Chapter 2

May 1768, the French ‘discovery’ by Louis-Antoine de Bougainville

1. The narrative

The French round-the-world expedition led by Louis-Antoine de Bougainville was among the first to open up a new era of voyaging in which discoveries were sought as much for mercantile profit as for the new scientific study of the ‘System of Nature’. This was the second opportunity that Samoans had to see European ships, apart from the supposedly few Samoans who had earlier seen European ships sailing in Tongan and Fijian waters. Nevertheless Bougainville, when he sighted the Samoan islands, thought he was the first European to do so. Behrens’s account, the only one published from the Dutch expedition of 1722, did not give any precise nautical information for the location of the islands that he described in his text. Because Bougainville admired the dexterity of the Samoans as they manoeuvred their canoes around the French ships, he called his island discovery l’Archipel des Navigateurs, the ‘Archipelago of the Navigators’.

The sources for the following discussion are Bougainville’s voyage narrative published in 1771 (an immediate success, and published in English as early as 1772), Bougainville’s journal, and also the various journals written by his companions, including the naturalist Philibert Commerson, the young volunteer Felix Fesche and Prince Nicolas de Siegen-Nassau.

Bougainville’s journal indicates that on 3 May 1768, when he reached the Manu’a group (the three easterly islands of the Samoan archipelago: Ta’ū, Ofu, and Olosega) there were already a number of canoes visible in the distance. On 4 May Bougainville passed between Ta’ū on one side and Ofu-Olosega on the other when a canoe with five men on board approached his ship. The men held up coconuts and ‘roots’. Bougainville noted that the Tahitian navigator he took with him (after departing from Tahiti in mid-April), a man who could find his way among islands several days’ distance from Tahiti, found nothing he recognised in this archipelago and could not make himself understood by the Samoans. The Samoan canoe would not come near the ship, and when

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1 Where I cite the French text below the English the quotations are my translations from the French original (Bougainville 1771). Where only the English is cited, the quotations are taken from Johann Reinhold Forster’s very accurate translation, published in 1772 (Bougainville 1772b; the pages relating to Samoa are pp. 278-84).

2 See Bougainville (1771, 1772b); Taillemite (ed. 1977: I: 334-35, for Bougainville’s journal; II: 98, 250-1, 333, 400, 476, for the journals written by Fesche, Vivès, Caro and Commerson).
Bougainville had one of his small boats put to sea, with the intention of getting nearer to it, the Samoans turned back. Fesche’s journal records that, after this first attempt, Bougainville hotly pursued the Samoan canoe with one of his ships. The Samoans began to shout and jumped into the sea with their coconuts and fowls, also releasing a bird that they had with them (we know from later ethnographic accounts that chiefs were always accompanied by tame birds when they were journeying: the birds were the messengers of the gods).

2. Three hundred years of a tradition: the design of Samoan tattooing

Fesche went on to note the ‘painting’ (tattooing) on the thighs. All the journals from this expedition confirm that the painting—sometimes said to be of a ‘blue’ colour, sometimes ‘black’—began at the waist (depuis la ceinture de la culotte) and went half way down the thighs (jusqu’à moitié de la cuisse); Commerson, the most accurate observer, because he was the naturalist of the expedition, adds that the painting could also be seen on the navel and lines running along the ribs ‘as flames’ (ils ont de plus au nombris [sic] et sur les costes des espèces de flammes). All of this corresponds precisely to the pattern observed minutely in the second half of the 19th century by German ethnographers and reproduced in great detail in their books.

One might think that the lack of change in the Samoan pattern of tattooing through the 20th century and up until this very day (see precise descriptions of year 2000 patterns in Galliot 2001), is due to the fact that the pattern had been recorded in books at the end of the 19th century and, since then, has been reproduced in exactly the same way. But we can see that there had, in fact, been internal continuity, in the absence of models recorded externally, at least from the early 18th century (as noted in the Dutch accounts) till the end of the 19th century. Thus the continuity of patterns over 150 years was demonstrated before the patterns were reproduced and published by the ethnographers at the beginning of the 20th century.

3. An ‘ugly woman’

Shortly afterwards, more canoes came, ‘8 or 10’, each large enough to carry eight people. After some time, they came near the ship. In one of them Bougainville noted the presence of an ‘old and ugly’ woman (according to his published text). But the journal says: ‘A woman who came in one of the canoes was extremely ugly’ (une femme venue dans une des pirogues était affreuse).

