Chapter 3

December 1787, Lapérouse: first incursion on land

(The ‘young girls’, the origin of the Western myth and a comparative hypothesis about the Polynesian sexual presentations)

With the arrival of Jean-François de Galaup de Lapérouse we come to the first Samoan/European contact on land, and to the first of the two authors who are Williamson’s and Côté’s key witnesses for the theory of a free sex pre-marital life among Samoan girls. We saw in the Introduction how Côté found to be crucial Williamson’s statement that ‘Lapérouse tells us that girls were, before marriage, mistresses of their own favours, and their complaisance did not dishonour them’. Indeed, as regards this quotation, as for all others from Lapérouse in his volumes on Polynesia, Williamson was accurate. The question, though, is why he had noted that very passage, among dozens of pages from Lapérouse’s narrative. Lapérouse did indeed write this very sentence in his journal. It can be found in a concluding part of his narrative of his encounter with the Samoan people. But the preceding lines, omitted by Williamson (and apparently not checked by Côté), contain a surprise and lead us to a very different conclusion: young and weeping girls were forcibly dragged by adults into a chiefly house, where they were held firmly in the arms of an elder and sexually offered to the French. It seems that in Williamson’s case the Western myth of Polynesian sexuality had once again informed the selection of ideas just as it did at much the same time for Margaret Mead. Actually the myth was already at work in Lapérouse’s case: influenced by his reading of Bougainville’s chapter on ‘New Cythera’ (Tahiti), Lapérouse misinterpreted in terms of female ‘favours’ what he saw (and/or what he had been told by some of his officers) during his brief landing in Samoa.

Lapérouse had the commendable habit of sending a copy of his journal to France from his main ports of call. Thus, although he and all his expedition disappeared in 1788 in the Solomons (Vanikoro) (shipwrecked on a reef in a storm; no survivors were ever found and material traces of the expedition were not discovered until forty years later), the French Navy was in possession of the journal of the expedition, from early 1786 when Lapérouse entered the Pacific until his last call at Botany Bay in January and February 1788, thus shortly after his passage through the Samoan islands in December 1787. His journal was published with some alterations by French authorities in 1797 (edited by Général
Millet-Mureau). In 1985, a scholarly edition was published by John Dunmore of Massey University and Maurice de Brossard of the French Navy and the Académie de marine. The editors were able to go back to the original manuscript. An English translation was published by Dunmore in 1994 (volume 1) and 1995 (volume 2).1

1. Lapérouse’s conclusion about Samoan ‘customs’: the women’s behaviour

After his chapter describing daily events, Lapérouse wrote a concluding chapter describing his encounter with the Samoans. His summary of the contents, given on the first page of the chapter, says that his remarks will bear ‘on the customs and practices of these people, their crafts and the country’s products. Basis of a belief that they do not all share the same origin…’ ([Lapérouse] Dunmore ed. 1995: 415). Lapérouse speaks first of the names and position of the islands, and refers first of all to Bougainville’s comments. (We thus know that Lapérouse had carefully read the narrative of Bougainville’s circumnavigation of 1766–9). Then he summarises Roggeveen’s voyage from his reading of Behrens’s narrative through the quotations that are in ‘Président de Brosses’’s work of 1756. This was the great compilation, used by all captains of the second half of the 18th century.2 Lapérouse then proceeds to describe the physical appearance of Samoan men, ‘the tallest and most robustly built we have met’, and how they are ‘painted or tattooed in such a way that one could almost believe they are clothed’ (Dunmore ed. 1995: 419). Then he describes the women (we shall return to the passage in its entirety). His last lines about Samoan ‘women’ concern the ‘girls’ and contain the words highlighted by Côté via Williamson: Whatever navigators who preceded us might say, I am convinced that at least in the Navigators Islands girls are mistresses of their own favours before marriage, their complaisance casts no dishonour on them, and it is more likely that when they marry they are under no obligation to account for their past behaviour. But I have no doubt that they are required to show more restraint when they are married (ibid.: 420).3

