

From Symbolic Structures to Cultural Transformation: A Critical Re-reading of Marshall Sahlins's Anthropological Foundations in Intercultural Communication

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Review Article

Abstract

Background and Aim: Marshall Sahlins, through a novel perspective, has established a new conceptual foundation for anthropology. The central question of the article is: What are Sahlins's anthropological foundations in intercultural communication, and how has he employed these foundations to reinterpret culture and intercultural relations?

Data and Method: The research, employing an interpretive and critical-analytical methodology, examines Sahlins's key concepts through primary sources and his own writings.

Findings: Sahlins's intellectual achievement rests on three pillars: culture as a "symbolic system" that generates its own particular worldview, the "structure of the conjuncture" that explains how unforeseen events are absorbed and reinterpreted within the semantic frameworks of the host culture, and "cultural relativism" with the argument that each culture possesses its own specific rationality. Sahlins's defense of relativism is also grounded in "multiple cultural rationalities," not in the denial of any common standard.

Conclusion: Sahlins's framework provides a tool for understanding the interpretive activity of culture and intercultural encounters, but the intense focus on the autonomy of symbolic systems has two limitations: the difficulty of transcultural ethical critique, and the paradoxical risk of its use to justify ethnocentric or nationalist ideologies.

Keywords: Marshall Sahlins, Intercultural Communication, Cultural Relativism, Structure of the Conjuncture, Indigenized Modernity.

Key Message: Culture, as a symbolic system, is not passive before global forces; rather, it reinterprets reality according to its internal logic. This framework illuminates how societies, when confronted with unprecedented events, maintain a dynamic equilibrium between reproducing the prior symbolic order and articulating a new one.

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Introduction

Anthropology occupies a unique position among the human sciences; it is a discipline that is at once deceptively simple and inherently complex. While its subject of study—human beings and their lived experiences—can be observed directly and empirically, the complexity of human nature and culture renders any knowledge derived from it equally intricate (Geertz, 1973). Thus, delving into this field requires not only methodical rigor and patience, but also sustained intellectual effort to navigate its theoretical subtleties.

As a universal endeavor, anthropology is confined by neither geographic nor cultural boundaries; wherever human societies exist, discipline finds a platform for inquiry and expression. However, depending on the intellectual backgrounds of its researchers, human nature is approached from various, and at times sharply conflicting, perspectives. Re-examining the foundations of these diverse anthropological models is therefore essential, as it illuminates the root causes of such divergent theoretical trajectories and helps clarify how human behavior and cultural systems are conceptualized across traditions.

Within the Western intellectual tradition, Marshall Sahlins stands out as one of the most prominent figures to critically reflect upon the nature of humanity and culture. As a pivotal figure in American anthropology and an influential mentor to generations of scholars, Sahlins sought to reconstruct groundwork of the discipline. Rather than remaining at the level of abstract generalities, he proposed new theoretical foundations, vigorously defended them, and critically engaged with the reductionist premises of competing Western traditions. In doing so, Sahlins extended his concepts to concrete human problems, offering a fresh vision for understanding human agency and historical transformation.

Building upon this rich theoretical landscape, the present article investigates a central question: What are the anthropological foundations of Marshall Sahlins in the context of intercultural communication, and how does he employ these foundations to reinterpret culture and intercultural relations? Through a critical-analytical reading of his seminal works, this study aims to articulate Sahlins's distinct vision of humanity and demonstrate its broader implications for understanding cultural continuity, systemic change, and intercultural engagement.

Literature Review and Theoretical Considerations

Marshall Sahlins's anthropological contributions, by offering a novel framework for understanding the interplay among structure, culture, and history, have had a remarkable

impact on the social sciences, particularly within anthropology and communication studies. In seminal works such as *Stone Age Economics* (1972), *Culture and Practical Reason* (1976), and *Islands of History* (1985), Sahlins articulated foundational concepts such as "structure and event," "cultural logic," "mythopraxis," and "indigenous historiography"—each of which has a high analytical capacity for explaining intercultural interactions (Sahlins, 1972, 1976, 1985). Nevertheless, within international literature, the direct and systematic application of these anthropological foundations to the analysis of intercultural communication—especially within non-Western contexts—remains surprisingly underexplored. Previous studies have either referred to some of Sahlins's concepts sporadically or analyzed his works through analytical lenses unrelated to intercultural communication.

The secondary literature that critically examines Sahlins's own intellectual trajectory and its implications is rarely incorporated into intercultural communication research. A key resource in this regard is *Culture in Practice: Selected Essays* (Sahlins, 2000a), which collects his academic and political writings from the 1960s through the 1990s and functions less as a mere compilation than as an "intellectual autobiography." The volume documents Sahlins's movement from an evolutionary materialist in the tradition of Leslie White and Elman Service—through articles such as "The Original Affluent Society" (1972) that challenged materialist assumptions about unlimited needs—to his "conversion" to French structuralism under Lévi-Strauss, or, more accurately, his absorption of "the critical, semiotic, and structural points of view into his own approach" (Sahlins, 2000a). As one authoritative review of the collection observes, Sahlins "has made a journey through the dominant theories of the past half century, enriching and combining ideas in a highly individual way" (Bock, 2001, p. 228). Part Three of the book, *"Culture in Practice"* contains essays such as "Individual Experience and Cultural Order" (1982) and "The Return of the Event, Again" (1991), which directly address the relationship between structure and event—the very core of the framework employed in the present article (Sahlins, 2000b).