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3 This is a welcome example, and certainly not unique, that can be used to counter a certain post-modernist view which holds that ethnographers always tend to create an illusory permanence in the social systems and cultural styles of non-Western societies and erroneously call it ‘tradition’ when these rarely last more than a generation (see the discussion and the references in Tcherkézoff 2003b: 515-17).
She might still have been a ceremonial virgin (tausala), and not particularly ‘old’, but a woman who appeared to Bougainville quite different from the Tahitian women, hence ‘ugly’. We shall see how Tahiti was the absolute reference for beauty—in women and in ‘Nature’ in general—according to Bougainville, and how, by comparison, he described everything he encountered in Samoa in negative terms. The descriptive term ‘ugly’ could have induced Bougainville, when he revised the text for publication two years later, to add ‘old’. Besides, the hypothesis that this was all a ceremonial presentation is supported by another remark in the journal. It is said that some of the Samoans had garlands of flowers around the neck (nous leur avons vu des colliers de fleurs). Of course, in this ceremonial context, the woman could have been an elder woman of high rank, or a medium, or something similar.

4. First exchanges: iron and cloth

The Samoans did not want to board the ship, although they were invited to do so; instead, they offered their produce and crafted goods from their canoes. According to Bougainville, the gifts were yams, coconuts, fowl, a nice looking blue bird in a cage, necklaces of painted seeds (which suggests the well-known necklace of red-dyed pandanus fruits used for chiefs, as this is the only type of necklace which matches the description—others are made of shells, bones/teeth, or flowers), and pieces of turtle shell. The bird and the painted necklaces are definitely kinds of ceremonial gifts which were, and still are, never used in ordinary barter (information derived from 19th-century German sources, such as Krämer 1994-95 and my contemporary notes).

They also gave barkcloth, which Bougainville found ‘much coarser’ (literally: ‘much less nice’, beaucoup moins belles) than the ‘Tahitian cloth’, ‘dyed with ugly red, brown and black colours’—we see how easily Bougainville could use the adjective ‘ugly’. They also offered some large fishing hooks, which again Bougainville found ‘bad’, literally ‘badly made’ (mal faits); also ‘some mats, some lances’. When the Samoans failed to admire the iron tools, the French again thought that Samoa could not be equated with Tahiti:

[From the published narrative:] They didn’t want iron and preferred small pieces of red coloured cloth to the nails, knives, and earrings which have met with such success in Tahiti.

(Ils ne voulaient point de fer; ils préféraient de petits morceaux d’étoffe rouge aux clous, aux couteaux et aux pendants d’oreilles qui avaient eu un succès si decidé a Tahiti.)

[From the Journal:] Au reste ces Indiens n’ont aucune connaissance du fer et n’ont paru en faire aucun cas. Plusieurs ont examiné des couteaux proposés en échange et n’en ont pas voulu. A Cythère, la premiere demande des insulaires était aouri.
[which can be translated as] Besides, these Indians don’t have any knowledge of iron and didn’t attach any importance to it. Several of them have examined the knives that we were offering them in exchange for their goods and did not want them. [But] in Cythera [Tahiti] the first article demanded by the natives was aouri [iron].

But the Samoans very much appreciated and valued the gift of cloth. In his journal, Bougainville noted that, when the French were showing them the red material, one Samoan was even brave enough to dive from his canoe and catch a rope hanging from the ship, with the apparent intention of climbing on board; but he did not succeed as the ship was moving too fast.

The officer Caro also noted that the Samoans seemed to be ignorant of the use of nails when the French presented them with some nails in exchange for the fish they were offered. But we can ask ourselves the following question. Was it not possible that the Samoans did know about their existence (Roggeveen had given them some ‘rusty nails’), but simply did not yet see the decisive advantage of knives and nails over their iron-wood, bones, and shell tools, all of which were very efficient? The knowledge of iron in Western Polynesia dated at least from the Dutch voyages—and maybe even earlier, given the Spanish wrecks in the Tuamotu islands, if we assume that there could have been exchanges throughout Polynesia in the 16th and 17th centuries (from one island network to the next, via the Cook Islands).