Lapérouse then goes on to describe ‘crafts’, notes how the art of plaiting fine mats is prevalent in comparison with making barkcloth (called in Samoan *siapo*),

---

1 Dening (1998: 41-7) has emphasised the great achievement that these publications represent, and the contribution that they make to the researches of ethnohistorians of the Pacific.
2 In 1756, Charles de Brosses, a jurist, geographer, President of the Parliament of Dijon in Burgundy, and a reader of all prior voyagers’ accounts (in all languages), had published two large volumes that were a compilation and a study of these previous voyages in the Pacific (de Brosses 1756; Ryan 2002).
3 Quoiqu’en puissent dire les voyageurs qui nous ont précédés je suis convaincu qu’au moins dans les isles des Navigateurs les jeunes filles avant d’être mariées sont maîtresses de leurs faveurs, que leur complaisance ne les déshonore pas, il est plus vraisemblable qu’en se mariant elles n’ont aucun compte à rendre de leur conduite passée. Mais je ne doute pas quelles ne soient obligées à plus de réserve lorsqu’elles ont un mari ([Lapérouse] Dunmore and de Brossard eds, 1985: II: 477).
carefully describes the houses, then tries to characterise the language and the origin of the Samoans.

We see that his final sentence about ‘girls as mistresses of their own favours’ is presented as a sheer hypothesis: ‘Whatever navigators who preceded us might say’ (i.e., ‘even if prior navigators said nothing of the kind’; Lapérouse is referring of course to Bougainville’s and Behrens’s accounts), ‘I am convinced…’, ‘it is more likely…’, ‘I have no doubt…’. Why was he ‘convinced’? One reason is of course his reaction to certain events. We shall return to this in what follows. But there may have been a more general reason: Lapérouse assimilated the Samoans to the Tahitians and thus interpreted everything in a biased way. The assimilation followed two complementary paths. Firstly, Lapérouse reflected on the language area and noted a certain unity. Secondly, as to the women and girls, he had in mind Bougainville’s narrative recounting the numerous ‘Venuses’ seen in ‘New Cythera’.

2. Interpretation (i)—Samoa and Tahiti: ‘dialect of the same tongue’

On the following page, when Lapérouse discusses the language and the origins of the people, he says that Samoans seem to belong to the same language area as Tahitians. ‘At first’, Lapérouse says, the language of the people met on those ‘Navigators Islands’ seemed to have ‘no similarity with our vocabularies from the Society and Friendly Islands’ (Tahiti and Tonga). We remember that this was Bougainville’s impression as well. Lapérouse continues: ‘but more careful

---

4 Although his general conclusion is that Samoans ‘spend their days in idleness or engaged in tasks that have no other purpose than their clothing and their luxury’, Lapérouse admired ‘the elegant shapes of their houses… axes made of a very fine and very compact basalt shaped into adzes; and they sold us for a few glass beads wooden dishes affixed to three feet holding them up like a tripod and which seemed to be painted with the finest varnish… they make some paper-cloth (étoffe-papier) similar to that of the Society and Friendly Islands; they sold us several lengths of a single reddish-brown colour. It seems that they do not prize it very much and have little use for it, the women prefer mats (nattes) that are extremely well plaited and I saw only two or three men whom I took to be chiefs who had instead of a grass skirt a length of material (une pièce de toile) wrapped around them like a skirt, this cloth is woven with a true thread drawn no doubt from some ligneous plant, like a nettle or flax, it is made without a shuttle and the threads are woven through absolutely as with the mats, this cloth has both the suppleness and the strength of our own, is very suitable for their canoe sails and cannot be compared in respect of its advantages to the paper cloth of the other islands which they also manufacture but seem to disdain’ (Dunmore ed. 1995 : 420-1 ; Dunmore and de Brossard eds, 1985 : II : 477-8). His description of the house he was taken to during his landing of 10 December (see below) is very precise and corresponds exactly to what we know about a fale tele from 19th-century sources. The floor was made of pebbles, the Samoans ‘stretched out the finest and freshest mats on the ground’ to welcome the French. ‘I went into the best hut which presumably belonged to the chief and was extremely surprised to find a vast latticed room as well and indeed better made than any in the environs of Paris. The best architect could not have given a more elegant curve to the two ends of the ellipse ending this hut, a row of columns five feet from each other ran along the edge, these columns were only tree trunks very elaborately worked between which the Indians had placed some fine mats that could be raised or lowered with ropes like our roller-blinds and arranged with the utmost skill like fish scales, the rest of the house was covered with cononut-tree leaves’ (p. 394).
study convinced us that they speak a dialect of the same tongue.’ It confirmed, Lapérouse adds, ‘the view held by the English’ (ibid.: 421).