Yet the collection and its critical reception also expose unresolved tensions in Sahlins's work. Cook's (1974) critical review of *Stone Age Economics*—which he labeled "structural substantivism"—had already argued that Sahlins's book, while "original and provocative," "lacks the theoretical scope and scholarly judiciousness" of rival works and was unlikely to revolutionize the field as Godelier's work had done (Cook, 1974, pp. 355–379). Friedman (1987), reviewing *Islands of History*, raised fundamental questions about the capacity of Sahlins's framework to account for historical transformation rather than merely structural reproduction. Sahlins responded in "Deserted Islands of History: A Reply to Jonathan

Friedman" (Sahlins, 1988), but the debate over the limits of agency versus structural constraint remains open.

A second and more directly relevant strand of critique concerns the "rationality debate." Obeyesekere (1992), in *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook*, argued that Sahlins's insistence that eighteenth-century Hawaiians regarded Cook as the god Lono perpetuated a European myth of the "irrational native" and served colonial narratives about non-Western societies. He contended that Hawaiians possessed a universal "practical rationality" and were unlikely to mistake a flesh-and-blood human for a god. Sahlins (1995), in *How "Natives" Think*, replied that Obeyesekere's appeal to universal rationality effectively turned Hawaiians into "new Europeans," erasing their cultural specificity and indigenous rationality (Sahlins, 1995). Yoshida's (2014) systematic examination of this debate highlights a crucial point: both Sahlins and Obeyesekere ignore the possibility of "degrees of rationality." Sahlins, on the one hand, reduces rationality to distinct and incommensurable "cultural rationalities," Obeyesekere, on the other, collapses it into a universal Western standard. Yoshida demonstrates that acknowledging degrees of rationality, without denying cultural differences, makes cross-cultural comparison and mutual critique possible. This critique is vital for the present article because it demonstrates that Sahlins's framework, if applied without correction, reduces intercultural communication to a confrontation between closed and incompatible cultural wholes. Michalski (2026), in his critical reading of the later Sahlins, formulates the same tension as an opposition between a "descriptive concept of immanence" and a "diagnostic interpretation" of cosmological orders, showing that Sahlins's framework for understanding "enchanted" politics still requires conceptual revision.

In the Iranian academic context, this research gap is even more pronounced. A systematic search in Persian scientific databases (Noormags, Magiran, Elmnet, and so on) up to 2025 yielded no comprehensive study—whether article, thesis, or research project—specifically devoted to Sahlins's anthropological thought, either independently or in relation to intercultural communication. While substantial research has been conducted within Iranian scholarship on cultural anthropology and intercultural communication, none has drawn upon Sahlins's theoretical framework. For example, the *Journal of Social Continuity and Change* has published empirical studies addressing the dynamics of cultural encounters and the re-creation of interactions; for instance, Navah and Khoshkalam's (2025) study on the re-creation of ethnic interactions among the Lak tribe during COVID-19, and research on the lived experiences of Iranian immigrants in Germany and their challenges in interacting with the host culture (2026), highlight the significance of this field in Iranian social studies. The absence is not merely bibliographic: no existing study has systematically asked how Sahlins's

tripartite architecture—symbolic-structural, historical, and anthropological—can function as an integrated analytical lens for intercultural communication, nor has any study examined the normative limits of his cultural relativism from the standpoint of cross-cultural critique.

The theoretical framework of this study comprises three interconnected dimensions: (1) symbolic and structural anthropology, emphasizing the primacy of symbolic and mythological systems in shaping cultural understanding; (2) historical anthropology, highlighting the dialectic between structure and event and the agency of actors within historical processes; and (3) anthropological critique, facilitating a critical re-examination of the relationship between culture in traditional and modern societies. This tripartite framework is applied through a critical perspective, incorporating insights from scholars who critique the classical anthropological tradition (Clifford, 1988), as well as from the critical reception of Sahlins's own work outlined above.

The contribution of this study, relative to existing scholarship on Marshall Sahlins and intercultural communication, is threefold. **First**, it moves beyond exegetical summaries or purely internal critiques of Sahlins by operationalizing his three anthropological registers into an integrated analytical lens specifically designed for intercultural communication—a task that neither the international secondary literature (such as *Culture in Practice* or *Culture, Relevance, and the Event*) nor Iranian scholarship has previously undertaken. **Second**, drawing on Yoshida's (2014) critique of the Sahlins–Obeyesekere debate, it introduces the notion of *degrees of rationality* as a corrective to Sahlins's binary treatment of "incommensurable rationalities." By conceptualizing the contrast between Western and non-Western thought along a continuum rather than as a stark opposition, this study retains Sahlins's sensitivity to cultural specificity while overcoming the pitfall of culturalist closure identified by critics such as Friedman (1987). **Third**, it brings Sahlins's concept of *indigenized modernity* into direct conversation with the problem of *nationalism*, revealing that a strict cultural relativism lacks internal conceptual resources for critiquing ethnocentric or nationalist appropriations of "indigenous" frameworks—a normative limitation that any robust intercultural ethics must confront. In sum, rather than merely applying Sahlins's theories, this study critically reconstructs his framework to provide a nuanced analytical model alongside an explicit evaluation of its normative boundaries.