But the question of cloth was different: the Samoans knew for certain about the value of European cloth from what they saw in Tonga and from the stories told by the Tongans from their own dealings with the Dutch. They knew the decisive advantage of European cloth compared to their barkcloth. The former did not dissolve when wet from the rain or from the sea. Besides, the bright red colour was attractive throughout Polynesia. Regalia like the maro ura in Tahiti or the Samoan ‘ie ula (roll of red feathers), as well as the fringes of Samoan fine mats (‘ie tōga), were made from an accumulation of red feathers. The barkcloth was most often painted with the red-brown dye extracted from the bark of the ‘o’a tree. The heavenly house of the great Samoan creator-god Tagaloa was the Red House (Fale Ula). But the red feathers, obtained from a specific parakeet species, were rare; the birds were rare in Samoa and were very difficult to catch. In Fiji these birds were more numerous. Hence the Samoans bartered for their feathers from the Fijians, through the Tongans (Kaeppler 1978, 1999, n.d.). The surgeon Vivès tells us that one of the French threw a gift of clothing into the sea, and a Samoan immediately took it, rolled it up, and swam with it to the coast (swimming on his back), although the coast was very far away. (The French

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4  The Bischoffia javanica (Te Rangi Hiroa 1930: 297). This dye was explicitly compared to the life-giving blood of the bride (Tcherkézoff 2003b: 365).
apparently did not bring with them the blue beads that were also greatly valued by Samoans).

5. The Tahitian reference

Bougainville concludes:

I do not believe that these men are so gentle as those of Tahiti: their features were more savage (Bougainville 1772b [Forster’s translation]: 280).

(Je ne crois pas ces hommes aussi doux que les Tahitiens; leur physionomie était plus sauvage.)

He adds that his Tahitian guide, who had embarked in Tahiti, predictably ‘manifested all his contempt in front of such people’ (a temoigné le plus grand mépris pour ces insulaires). We have already seen how Bougainville found the first woman he saw ‘ugly’, the barkcloth ‘much coarser’, the colours of the dyes for the barkcloth ‘ugly’, the fish hooks ‘badly made’, and how he commented with derision on the fact that Samoans did not attach any importance to iron tools.

Thus, the French immediately compared Samoa to Tahiti, where they had stayed a month earlier. It is well known that Bougainville had made of his ‘Nouvelle-Cythère’ (Tahiti) the most perfect habitat of ‘Natural Man’: he referred to the Tahitians as a people who had maintained their kindness and innocence since the time of the Creation (the Noble Savage ideal-type). This was due to his total misunderstanding of the sexual presentations of girls who had been brought to him and to his crew in Tahiti; I shall return to this when discussing Lapérouse’s narrative. From then on, steering westwards, he only found people who seemed to him to be ‘less’ of everything. He applied this judgement of inferiority to the physical appearance of the men and women, as well as to their goods (barkcloth, fish hooks) and their lack of interest in iron.

Bougainville thus inaugurated a narrative genre that would be continued by the other French captains. It was even reinforced after 1787, when the Samoans also acquired a reputation as ‘murderers’ via Lapérouse’s account.

6. Departure

The next day, 5 May, the French ships stood in front of Tutuila. Many canoes passed by ‘and the signs made by the Indians seemed to invite us to land’ (les Indiens semblaient nous inviter par leurs signes à aller à terre); but the reef barrier seemed to render it impossible and Bougainville decided to resume his course in the Pacific. In the distance he saw the eastern end of Upolu, but the fog was very dense and so he continued on his route. Thus ended this brief two-day
interlude of contacts at sea, only the second recorded contact that Samoans had yet experienced with Europeans.

Some islands in the Samoan archipelago had not been visited by the first expedition (Roggeveen’s), nor even by the French during this second contact episode: for instance, the large island of Savai’i would have to wait for Captain Edward Edwards’s expedition in 1791 to see Papālagi passing by its shores for the first time (chapter 5). But judging by early 19th-century observations, the demonstrable unity of the language throughout the archipelago observed from 1830 onwards, and the existence of a kinship system where marriage ties are widespread as each village was (and often still is) an exogamous unit, the practice of constant inter-village and inter-island visiting that lay at the heart of Samoan life in those years allows the supposition that news of any contact with the Papālagi on one island would have spread to inhabitants of the other islands within a few years if not a few months.