What was this view? Lapérouse does not expand on this, but we can easily guess. The conclusion from Cook’s first voyage (1769-71), reinforced after the second voyage (1772-75), was that there was a strong similarity of language and customs throughout the region, and this lead to the attribution of a common origin to the various people of Tahiti (and neighbouring islands), Tonga, New Zealand (Maori), the Marquesas and Rapa Nui (Easter Island). J. R. Forster, the naturalist who accompanied Cook on his second voyage, had elaborated these ideas in his report which was published in 1778.5 The very first mention of this idea in France appeared in Bougainville’s chapter on ‘Tahitian Language’ (Vocabulaire de l'île Taiti), in the concluding pages that were added to the second edition of his Voyage autour du monde (Voyage around the World).6 ‘the British have found that the language of New Zealanders (Maori) is more or less the same as the language of the Tahitians’ (Bougainville 1772a: II: 434; my translation).7 In autumn 1771, Bougainville had already received this information from the British, since Cook’s first expedition returned to London in July 1771 (Banks came to Paris to meet his fellow naturalists).8 Bougainville (1772a: ibid.) added that one can also make comparisons with the words noted by the Dutch in north Tonga (on the islands they called ‘Îles des Cocos’). He also mentioned a French linguist, de Jebelin (‘M. Court de Jebelin de l’Académie de la Rochelle’), who had just sent him a ‘mémoire’ on Tahitian language, based on the lists brought back by the French, mainly from their extensive conversations with ‘Aatorou’ on board ship while they were sailing back to Europe, and on the vocabulary lists

5 Forster’s book of 1778 has been republished in a scholarly edition (Thomas, Guest and Dettelbach eds 1996). For a detailed analysis of Forster’s theories on that topic, see Tcherkézoff (n.d.).
6 The Voyage was first published in March or April 1771 (Bougainville 1771) and reprinted in the French with additions the following year (Bougainville 1772a), while the first edition was translated into English and also published in 1772 (Bougainville 1772b).
7 Bougainville’s first edition of 1771 was probably published in March. The final manuscript was approved by the Royal Censor authorities on 15 January 1771. This decision was transmitted to the Publishing Register authorities on 27 February and registered on 2 March. The speed of this process suggests that the French were eager to have the book appear as soon as possible and leads one to think that it was printed immediately after registration. The French were clearly in a hurry as they thought that ‘Banks’ first voyage around the world’ expedition (as Cook’s first expedition was then called) would be returning soon. They knew that the expedition was supposed to observe the transit of Venus in Tahiti in 1769, on the advice of Wallis, the ‘discoverer’ of Tahiti, who came back to London just before Cook left. This first edition already included the final chapter on the Tahitian language (Bougainville 1771: 389-402). But only the second edition, in 1772, includes this final observation by Bougainville: ‘Cependant les Anglais dans leur dernier voyage ont constaté que le langage des habitants de la Nouvelle Zélande est à-peu-près le même que celui des Taitiens.’ (1772a: II: 434). Obviously, Bougainville heard about this after Cook’s return, thus after mid-July 1771. (My thanks to Marc Kurt Tabani, Curator of Ethnological Collections at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, who verified these dates, with the help of Jean-Dominique Mellot, Curator at the Bibliothèque Nationale, ‘Département de la reserve’, and consulted the first edition at a time when I only had access to the second edition at the Library of our Centre de documentation de la Maison Asie-Pacifique in Marseilles.)
8 Personal communication from Tom Ryan (June 2001).
of the British made during Cook’s first voyage. According to this mémoire, Tahitian has ‘a very strong analogy’ with the ‘Malay language’ (avec le Malais) and ‘as a consequence [we can be sure that] most of the islands of the South Seas had been peopled by immigrations which came from the East Indies’ (ibid.: 435).\footnote{Ce mémoire par lequel il me paraît prouver que la langue de Taiti a la plus grande analogie avec le Malais, & conféquemment que la plupart des îles de la mer du Sud ont été peuplées par des émigrations forties des Indes orientales.}