Methods and Data

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and critical-analytical methodology. This approach was selected because understanding and evaluating Marshall Sahlins's anthropological foundations requires deep textual engagement, conceptual interpretation,

and a critical evaluation of their applicability to intercultural contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). To achieve these objectives, the research designed and implemented in three main steps:

Step 1: Textual Extraction of Core Components: In this step, employing directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), Sahlins's seminal works—including the aforementioned books and relevant articles—were thoroughly reviewed. Meaning units pertaining to his anthropological foundations (e.g., definitions of culture, the dialectic between structure and agency, the function of myth, and indigenous historiography, etc.) were extracted, coded, and categorized. The primary sources include:

- Sahlins, M. (1972). *Stone Age Economics*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Sahlins, M. (1976). *Culture and Practical Reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sahlins, M. (1985). *Islands of History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Selected journal articles by Sahlins published in peer-reviewed international journals.

Step 2: Conceptual Categorization and Formulation of the Anthropological Framework: The components extracted in Step 1 were organized and synthesized using inductive categorization techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) based on their conceptual affinities. They were organized into three thematic dimensions: symbolic-structural anthropology, historical anthropology, and anthropology. These categories and their sub-dimensions were subsequently articulated within an integrative conceptual framework.

Step 3: Critical Evaluation from an Intercultural Communication Perspective: In this phase, each component of the extracted framework was critically evaluated regarding its analytical utility for understanding intercultural communication phenomena. Drawing on critical analysis method (Fairclough, 2013), the study identified both the analytical strengths and theoretical limitations of Sahlins's concepts. To ground this critique, illustrative examples of cross-cultural interactions derived from established intercultural communication literature were examined.

Findings

This section presents the findings derived from the analysis of Sahlins's works across four main axes. First, it examines the foundations of his structural anthropology and the dialectical relationship between structure and event. Second, it elaborates on culture as a symbolic

structure and the role of language in shaping conceptual schemas. Third, it delineates Sahlins's analysis of Captain Cook's arrival in Hawaii and the concept of the "structure of the conjuncture" as a mechanism of structural transformation. Finally, it critically explores the notion of "degrees of rationality" and the risk of cultural relativism slipping into nationalism and indigenized modernity.

1. Sahlins's Structural Anthropology

Although Sahlins adopts a hermeneutical approach, his early work was heavily influenced by Marxist historical materialism—despite his rejection of the Marxist label (Kuper, 1999, pp. 159–164). As his ideas developed, Sahlins engaged with French structuralism, particularly Ferdinand de Saussure. This distinguishes Sahlins from other interpretivists who lacked ties to the French intellectual tradition, with the exception of Charles Taylor, who was also influenced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Sahlins derived his concept of "structure" from Saussure, asserting a dialectical relationship between structure and historical events. For Sahlins, structure acts as a conceptual blueprint for perceiving and categorizing the external world. However, unlike classical French structuralists who viewed structures as historically static, Sahlins argues that structures transform historically through human action or as a result of events. In this sense, he seeks a middle ground between historical materialism and structuralism, advocating a dynamic interplay between history and culture.

This orientation is evident in *Culture and History: The Transformation of the Structure of Meaning* (Sahlins, 2004), where he applies his framework to Polynesian societies (Sahlins, 1978). He extensively analyzes how 18th-century Hawaiians understood an unprecedented event: the arrival of Captain James Cook in 1779. Hawaiians employed their cultural framework to make sense of Europeans, identifying Cook with their deity *Lono*. By fitting Cook into their conceptual schema, they exposed fundamental differences between Hawaiian and European criteria of rationality.

However, Gananath Obeyesekere (1992) strongly criticizes Sahlins. In *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook*, Obeyesekere argues that Sahlins perpetuates European myth-making by depicting Hawaiians as irrational. Obeyesekere asserts that 18th-century Hawaiians possessed a universal "practical rationality" shared across humanity and would not mistake a flesh-and-blood human for a god, viewing Cook as a chief. In response, Sahlins (1995), in *How "Natives" Think*, accuses Obeyesekere of imposing a Western lens that reduces Hawaiians to "new Europeans." Sahlins insists that different cultures embody distinct, locally grounded

rationalities. He argues that by attributing a universal form of practical rationality to the 18th-century Hawaiians, Obeyesekere undermines the cultural specificity and rationality of the Hawaiian worldview.

2. Culture as a Symbolic Structure

Because the concept of culture was often regarded as polyphonic or inherently ambiguous, mid-20th-century British social anthropologists frequently avoided employing it, preferring "social structure" in their analyses. Although Sahlins recognized the term's fluidity and vagueness (Popper, 1989, p. 327), he remained committed to it, arguing that culture cannot be eliminated from anthropology as a scientific discipline. As Sahlins articulates:

"Culture is the organization of human experience and action by means of symbolic tools. Persons, relations, and the materialities of human existence are positioned (culturalized) in terms of their meaningful values." (Sahlins, 2000b, p. 158)

For Sahlins, these meaningful values cannot be determined merely by biological or physical characteristics. Drawing from symbolic anthropology, he views culture as a symbolic system of human action that cannot be reduced to nature. This framework clearly demarcates physical phenomena from symbolic conventions. However, this distinction does not imply that Sahlins embraces cultural determinism or fatalism—despite being criticized by some scholars in this regard (Friedman, 1987).

For instance, Sahlins critiques Alfred Kroeber and Leslie White for viewing culture as a supra-biological entity that fully controls human behavior. In contrast, Sahlins considers culture as a lived social reality, emphasizing the social and symbolic dimensions of human action (Sahlins, 1982, 1999a). This stance refutes the charge of cultural determinism. Indeed, compared to Clifford Geertz, who paid less serious attention to historical transformation, Sahlins incorporates cultural change into his theoretical framework.

