Chapter 1

June 1722, the Dutch ‘discovery’ by Jacob Roggeveen

1. Introduction

During the 17th and 18th centuries, various Dutch expeditions ventured into the Pacific, searching for new routes to the East Indies and new lands where gold or spices would be abundant. Small islands did not present any interest other than as sites for brief restocking of provisions such as wood, water, or fruit. When indigenous people were encountered, they became a target for the guns of the visitors the moment that their gestures could be interpreted as a sign of hostility. The Spaniards had opened fire on indigenous people in the 16th and 17th centuries. After Mendaña’s massacre in the Marquesas in 1595, news of these dreadful creatures—the Spaniards—must have spread through Eastern Polynesia. And after LeMaire and Schouten’s musket firing on canoes in north Tonga in 1616, the awful news of this deed must likewise have spread through Western Polynesia. We know that the memory of such extraordinary encounters can last many generations. As we shall see in chapter 11, the Tongans explained to Cook in the 1770s that some ‘Papālagi’ had already come to their shores: undoubtedly this was Tasman in 1643 (and/or LeMaire even earlier).

The last of the Dutch expeditions conformed perfectly to the rule of brutality when it ‘discovered’ Rapa Nui in 1722 on Easter Day, hence naming it ‘Easter Island’, and fired on the Pascuans. It also happened to be the first expedition to sight the Samoan Islands, in June 1722. The expedition was under the command of Jacob Roggeveen, ‘President’, and consisted of three ships, the Arendt (Captain Jan Koster), on which Roggeveen sailed; the Thienhoven (Captain Cornelis Bouman); and the Africaansche Galley (Captain Roelof Rosendaal). This third ship was wrecked on the reef of one of the Tuamotu atolls in May 1722. Roggeveen’s journal has been made more accessible through Andrew Sharp’s translation from the Dutch (Sharp ed. 1970: for Samoa, see pp. 150-6). Sharp also mentions the relevant entries of Bouman’s log. In the 18th century, the story of the expedition was widely known only through the sometimes imaginary account of a young officer, Carl Friedrich Behrens, whose narrative was published in German and in French (Behrens 1739). Concerning the discovery of Easter Island, Behrens’s narrative contains crucial supplementary pieces of information, but he has nearly nothing to say regarding contact with the Samoans.
2. The narrative

On 13 June 1722, the Dutch expedition arrived at the easternmost part of the Samoan archipelago, sighted the uninhabited Rose Island atoll (this name given much later by a merchant ship) and, apparently, was able to land and get ‘so many greens that the whole crew ate to their satisfaction four times and the sick [suffering from scurvy] six times’. From there they saw the island of Ta’ū and, on 14 June, came near the coast. ‘Two to three canoes’ came by and ‘had some coconuts, which we exchanged for 5 to 6 large rusty nails’.

The comment on the ‘exchange’, quite common in the narratives of early voyagers, must not lead us to think that this kind of exchange was already an established practice for the Polynesians. When the description is more precise, we see that, in every case, the Polynesians spontaneously gave an offering of food, probably a first-fruits type of offering: coconut, fish, fowl, fruits, a plantain branch. The trade-minded Europeans, who could not understand that this was a form of sacrificial offering, interpreted it immediately in terms of barter and gave in return some glass or iron trinkets. The same misunderstanding occurred with the sexual presentation of young girls in Tahiti in 1767-1769 and rapidly transformed a religious act into one of sexual commerce.

The Dutch noted the dense forest covering the slopes, and the ‘painting’ that covered the ‘Indians […] from the thighs downward to the legs’ (Sharp ed. 1970: 151). It was of course the tattoo, on the same part of the body as we know it from the 19th century and today. We can now see, in retrospect, that for nearly three hundred years, the part of the body that is tattooed has remained the same, and has remained quite specific (pelvis, thighs, and knees, with nothing on the face or the chest) in comparison with the practices of other Polynesian peoples.