Bougainville had built on an earlier and very general hypothesis proposed by de Brosses in 1756 about the supposed conquest by Asians of an ‘old race’ of ‘black and frizzy-haired’ people. De Brosses himself was influenced in this by Buffon. Thirty years later, Lapérouse pursues the same theme. We can note that Lapérouse, in the 1780s, had himself approached Buffon, by then quite elderly, when Lapérouse was in Paris preparing his expedition (Dunmore 1985: 192). Thus, in December 1787 Lapérouse, as he indicates in his narrative, is immediately interested when he notices that a ‘young servant from Manilla’ who is on board ‘could understand [the Samoans] and explain to us the greater part of the islanders’ words’. He then makes the hypothesis of ‘Malay colonies’. It is known, he says, that:

all the languages of the Philippines are derived from Malay, which language more widely spread than Greek or Latin is used by the innumerable peoples who live in the South Sea in the islands of both hemispheres; I consider it proved that these various nations are merely Malay colonies which in very remote periods conquered these islands ([Lapérouse] Dunmore ed. 1995: 421).

After remarking on the unknown date of the ‘Malay’ conquerors’ arrival (but which probably occurred, he says, at a time much earlier even than ‘the so-called antiquity of the Chinese and Egyptians’), he expands into a theory of ‘two very distinct races’, for all the South Seas, thus following a tradition established by de Brosses in 1756, by Bougainville in 1772 and by Forster in 1778 (Tcherkézoff 2003a). He then applies it to the ‘Navigators Islands’:

Basis for a belief that they do not all share the same origin, and that the natives of these islands were[,] before the mixing of the two nations[,]\footnote{Motif de croire qu’ils n’ont pas tous une origine commune, et que les indigènes de ces îles étaient avant le mélange des deux nations noirs et crépus comme les habitants de la Nouvelle-Guinée et des Hébrides, la forme de leur gouvernement entretient leur férocité (Dunmore and de Brossard eds 1985: II: 471).} dark and frizzy-haired like the inhabitants of New Guinea and the Hebrides, their form of government maintains their ferocity…

I am convinced that the indigenous people of the Philippines, of Formosa, of New Guinea, New Britain, the Hebrides, the Friendly Isles &c in the southern hemisphere: and of the Carolines, the Marianas, the Sandwich Islands in the northern hemisphere were these frizzy-haired men who
still live deep in the interior of the Luzon islands and of Formosa, whom it was impossible to subjugate in New Guinea, New Britain, and the Hebrides and who, defeated in the islands further east, which were too small for them to find a refuge in the centre of the said islands, intermarried with the conquering people and gave rise to that very dark race of men whose colour retains ten shades more than the skin of those families presumably distinguished in their countries who made it a point of honour not to marry beneath them. We were particularly impressed by these two very distinct races in the Navigators Islands and do not attribute any other origin to this (ibid.: 415, 421-2).

Lapérouse is convinced that, in ancient times, Samoans were ‘like the inhabitants of New Guinea’. The violence that they were still displaying to this day (he is referring to the ‘massacre’ during the last day of the encounter, on 11 December) shows that ‘their form of government maintains their ferocity’. Nevertheless, they had been a ‘Malay colony’ for a long time, like the rest of Polynesia, following the ‘mixing of the two nations’. Therefore it was to be expected that one would find some ‘similarity’ (in language and hence in customs) between the ‘Navigators Islands’ and the ‘Society and Friendly Islands’.