Understanding cultural change necessitates recognizing a dialectical relationship between culture and history—or structure and action. Although Sahlins rejects Kroeber and White's determinism, he accepts White's premise that human existence is symbolically constructed and culturally ordered (Sahlins, 1999, p. 400). For Sahlins, while humans operate within a symbolic system, and although people are not entirely free from this system, it does not dictate human action in a rigid or fatalistic manner; rather, culture serves as a guide:

“Human action is conceived as a forward movement governed by symbolic design, which immediately organizes practical experiences, conventional behavior, and the emergent relations between the two (experience and convention)” (Sahlins, 1976, p. 15).

To explain his view of culture as a symbolic system, Sahlins draws on Saussurean structuralism. According to Harris and Taylor (1997, p. 210), Saussure distinguishes between *langue* (language) and *parole* (speech), defining language as a semiotic system grounded in the relational interplay of signs and our understanding of reality. Because thought is inextricably bound to language, linguistic structures are conventional, as it is not based on any inherent match between signs and external objects. For example, the English word "cheese" carries a meaning entirely distinct from its Persian homophone "*chiz*" (meaning "thing").

Furthermore, Saussure maintained that linguistic signs cannot exist independently of cultural context. Harris and Taylor (1997, p. 213) thus argue that Saussurean structuralism is holist, encompassing two primary dimensions: 1) Social dimensions, 2) Systemic, overarching dimensions. While Saussure acknowledged that linguistic systems evolve over time—distinguishing between synchronic and diachronic analysis. From a synchronic perspective, a linguistic system is analyzed based on the relations among signs at a given moment. From a diachronic perspective, attention shifts to how one linguistic system transforms into another. He prioritized synchronic linguistics to diachronic, arguing that the latter is unintelligible without understanding the former (Harris & Taylor, 1997, p. 215).

Sahlins adapts these Saussurean principles to cultural anthropology. Like Saussure, he views linguistic structures as conventional and non-essential, and he considers culture a symbolic system. In this view, individuals across different cultures possess distinct conceptual schemes that guide how they perceive the world and categorize reality. Sahlins (1982, p. 32) explains:

“Perception, in any given moment, is an act of recognition and categorization of the perceived into pre-existing social classes. Thus, symbolic awareness—human consciousness—emerges from categorized actions concerning the subordination of individual perceptions to social meanings.”

In symbolic awareness, a perceived object is subsumed under a socially imposed conceptual category, relating to a concept much as an instance belongs to a class. Human experience is thus culturally shaped; categories do not emerge directly from the external world but arise from systemic relations among other categories. While such formulations have led critics to accuse Sahlins of idealism, he explicitly rejects this charge. Instead, he adopts a skeptical view

regarding the possibility of objective access to external reality, aligning in this respect with the later Wittgenstein. For Sahlins, a specific conceptual scheme or "language game" constitutes the referential possibilities for members of a particular community. Even if such a scheme is structured around distinctive principles, these distinctions are never the only possible ones in relation to the objects they signify.

Sahlins does not deny the existence of social reality, but he maintains that the world cannot be comprehended outside culturally and socially rooted conceptual schemes (Sahlins, 1982, p. 40). As he contends:

"Empirical realities are allocated to social meanings as exemplars of universal social classes. These meanings may be known or unknown in advance. Moreover, as selective valuations of experience, such meanings can only imperfectly point to objective features—features which, by definition, are infinitely describable." (Sahlins, 1988, p. 445).

Following Saussure—and the later Wittgenstein—Sahlins maintains that cultural schemas are grounded in language, which serves as a classificatory tool defining how we perceive the world. In this sense, his position can be interpreted as a form of "linguistic Kantianism" (distinguishing phenomena from things-in-themselves), asserting that historical phenomena cannot be predicted solely from their objective properties or intrinsic qualities (Sahlins, 1988, p. 47). However, Sahlins diverges significantly from Kant by accepting the multiplicity and simultaneity of competing conceptual frameworks (Sahlins, 1995, p. 14). According to Sahlins, different cultures operate through distinct modes of understanding and categorizing reality, leading to his foundational principle: "Different cultures, different historical qualities, different rationalities" (Sahlins, 1985, 1995).

Although Sahlins views conceptual frameworks as defining how humans comprehend and categorize external reality, this position does not imply that he embraces cultural determinism—a charge leveled against him by Jonathan Friedman. While Sahlins draws upon Saussure's holistic ideas, it is crucial to distinguish between holism and determinism. The main distinction lies in Sahlins's emphasis on the historical mutability of conceptual frameworks. Far from being static, these frameworks transform through what Sahlins calls the "**structure of the conjuncture**"—the idea that relationships formed in practical action can differ from the original intentions of the actors. The specific context and emergent dynamics of an action can alter pre-existing values, as new situations rarely conform perfectly to established interpretive categories.

Although action contains its own dynamics (the structure of conjuncture), it also meaningfully defines the actors and objects involved in that dynamic. When culturally taken-for-granted values are contradicted in practice, those values undergo re-evaluation through prevailing norms. Action that involves unprecedented relations between agents or objects thus constitutes a "re-objectification" of categories (Sahlins, 1981, p. 35).