The Samoans wore only ‘a girdle round the waist to which a lot of long broad leaves or rushes, or of another plant, was fastened’. This garment has been described by all later observers as the usual garment for fishing, plantation work, and all other kinds of work activities (Te Rangi Hiroa 1930). The formal and indoor garment was barkcloth (siapo), but this dissolved if soaked in water.

No anchorage could be found at Ta’ū and the Dutch steered towards the two other islands of the Manu’a group, Ofu and Olosega. A party came near the shore on the sloop:

The Upper Mate of the said ship Thienhoven rowed with the sloop towards the shore or the beach in order to take soundings, and having come there he says that the King sitting in a canoe, and having by him a young woman of 18 to 19 years, whose neck was encircled by a string of oblong blue beads, asked the Mate by signs if he had any such, pointing to the said string, whereupon the Mate, by nodding his head, said yes, but indicated by his hand towards the ship that the beads were
there, and he would bring them to the land. That this was the King he concluded from this, because when the King came near the sloop a thousand and more Indians were on the beach, armed with spears, bow and arrows, and he gave them a directing sign with his hand that they should go away, which was obeyed in a blink of an eye, all retreating into the trees (Sharp ed. 1970: 152).

Bouman adds:

The old man gave my Mate when he saw that he intended to go to the ship as a present a branch with 6 half-grown coconuts and they parted as good friends, and the inhabitants came also to the side of our ships in their canoes, having only some coconuts and 4 to 5 flying fish, which I bartered from them together with a small mat for 4 to 5 strings of glass beads. I tried to get some of them into the ship, but they would not come aboard (ibid.: note 2).

Bouman recognises that the coconuts from the Chief were a ‘gift’ but again treats the coconuts handed over by the other Samoans in terms of the bartering logic.

Behrens’s narrative contains only one additional remark. Many canoes surrounded the canoe of the man ‘who seemed to be the Master of the country’; beside this man, ‘a young woman was sitting; her body was all white’.¹ We know that at that time, as well as throughout the following centuries, European travellers keenly noted in the first instance the colour of the locals’ skin, then their size, and finally other physical aspects (a physiology that also included judgements on beauty and on the ‘character’ or ‘temperament’ of the ‘nation’ encountered: ‘honesty’, ‘treachery’, etc.) (Tcherkézoff n.d.). Behrens also notes that most of the indigenous people appeared to him to have fair skin, but some were more ‘red’ or ‘brown’. Fifty years later, the French (Bougainville and Lapérouse), as well as the English on other islands (Cook in Tahiti, etc.), would also note these various ‘colours’ of the skin and make hypotheses about it.

No anchorage was found and the Dutch moved on. In the next two days they sighted Tutuila in the distance and, later on, Upolu. Although many were eager to visit those islands, the President was not inclined to do so. He was worried by the fact that the season of the southeast trade winds, on which they needed to rely in sailing to the west of ‘New Guinea’, would soon end and give way to the dreaded westerlies. The search for an anchorage could take four days or more and he did not want to allow for such a delay. Thus, the Dutch left the Samoan waters without any further contact than these two brief encounters at sea, off Ta’ū and Ofu-Olosega.

¹ See the French text in Behrens (1739), and the original German text (from Behrens 1737) in the quotation by Krämer (1903: vol. 2, Part 1; translated into English in Krämer 1995: II: 3–4).
Although the facts are few, the lesson from that very first contact is rich. The only woman in sight was an adolescent sitting beside the main Chief, on a canoe that came to meet the visitors. We do not know if she made any specific gestures or if she remained motionless. She could have been a young wife of the Chief. But, if we are to judge from similar situations in the 19th and 20th centuries, a young female accompanying a chief (ali'i pai'a) who comes to greet visitors or enemies was a daughter or sister (real or classificatory), one of those girls referred to in the later literature as ‘village maiden: taupou’ (more precisely, in Samoan honorific vocabulary, a tausala, augafa’apae, saotama’ita’i). This person bore a specific title which represented a sacred complement to the Chief’s title. More precisely, the ‘dignity’ (mamalu) of a High Chief’s title was always made of a ‘mutual agreement’ (feaga’iga) in the sense that it was constituted by two aspects: the tamatane name—the Chief’s name—and the tamafafine name—the sacred female’s name. The two sides representing these two aspects were respectively the progeny of the sons and the progeny of the daughters of the founding ancestors, and they cooperated in well-defined ways to maintain the ‘dignity’ of the title.2