3. Interpretation (ii)—they ‘offered their favours’: extension of the myth from Bougainville to Lapérouse

We thus have good reason to think that, when Lapérouse interpreted what he thought he had observed about Samoan ‘girls’ and ‘women’, the Tahitian reference was uppermost in his mind. This may explain why he immediately interpreted some gestures in terms of female ‘favours’: the ‘girls’ would be ‘mistresses of their own favours’ and the ‘women’ themselves were ‘offering their favours’. Twenty lines earlier, before the conclusion about the girls being ‘mistresses of their own favours’, Lapérouse begins to describe the women, right after his description of the men which I have already quoted: The women also are very tall and before their springtime has ended they have lost the shapes and that gentle expression, which Nature has never withheld from these

---

11 I have quoted James Cook, who had noted in Tahiti, in 1769, that the ‘various kinds’ of skin colour are due to the relative exposure to the sun, according to the type of work done. Implicitly, this social class model proposed an alternative explanation to the tradition, dating from the first Spanish observations and generalised in the mid-18th century by de Brosses, that theorised a multiracial peopling of the Polynesian islands by successive groups of ‘light’- and ‘dark’-skinned people. But Cook was not an intellectual like Forster, or even Bougainville or Lapérouse, and did not broaden this remark into a comparative discussion of earlier theories. Forster (1778), like Buffon and de Brosses, attributed the colour variation in human groups to ancient climatic adaptations, thus still leaving the way open to interpret the variety of groups encountered in Polynesia as the result of successive migrations of different ‘races’ (in the sense of ‘varieties of humanity’ which had originally become different through climatic influences). As we can see, Lapérouse kept to this idea, which persisted until the advent of the racist theories of the 19th century represented by Dumont d’Urville’s ‘Melanesia’ and similar classifications. The major change was that the idea of ancient climatic adaptation was replaced by a new belief in original and immutable physical differences among human groups.
uncivilised people but which it seems to leave with them for only an instant and reluctantly. Among a very large number of women I found only three who were very pretty; the rough impudent expression of the others, their indecent gestures, the off-putting way they offered their favours…\textit{(ibid.: 419).}\textsuperscript{12}

We shall see later how Lapérouse ends his sentence. But, for the moment, let us reflect on this expression: ‘offered their favours’.

\textbf{Lapérouse in Mauritius}

We must remember that Lapérouse was among the navigators who had read Bougainville before departing for the Pacific. In the 1770s and 1780s, Bougainville’s version of Tahiti was the absolute reference—in most of Europe, but certainly for all French captains—and Lapérouse, like any other captain of a Pacific expedition, sailed with this narrative firmly in his mind. Perhaps even more so than other captains, because Lapérouse had personally met those who had been in Tahiti with Bougainville.

In Mauritius (‘Isle de France’), where Lapérouse stayed in 1772, he met some of Bougainville’s companions from the 1766-69 circumnavigation and discussed the events of their voyage at length with them. Several of Bougainville’s companions were living there, including the famous naturalist of the expedition, Philibert Commerson. His \textit{‘Post-Scriptum sur Tahiti’}, published in the main Parisian newspaper in 1769, which described Tahiti as paradise on earth, started off the whole myth of the ‘New Cythera’ as a Garden of Eden (Tcherkézoff in press-1). In Mauritius, ‘La Pérouse had numerous opportunities to discuss the great voyage of exploration with them’ (Dunmore 1985: 86-7). As it happens, Commerson had disembarked from Bougainville’s ships at Mauritius in November 1768, while the expedition was on its way back to France, and it was from there that the famous \textit{Post-Scriptum} had been sent. He worked as a naturalist on local projects in this French colony, and was still there four years later when Lapérouse arrived in 1772 (Lapérouse was an officer serving on the French vessel \textit{Belle-Poule} which was bringing a new Governor to Mauritius [Dunmore 1985: 75]).

