans are infusing them anew with meaning, allowing the traditions to remain useful for Pukapukan society. Whether or not a historical precedent for *Akatawa*, as it was used 1976-1980, ever existed is not of concern.

“What Petelo and Molingi provided, in answering [Borofsky’s] questions, was probably less a set of remembered facts than an explanatory form for validating knowledge. It was a style of explanation – a typification of the facts in which a ‘particular set of events could be narratively ordered and meaningfully understood’” (151).