If Behrens’s noting of the particularly fair colour of the girl’s skin is valid, it would be a further proof that this girl was a tausala, as those high-ranking official virgins were kept very secluded inside their houses. Later ethnography has noted this pan-Polynesian practice as it applied to high-ranking females. The thinking behind it was for the girls to avoid sunburn and remain as white as possible (and even enhance their whiteness by getting very fat and having the skin distended). The practice had both a cosmological and a social reference. Cosmologically, the light of the sun was valued over darkness as the sign of life (ao versus po). Socially, avoidance of the sun was a sign of superior rank. The sun’s rays blind other people, obliging them to keep their eyes down and bow their heads. Dark skin denotes someone who is working outside and thus is exposed to the sunlight (fishing, tilling the garden, preparing the food), while fair skin denotes the person of chiefly rank who stays inside and is served food by others.3

3 James Cook was probably the first to note this distinction, after his first stay in Tahiti in 1769. He mentions, in his first Voyage (Beaglehole ed. 1955: 123), that the ‘various kinds’ of skin colour of the Tahitians are due to their relative degrees of exposure to the sun: ‘They are of various colours, those of the inferior sort who are obliged to be much exposed to the sun and air are of a very dark brown, the Superiors again who spend most of their time in their Houses or under shelter are not browner than people who are born or reside long in the West Indies may some of the women are almost as fair as Europeans.’ Sahlins (1985a: chapter 1; 1995) provides several examples from the Hawaiian ethnographic literature about the particular relationship between the high chiefs and the sun. In chapter 9 we shall return to the question of ‘light’, as the physical principle of Polynesian social hierarchy, versus darkness, which makes everyone alike (this is why there is no hierarchy inside the dark world of spirits and
4. Blue beads, ‘life-giving’ gifts and the mythology of the Papālagi

The Dutch noticed that the girl beside the Chief had her ‘neck encircled by a string of oblong blue beads’ and that the Chief pointed at it while looking at his visitors. Augustin Krämer, the famous German ethnographer who had sojourned in Samoa in the 1890s, mentions the early contacts in the introduction to Volume 2 of his Samoa Inseln and comments on the blue beads noticed by the Dutch (Kramer [1902] 1995: II: 6). He considers that they were not a native object, because, in the 19th century, the only local object of that colour (fragments of nautilus shell) was used as the centrepiece of the ceremonial head-dress but not in necklaces. He therefore assumes that the beads were of European origin and that the Samoans had obtained them from the Tongans, who themselves received them from the Dutch expeditions of 1616 and 1643.

We shall see several confirmations of this later on. When he came to Samoa in 1791, Captain Edwards observed: ‘we saw a few of the natives with blue, mulberry and other coloured beads about their necks, and we understood that they got them from Cook at Tongataboo’ (Thompson ed. 1915: 56). Lapérouse noted in 1787 that the Samoans were very fond of these beads, as did Otto von Kotzebue in 1824, while Lafond de Lurcy added in 1831 that a necklace of these beads could be used for saving one’s life in a war when given by a prisoner to the victorious side. Indeed, the Samoan practice of togiola (literally ‘life[-giving] gift/payment’) is well affirmed in legends, and still operates today: it involves the giving of fine mats in a special presentation called ifoga, where the person guilty of murder, manslaughter or a severe breach of taboo and who is asking for mercy, entirely covers himself with one of these mats (Tcherkézoff 2002).