\textbf{First contacts in Tahiti: the Western myth and the ethnography}

Let us turn back briefly to this other French ‘discovery’ of 1768 (Tcherkézoff in press-1). In Tahiti, on the third day of Bougainville’s tacking off the coast (before he even attempted a landing), a group of Tahitians brought an adolescent girl out with them and had her climb on board; once there, she took off her

\textsuperscript{12} Les femmes sont aussi très grandes et ont perdu avant la fin de leur printemps ces formes et cette douceur d’expression, dont la Nature n’a jamais brisé l’empreinte chérs ces peuples barbares mais qu’elle paroit ne leur laisser qu’un instant et à regret. Parmi un très grand nombre de femmes je n’en ai vu que trois très jolies; l’air grossement effronté des autres, l’indiscence de leurs mouvements, l’offre rebutante qu’elles faisaient de leurs faveurs … [Dunmore and de Brossard eds 1985: 477].
barkcloth (obeying the adults who accompanied her, as we learn from the journals) and appeared to the French on the deck ‘such as Venus shewed herself to the Phrygian shepherd’ (Bougainville 1772b: 219). This sentence, which became the most famous of Bougainville’s book of 1771, together with the Post-Scriptum from Commerson, sparked the myth about the ‘lascivious’ customary education of Tahitian—and later all Polynesian—adolescent girls that spread throughout Europe. It gave the idea that the girls were offering themselves quite willingly.

Then, when the French landed, they were conducted into a chief’s house where, with complete ceremonial decorum, they were asked to take a young girl sexually. The journals provide some crucial details that were never published. We learn that the girl was presented to the visitors in the middle of a circle of adults who chanted (prayers?) and held a green bough in their hands (as a sign of fecundity and as an offering to the superior entities?). We learn too that the girl was crying. The significance of the green bough (a branch of plantain) can be inferred from the Tahitians’ behaviour in front of their own sacred chiefs, as observed a few years later by James Morrison, the first European visitor to stay a long time in Tahiti. The presentation of a green bough paved the way for making offerings to a superior, as can also be seen from other scenes, such as the gifts of barkcloth presented to Cook and Banks in May 1769 (as I shall describe in chapter 10). The presence of the green bough indicates the formal and indeed ritual (sacrificial) character of the whole scene which, contrary to what Bougainville wrote in his book, cannot thus be reduced to any kind of sexual ‘hospitality’.

These details are supplied in the journals and logs of the companions and officers who accompanied Bougainville. But the captain did not include this information in his published account and only mentioned that in ‘every house’ of this island where the French entered those favours were ‘offered’. He thus led the European reader to believe that all of this was purely sexual hospitality, from a people who had made sexuality their main value and thus their main offering. The French made no attempt at all to decode the ceremonial and ritual context in which the sexual offering occurred and concluded for the most part that they had found in Tahiti a people who had remained ‘as Eve before her Falling’: a place in which the sexual act was ‘naturally’ done, constantly practised and ’staged in public’ (en public).

Had Bougainville been able to land in Samoa, he might have met with the same experience—the presentation of girls—as his successor, Lapérouse, and he might have rated both his New Cythera and his Navigators’ Islands as two remnants of the ‘Garden of Eden’. (We leave aside the crucial difference that, in Tahiti, everything went peacefully for Bougainville because, a few months before his visit, the Tahitians had experimented with the cannons of Wallis via

"First Contacts" in Polynesia
their attempt to attack and seize the Europeans’ boats, thus learning what a European response to aggression could be—but Bougainville was not aware of the earlier visit, thinking himself to be the ‘discoverer’ of the island of Tahiti, and therefore interpreted Tahitian society as ‘naturally’ peaceful.) In any event, Lapérouse’s account mirrors what Bougainville would have written: there were the same misinterpretations about this Samoan custom of presenting girls, Lapérouse painting it as sexual hospitality, ‘offerings’ (with a touch of a ‘selling’) of ‘favours’ for European goods, within a customary setting in which ‘it can be observed’ that there are no restrictions on pre-marital sexual activities. The two gross misinterpretations of these sexual encounters were (i) to see in these ritualised contacts a form of sexual ‘hospitality’ or a ‘selling of favours’ and (ii) to conclude from the encounters that, between themselves, the local people behaved in the same way, thus implying that a custom of ‘free pre-marital sex’ for all adolescents prevailed in these societies.