Sahlins advances this idea as a critique of "stereotypical reproduction"—a typical feature of structuralist thinking, which he critiques for its ahistorical nature. Structuralism assumes that individuals in a culture uncritically employ a fixed conceptual scheme. Consequently, people are seen as merely following what their framework dictates, they perceive and how they should behave. Such a view, Sahlins argues, is indeed cultural determinism—but he does not subscribe to it. Instead, Sahlins investigates what occurs when existing conceptual categories encounter unprecedented events. His concept of the structure of conjuncture, demonstrates how such encounters compel the revaluation and transformation of cultural schemas. To illustrate this dynamic, the following section examines the Hawaiian understanding of God and the death of Captain Cook.

3. Sahlins's Analysis of the Emergence of Captain Cook

According to Sahlins, the eighteenth-century Hawaiians regarded Captain James Cook as the god *Lono*. When Cook's ships arrived at the Hawaiian Islands on January 17, 1779, the natives believed that their god had returned, as his arrival coincided with the annual *Makahiki* festival, which marked the return of *Lono*. In this light, the Hawaiians employed their cultural conceptual schema to interpret Cook's arrival and interacted with him on that basis.

At the end of the *Makahiki* festival, on February 3, Captain Cook and his two ships departed from Hawaii. However, due to technical issues with his ships, they were forced to return on February 11—after the festival had concluded. The Hawaiians were displeased with Cook's return, as Sahlins notes they believed *Lono* was not supposed to reappear before the next year's festival. Sahlins explains that a political-mythic crisis ensued due to *Lono*'s inexplicable reappearance, creating tensions between locals and sailors that ultimately led to Cook's death on February 14, 1779.

It is difficult to determine precisely when the Hawaiians began to alter their conceptual understanding of Cook; they may have suspected his divinity even before he first departed. His unexpected return may have confirmed their suspicion that he was, in fact, a human being. While some might assume that the Hawaiians simply applied fixed cultural classifications to Cook's arrival, Sahlins contends that this is not the case. Rather, he argues that applying broad

classificatory schemas to an unprecedented event necessarily subjects those schemas to re-evaluation and transformation (Sahlins, 1985, pp. 127–128). For Sahlins, this was not a matter of two separate mentalities at distinct moments, but rather an internal revision of the original conceptual framework—a process he calls the “structure of the conjuncture.” He explains:

“Hawaiian culture changed precisely because, in accepting the world into its classifications, it allowed for the possibility that the classifications themselves might be re-evaluated in practice. In other words, they were not culturally rigid in rethinking their classifications. Thus, Lono no longer held the same meaning previously attributed to him in relation to Captain Cook, nor were the ideas of foreign lands, taboos, or other gods preserved as they had been before. As a specific category underwent re-evaluation through historical reference, so too had the relationships between categories to be changed, and the structure transformed.” (Sahlins, 1985, p. 31)

When the meaning of a category is expanded to encompass a new context, that category is no longer the same as it was before. Once a category changes, the entire structure changes. Clearly, Sahlins is influenced by Saussurean holism, which maintains that a sign cannot be transferred in isolation because a linguistic system functions as an integrated whole.

Referring to Thomas Kuhn’s work further clarifies Sahlins’s claim. Kuhn similarly adopted a holistic perspective, arguing that mastering a paradigm (such as Newtonian mechanics) requires learning its concepts and laws as an integrated whole. Kuhn explains that scientists work within a paradigm by solving puzzles; however, as anomalies—or unsolved puzzles—accumulate, confidence in the existing paradigm begins to erode. To resolve the resulting crisis, a new paradigm emerges through a paradigm shift, which Kuhn likens to a Gestalt switch. After such a shift, scientists begin to see the world from a new perspective, because the paradigm determines how reality is perceived. Thus, when a paradigm shifts, it alters the perception of the world itself (Kuhn, 1996).

Despite the differences in context, certain similarities exist between Kuhn and Sahlins. For instance, Sahlins’s term “structure of the conjuncture” parallels Kuhn’s concept of “crisis.” Sahlins rarely references Kuhn directly, so making any comparison remains speculative and exploratory. Nevertheless, Captain Cook’s appearance can be understood as an anomaly within the Hawaiian conceptual framework, leading to a paradigm-like shift in their cultural schema.

However, key differences separate Kuhn and Sahlins. According to Kuhn, paradigm shifts do not occur frequently or rapidly. In contrast, for Sahlins, conceptual change occurs whenever a

concept or category is extended to a new context, meaning that applying a concept or category, implicitly carries the risk of its transformation. Sahlins thus introduces a degree of conceptual instability that contrasts with the relative stability assumed by both Kuhn and Saussure.

Sahlins might claim that structures are always in flux while maintaining independent existence. However, it is unlikely that he would argue that different structures merge or that entirely new ones are created *ex nihilo*. These limitations in Sahlins's framework will be addressed later.

Sahlins further argues that Western history has forged an epistemological unification between the empirical and the instrumental, together defining what is considered "'rational" and "real". In Western thought, rationality is empirical and instrumental (based on empirical knowledge, objectivity, and utility). In contrast, non-Western modes of thought are often deemed irrational or unreal. Sahlins stresses, however, that Western rationality is not the sole avenue to attain objectivity, as indigenous peoples operate through distinct conceptions of experience and reality. He states:

"As a commonsense approach to how others experience the world, objectivity is doubly problematic. First, because it structures experience epistemologically in ways that are culturally relative and not the only possible ones. Second, because it commits itself to describing the world of things-in-themselves in universal terms—a method that is itself Western." (Sahlins, 1995, p. 155)

These two problems are closely related to Sahlins's concept of culture as a symbolic structure, underscoring his embrace of plural cultural schemas in perceiving and classifying the world.