Thus, it seems that the Samoans, even before seeing the Europeans, the Papālagi, for the first time, had already elaborated a representation of the power inhering in some of the Papālagi objects. Actually the whole story of the life-giving value of these beads could have originated even before Cook’s arrival in Tonga. In 1616, LeMaire and Schouten fired on a canoe in north Tonga (near Samoa), killing several people. The canoe was apparently carrying twenty people or so, including women and children. The Dutch opened fire because the canoe did not stop its course in front of their ship after a first warning shot had been fired into the air. But immediately after they had done so, they manoeuvred so as to get near to the survivors and, feeling pity, as well as curious to make contact, they helped those who were in the water to get back on board their large canoe which was still afloat. They even attended to the wounds of those who had been shot, and they gave them some trinkets of the kind that European goblins). This socio-cosmological theme, clearly attested to in the 18th and 19th centuries, seems to extend further back if we are to judge from mythological comparisons from throughout Polynesia (Tcherkézoff 2003b: 36-54).
expeditions had carried with them, since the early voyages, to be used in bartering with the ‘Indians’ for food (Schouten 1619: 100-4).

I would favour one hypothesis about how the trinkets were received and understood by the Tongans: the survivors could only have concluded that these objects, given to them after initial gunfire that killed some of their companions, were a ‘life-giving’ sign handed over by these superior creatures. After LeMaire and Schouten in 1616, Tasman, in 1643, had also distributed such trinkets (Moyle ed. 1984: 78, note 133). LeMaire handed over linen, beads, nails, hatchets while Tasman also distributed satin, knives, copper wire, looking glasses, an earthenware dish, a drinking glass, tailored clothing such as a hat, shirt, and so on (Ferdon 1987: 281-5). These Dutch visits introduced the glass beads and opened up an era lasting in Samoa until the 1830s in which sacred value attached to these beads, after which new European objects—fabrics, tools, salted beef, bread—were to replace beads in local ceremonial exchanges. It is also probable that it was actually during these early encounters with the Dutch that the word ‘Papālagi’ was coined and then rapidly diffused through the Tonga-Fiji-Samoa region (see chapter 11).

Thus, the first contact with the Samoans in 1722 was not, from the Samoan point of view, entirely a first contact. Samoans already knew something about the Papālagi. They probably knew about the muskets: how else might we interpret the King’s order to his people to retreat behind the trees while he approached the Dutch? They certainly knew about the blue beads: how else might we explain why they immediately asked the Dutch for more of them?

The people from whom they could have heard stories about the Papālagi are the nearby Tongan islanders. It is not surprising that an event in Tonga would have been recounted all around the region. The pioneer missionary John Williams noted in 1830 the Samoan use of the word ‘Papālagi’, but we know that the expression had been in circulation in Western Polynesia since at least the time of Tasman’s passage through Tongan waters in 1643, as the Tongans repeated it to Captain Cook when the British arrived (see chapter 11). We know from various legends describing wars and marriages that the relations between East-Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa have been constant for a very long time (Kaepppler 1978, 1999, n.d.). In 1777, a member of Cook’s third voyage noted while in Tonga the nature of the Tongan relationship with Samoa: Samoans were established in Tonga and vice versa.4 We shall see that, in 1824, Kotzebue noted how Samoans spoke Tongan to him; that, in 1831, Lafond de Lurcy himself saw the big canoes of the Tongans coming regularly to Samoa. Between 1840 and 1842, the beachcomber John Jackson, who stayed at Ta’ū and later at various Fijian islands,

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4 While in Tonga he heard Samoan words such as ‘Tamaloa, A chief man [tamaloa], Tamae’ty, A Chief Woman [tama’ita’i], Solle A common man [sole]’ (see Beaglehole 1967: II: 957-8, Anderson’s journal).
noted how frequent were the visits and the war alliances between Fijians, Tongans, Samoans, and Uveans.\(^5\)

\(^5\) See Jackson (1853: 413, 423, 453, 461, 465): a Tongan chief visiting Taveuni; a Fijian chief preparing a local war replies to another Fijian chief asking for help that he will come with his men, among whom there are Tongans, Samoans, and Uveans; in Rewa, Jackson witnessed the arrival of a Tongan boat from Lifuka in the Ha’apai (and with the Tongans he saw an African-American man who worked as a cook on a European boat and who deserted while in Tonga).