Thus, we can trace two trajectories of the Western-inspired myth. The more recent of the two runs from Lapérouse to Williamson and through to Côté as a proponent of the Meadian Samoa: Lapérouse’s account contains the two sentences that suggest the idea of a free sex life for females in Samoa. The older trajectory runs from Bougainville to Lapérouse to Williamson, for the influence of Bougainville’s book was twofold. First, Lapérouse’s interpretation was produced out of, or at least found its assertiveness in, what he had read in Bougainville’s account of sexual presentations in the Polynesian region. And secondly, the fact that in the 1930s Williamson picked out these sentences and not others in Lapérouse’s account, is again a direct consequence of the Western myth of adolescent sexual freedom in Tahiti. By the time that Williamson was working on his compilation, this myth was being transformed into one that was applicable to the whole of Polynesia (with the help of Handy’s fanciful ‘ethnology’ of the Marquesas and Mead’s equally fanciful description of Samoan adolescence, both published in the 1920s).  

4. Interpretation (iii)—women as ‘worthy of the ferocious beings…’

Besides mentioning the ‘favours’, Lapérouse portrayed the Samoan women as making ‘rough impudent’ faces and ‘indecent gestures’. We can see here a major point of discontinuity between Bougainville and Lapérouse: the transformation of the Noble Savage into the Ignoble Savage. I shall return to this in the next chapter, when I discuss the ‘massacre’. Let us only note here how Lapérouse ended his sentence about the ‘favours offered’:

---

13 For the role played by Edward Craighill Smith Handy and for the references to his publications, see Tcherkézoff (in press-1 and 2001a: chapters 3-4).
Among a very large number of women I found only three who were very pretty; the rough impudent expression of the others, their indecent gestures, the off-putting way they offered their favours, everything made them in our eyes seem worthy of being the wives or the mothers of the ferocious beings surrounding us (ibid.: 419).  

Lapérouse wrote these lines and, probably, the whole concluding chapter about his Samoan visit, after his departure from Samoa, either at sea or during his stay at Botany Bay. He had in mind that the scenes of ‘offered favours’ were followed by the ‘massacre’ of his men. Lapérouse thus portrayed these women as ‘indecent’ creatures precisely because it made them ‘worthy’ of the picture of men as ‘ferocious beings’ and ‘barbarian murderers’ (as Kotzebue was to say after reading Lapérouse; see chapter 5). Firstly, the implicit reference to Bougainville’s Tahiti led Lapérouse to interpret everything in terms of ‘offered favours’. But he had insisted on this for various reasons; one of them was diametrically opposed to Bougainville’s views.

Lapérouse’s conclusion appears to be biased on two counts, as it took on the Noble Savage myth (in the attention paid to female ‘favours’) and transformed it into its contrary. It became a discourse on the Ignoble Savage type of Pacific society, where free sex was linked to the brutality of a pre-civilised age. It was opposed to the Noble Savage type of society elaborated by those such as Bougainville, Commerson and Banks for whom free sex was a sign that people had remained within the happy and innocent state of the primordial Creation.

It is this doubly biased discourse, expressed in the concluding lines where—as usual—the description of events is replaced by judgements and interpretations, that Williamson deemed to be representative of Samoa. It is also the discourse that Côté would like us to retain today as a perfect summary of pre-Christian Samoan culture!