Accordingly, Sahlins explicitly advocates cultural relativism, arguing that applying Western notions of rationality to other cultures is a grave mistake. To understand other cultures, anthropologists must first grasp their particular forms of rationality. In his remarks on Borofsky, Sahlins writes:

"Cultural relativism, for anthropology, does not mean the vulgar moral relativism criticized¹ by defenders of Western virtues and their claims to

¹ In this quote, Sahlins states that his cultural relativism does not mean vulgar moral relativism. However, he does not explain why or how his view is free from moral relativism. This is not merely a denial of scientific justification; his claim also involves the application of moral relativism. The problem is that if he attributes

universal practical reason. It does not mean that the values of every people are as good, equal to, or better than those of others. Relativism is simply a prescription: that to make the actions and ideals of others intelligible, they must be placed in their own context, to be understood by reference to the specific values and cultural relationships in which they operate—not judged by our personal moral and intellectual classifications. Relativism is the temporary suspension of our individual judgments to determine the status of the actions in question within the historical-cultural order that made them possible.” (cited in Obeyesekere, 1997, p. 274)

Thus, actions must be interpreted within their own cultural framework through a temporary suspension of judgment, as those actions carry specific meanings within their historical and cultural contexts.

In this holistic orientation, Sahlins’s view closely resembles Peter Winch’s philosophy. To answer how anthropologists can understand the modes of thought of people in other cultures, Sahlins points to a shared human capacity for symbolic communication. Anthropologists can reconstruct the meaningfulness of foreign customs through the interpretive reproduction of meanings demonstrated in action. Through this shared ability to understand, analyze, and recompose meaning, foreign customs become intelligible as logical outcomes of anthropological understanding (cited in Obeyesekere, 1997, p. 275).

However, this interpretive flexibility seems to weaken Sahlins’s position and render his defense of anthropology incompatible with his cultural relativism. How can Sahlins defend his scientific anthropology against indigenous anthropologies? Arguably, Sahlins’s cultural relativism does not negate the possibility of modernity and indigenous science; rather, it welcomes it.

4. Degrees of Rationality and the Risk of Nationalism

Sahlins presents the example of the Japanese Empire, where until the end of World War II, the Japanese regarded their emperor as a living god—an idea rooted in myths portraying the emperor as the divine descendant of the gods. Remarkably, even before World War II, Japan

different rational criteria to different conceptual schemas, how can he make cross-cultural judgments? If we follow Sahlins’s view, judgment is made on the basis of a specific conceptual schema that has its own criterion of rationality. That is, although we initially suspend judgment, judgment will ultimately be realized on the basis of a conceptual schema. In this case, why and how does Sahlins prioritize his own conceptual schema framework over others, and how can we escape ethnocentrism? Such a problem also applies to the argument in favor of scientific anthropology, because we claim that this discipline is scientific, but we prove this scientificity with our own subjective conceptual framework and schema.

was considered a major power in international politics (Sahlins, 1995, pp. 134–136). Thus, there is no contradiction in stating that eighteenth- and early twentieth-century Japanese—who were highly educated and rational in many respects—still accepted the myth of the emperor's divinity. Given that even Japanese intellectuals held this belief, we cannot dismiss the possibility that eighteenth-century Hawaiians similarly regarded Captain Cook as a god.

Sahlins advocates multiple rationalities and cultural relativism. However, one could argue that no group is entirely rational or entirely irrational. The difference between Westerners and Hawaiian natives lies not in the presence or absence of rationality, but in its degrees. In specific contexts, either group may act more or less rationally. Viewed this way, rationality operates along a spectrum. Sahlins, however, overlooks this possibility and is thus compelled to ascribe a distinct kind of rationality to the Hawaiians.

If we accept the idea of degrees of rationality, the strict distinction between Westerners and non-Westerners dissolves. While Sahlins's use of the Japanese Empire example effectively critiques Obeyesekere, it leaves an unresolved vulnerability in his own framework: the danger of nationalism. As noted, the belief in the emperor's divinity was deeply rooted in the myth of the emperor as the divine representative of the Japanese people.

Understanding this requires examining Japan's modernization. From the late nineteenth century, Japan's primary national objective was to catch up with Western development. Consequently, Japan adopted Western science, technology, and education, gradually replacing traditional beliefs and ways of life with Western ones. In doing so, Japanese intellectuals coined new terminology to engage with Western philosophy. A major consequence of these modernization efforts was the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905—the first instance of a non-European nation defeating a European power. This victory demonstrated that the Japanese were highly rational and capable of effectively assimilating Western modernization. Yet, they continued to regard their emperor as a god.

In some of his writings, Sahlins introduces the concept of “indigenized modernity”—a phenomenon in which indigenous peoples adopt global goods and relationships without sacrificing their own conceptual schemas (Sahlins, 1999, p. 150). He cites the Inuit and the people of New Guinea as prime examples.

Sahlins might thus claim that the Japanese used their own conceptual framework to absorb and localize Western modernization. While encountering the West structurally transformed their schema, they preserved its foundational core. Unable to abandon a culture nurtured over generations, this process ultimately culminated in the intense nationalism of the 1940s.

This brings us to the possibility—raised by philosophers of the Kyoto School—that World War II was partly an outcome of this modernization narrative. However, the indigenization of modernity in Japan was not devoid of critical engagement with the West. Under the banner of "overcoming modernity," several Kyoto School thinkers criticized Western imperialism and colonialism, appealing instead to traditional Buddhist and Shinto values. Yet even this critical stance carried political implications, as invoking traditional values could easily fuel nationalism. For instance, State Shinto—a national religion in Japan—conceived the emperor as a living deity. Consequently, certain Kyoto School philosophers justified Japanese nationalism or advocated a form of meta-nationalism under slogans such as "the eight corners of the world under one roof," placing the emperor at the center (Collins, 1998, pp. 369–370).

Of course, we are not arguing that the indigenization of modernity inevitably leads to nationalism, or that Kyoto School philosophy is inherently nationalist. However, any indigenous society encountering the West must deliberate on how to navigate both traditional and Western beliefs. Non-Westerners should neither accept Western values uncritically nor reject them out of pure sentiment or political resistance; rather, they must engage them critically.

In this regard, it is surprising that Sahlins does not address the relationship between indigenized modernity and the potential for nationalism. Had Sahlins examined culture through the lens of Romanticism—particularly German Romanticism, which opposed Enlightenment universalism—he might have recognized its inherent nationalist undercurrents (Sahlins, 2000a, pp. 162–165). Yet, even when discussing the Japanese Empire as an instance of indigenized modernity, he overlooks this risk entirely. One reason for this omission may be Sahlins's neglect of degrees of rationality and spectrum-based thinking. The Japanese, though highly rational in many respects, believed their emperor was a living god—a belief that rationalized their nationalism without sufficient critical examination. Even if Sahlins were to acknowledge this problem, it is unclear what solution he could offer given his commitment to cultural relativism.

He argues that conceptual schemas change structurally and historically, yet it remains unclear whether they can merge or generate entirely new frameworks. Although schemas evolve, Sahlins implies they maintain independent existence. A critical problem arises here: we value other cultures not only for prompting self-reflection but also for enabling mutual critique. If we accept cultural relativism, how can a society critique its own excesses—such as Japanese nationalism? Under strict relativism, only the Japanese could critique their nationalism, using their own localized standards. Indeed, some Japanese individuals did

criticize their country's nationalism and questioned Japan's ability to defeat militarily and economically superior powers like the U.S. and Britain. However, these rational voices were often silenced, imprisoned, or executed. Internal critique was virtually impossible because Japan lacked the rational political institutions needed for open public debate on extreme nationalism or the emperor's divinity.

Sahlins insists that cultural relativism is not equivalent to the vulgar moral relativism criticized by defenders of Western virtues (cited in Obeyesekere, 1997, p. 274). Yet this reveals a key limitation in his position: he provides no argument for how he avoids vulgar moral relativism, offering only a bare assertion. Making any transcultural judgment would imply smuggling in universal criteria. Thus, Sahlins faces a dilemma: he must either defend diverse rationalities or reject vulgar moral relativism, as holding both creates an internal inconsistency.

As for how Sahlins defends Western scientific anthropology, one must remember that anthropology is historically a Western discipline. Sahlins implicitly operates within a Western scientific schema—even if he views it as evolving. If he emphasizes cultural relativism, he logically must endorse indigenous anthropologies as well.

In this context, Jonathan Friedman offers an important reflection: writing about other cultures and histories is essentially a discourse through which we express our own culture. This culturalist framing forces us to consider whether our accounts of others' heroic histories belong to our own narrative rather than theirs (Friedman, 1987, p. 82). Similarly, Jarvie (1998, p. 570) questions the cultural character of the scientific apparatus anthropology employs—asking whether it is inherently Western.

Sahlins draws on Saussurean structuralism, applying it—with modifications—to anthropology. In his view, conceptual schemas define how we perceive and categorize the world, and these schemas are unique to each culture. While they evolve historically over time, their culturally distinct rationalities lead Sahlins to argue in favor of cultural relativism. Based on this framework, Sahlins interprets Captain Cook's arrival, arguing that the Hawaiians regarded Cook as the god *Lono*. In Sahlins's account, the islanders applied their existing schema to comprehend his return, though applying it to an unprecedented event ultimately required structural adjustment.

For Sahlins, Western rationality is culturally contingent, making its application to non-Western societies inappropriate. Yet this highlights a key flaw in his framework: his failure to treat rationality as a spectrum. As Japanese nationalism illustrates, individuals who are highly

rational in certain domains can act irrationally in others, rendering rigid dichotomies between Westerners and non-Westerners unnecessary.

Sahlins's view presents another problem: by embracing cultural relativism, he limits the scope for cross-cultural critique. Yet both self-critique and mutual critique are essential for refining perspectives. Furthermore, Sahlins fails to clarify how he can defend Western scientific anthropology over indigenous anthropologies. If he upholds cultural relativism, he cannot privilege Western anthropology, given its own historical contingency. Thus, Sahlins faces a dilemma: either defend Western scientific anthropology or uphold the legitimacy of diverse rationalities and cultural relativism. Defending the former is fundamentally incompatible with advocating the latter. If Sahlins merely intended to describe cultural diversity or offer relativism as a methodological tool, no contradiction would arise. However, because he explicitly claims that different cultures possess distinct rationalities, he must provide a more comprehensive explanation—otherwise, his position remains unconvincing.

Conclusion and Discussion

According to Sahlins, the Hawaiian people employed their own conceptual frameworks to comprehend their encounter with Europeans. Consequently, in the case of Captain Cook, the Hawaiians identified him as the god *Lono*. Essentially, the Hawaiians sought to reconcile Cook with their preexisting mental models. While these frameworks are not immutable, their application in this context revealed significant differences between Hawaiian and European conceptual schemas, illustrating how two distinct cultures operate under different cognitive structures.

Sahlins argues that these divergent conceptual schemas are grounded in differing standards of rationality. Moreover, the very assertion that Hawaiians regarded Cook as a god reflects the persistence and reinforcement of European mythmaking—an interpretive stance that aligns with colonial narratives about non-Western societies. Sahlins maintains that we understand and categorize the world through internal conceptual schemas shaped by our cultural and social histories. However, he does not explore the possibility of conceptual frameworks being permeable or mutually influential.

In other words, individuals within different cultures reside within distinct conceptual domains and are thus bound to perceive the world differently. Sahlins never denies the existence of social reality, but he maintains that we cannot access or understand the world independently of conceptual frameworks rooted in our cultural and social backgrounds. His cultural schemas are fundamentally language-based—that is, language operates as a

classificatory tool that defines how we perceive reality. Because Sahlins accepts the plurality and coexistence of multiple conceptual schemas, he maintains that different cultures employ distinct ways of interpreting and classifying the world. His well-known slogan encapsulates this view: "Different cultures, different historical qualities, and different rationalities."

For Sahlins, these schemas are not static. To elaborate on this point, he introduces the concept of the "structure of the conjuncture"—a notion referring to relationships that arise in practical action and may diverge from the intentional motivations of individual actors. By "structure of the conjuncture," Sahlins means that conceptual frameworks encounter unanticipated events and are thus subject to re-evaluation. This perspective sets him apart from structuralist determinism and cultural essentialism. Given that different cultures possess distinct conceptual schemas and corresponding rationalities, Sahlins ultimately defends cultural relativism.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with Ethical Guidelines

This study is a theoretical and critical analysis based on library research and a review of Marshall Sahlins's works. The ethical considerations in this research include the following: ensuring the authenticity and integrity of the text, verifying the authenticity and accurate citation of all primary and secondary sources used, maintaining complete accuracy in referencing, avoiding any form of plagiarism, and adhering to the principles of research ethics. Ultimately, the authors fully accept ethical responsibility for the content, analyses, and findings presented in this article.

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Authors' Contributions

Dawood Rahimi Sojasi: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation (primary textual analysis of Sahlins's seminal works), Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. Mojtaba Akhondi: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation (analysis of secondary literature and the Sahlins–Obeyesekere debate), Validation, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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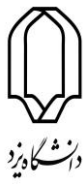
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از ساختارهای نمادین تا دگردیسی فرهنگی: بازخوانی انتقادی بنیان‌های انسان‌شناختی مارشال سالینز در ارتباطات میان فرهنگی

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مقاله مروری

چکیده

زمینه و هدف: مارشال سالینز با دیدگاهی نوین، بنیان مفهومی تازه‌ای برای انسان‌شناسی ایجاد کرده است. پرسش محوری مقاله آن است که مبانی انسان‌شناختی سالینز در ارتباطات بین فرهنگی چیست و او چگونه از این مبانی برای بازتفسیر فرهنگ و روابط بین فرهنگی بهره برده است.

روش و داده‌ها: پژوهش با روش‌شناسی تفسیری و انتقادی-تحلیلی، مفاهیم کلیدی سالینز را از طریق منابع دست‌اول و نوشته‌های خود او بررسی می‌کند.

یافته‌ها: دستاورد فکری سالینز بر سه پایه استوار است: فرهنگ به مثابه «سامانه نمادین» که جهان‌نگاری خاص خود را تولید می‌کند، «ساختار موقعیت» که توضیح می‌دهد چگونه رویدادهای پیش‌بینی نشده در چهارچوب‌های معنایی فرهنگ میزبان جذب و بازتفسیر می‌شوند و «نسبی‌گرایی فرهنگی» با این استدلال که هر فرهنگ عقلانیت خاص خود را دارد. دفاع سالینز از نسبی‌گرایی نیز بر «عقلانیت‌های فرهنگی چندگانه» استوار است، نه انکار هر معیار مشترک.

بحث و نتیجه‌گیری: چارچوب سالینز ابزاری برای درک فعالیت تفسیری فرهنگ و مواجهه‌های بین فرهنگی فراهم می‌کند، اما تمرکز شدید بر خودمختاری نظام‌های نمادین دو محدودیت دارد: دشواری نقد اخلاقی فرافرهنگی، و خطر استفاده متناقض‌نما برای توجیه ایدئولوژی‌های قوم‌محور یا ملی‌گرایانه.

واژگان کلیدی: مارشال سالینز، ارتباطات بین فرهنگی، نسبی‌گرایی فرهنگی، ساختار موقعیت، مدرنیته بومی‌شده.

پیام اصلی: فرهنگ به عنوان نظام نمادین در برابر نیروهای جهانی متغیر نیست، بلکه بر پایه منطق درونی خود واقعیت را بازتفسیر می‌کند. این چارچوب نشان می‌دهد که جوامع در مواجهه با حوادث خاص، چگونه میان بازتولید نظم نمادین پیشین و خلق نظمی نو، تعادلی پویا برقرار می‌سازند.

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