5. Events—the real scene observed by Lapérouse: the sacred marriage of virgins

Internal analysis

The reference to Tahiti led Lapérouse to interpret some events in a particular way and thus to convey a certain image of women, which he filled out in his last pages and which he therefore wanted to be conclusive. We need now to seek out a description of these events. Fortunately, Lapérouse’s narrative does give us some pieces of information. So far, we have quoted the first and last lines

---

14 Parmi un très grand nombre de femmes je n’en ai vu que trois très jolies; l’air grossemement effronté des autres, l’indescence de leurs mouvements, l’offre rebutante qu’elles faisaient de leurs faveurs, tout les faisait paraître à nos yeux bien dignes d’être les femmes, ou les mères des êtes féroces qui nous environnaient (Dunmore and de Brossard eds 1985: 477).
of his passage on ‘women’. In between, Lapérouse suddenly becomes more precise:

... everything made them in our eyes seem worthy of being the wives or the mothers of the ferocious beings surrounding us. As the story of our voyage can add a few pages to that of mankind I will not omit pictures that might shock in any other kind of book and I shall mention that the very small number of young and pretty island girls I referred to soon attracted the attention of a few Frenchmen who in spite of my orders endeavoured to establish links of intimacy with them; since our Frenchmen’s eyes revealed their desires they were soon discovered; some old women negotiated the transaction, an altar was set up in the most prominent hut, all the blinds were lowered, inquisitive spectators were driven off; the victim was placed within the arms of an old man who exhorted her to moderate her sorrow for she was weeping; the matrons sang and howled during the ceremony, and the sacrifice was consummated in the presence of the women and the old man was acting as altar and priest. All the village’s women and children were around and outside the house, lightly raising the blinds and seeking the slightest gaps between the mats to enjoy this spectacle. Whatever navigators who preceded us might say, I am convinced that at least in the Navigators Islands girls are mistresses of their own favours … (ibid.: 419-20).}

These lines are clearly quite different in kind from those that mark the beginning and the end of this particular passage. For a brief interval, Lapérouse did not interpret but simply described what he saw or what he had been told by some of the people of the de Langle party who had visited another village. Through ethnographic analysis we can compare this short piece of ethnography with other data.

The ‘women’: comparison with Tahiti

The ‘indecent gestures’ of the ‘women’ might well have been signs to the Frenchmen indicating what the ‘young girls’ had been brought for. Lapérouse does not mention any actual sexual encounter with those ‘women’, neither in this concluding chapter nor in the previous description of daily events (as we

15 Comme l’histoire de notre voyage peut ajoutier quelques feuillêts à celle de l’homme je n’en écarterais pas des tableaux qui servaient indescents dans tout autre ouvrage et je rapporterais que le très petit nombre de jeunes et jolies insulaires dont j’ai déjà parlé eut bientêot fixé l’attention de quelques Français qui malgré mes ordres chercherent à former des liasons d’intimité avec elles; comme les yeux de nos Français exprimaient leurs désirs ils furent bientêt devinés; des vieilles femmes negotierent cette affaire, l’autel fut dressé dans la case du village la plus apparente, toutes les jalousies furent baissées, les curieux écartés; la victime fut placée entre les bras d’un vieillard, qui lexortoit a moderer sa douleur, car elle pleuroit; les matrones chantoient et hurloient pendant la cérémonie, et le sacrifice fut consommé en presence des femmes et du vieillard qui servoit d’autel et de prêtre. Toutes les femmes et enfants du village etaient au tour et en dehors de la maison soulevant legerement les jalousies et cherchant les plus petites ouvertures entre les nattes pour juger de ce spectacle (ibid.).
shall see). What about ‘the off-putting way they offered their favours’? Here again, it could in fact be a mistaken interpretation of the sexual gestures these women were making, that is, the gestures may not have meant that the women offered themselves but may have been made as a non-verbal explanation of how the Frenchmen should behave with the ‘girls’. This hypothesis can reasonably be put forward since this is precisely what happened during the first Tahitian contacts in which descriptions were sufficiently detailed to discriminate between the adults’ movements and the ‘young girl’s acting (Tcherkézoff in press-1). In any event, we need some hypothesis of the sort in order to explain this encounter on Samoan land, since the one and only description by Lapérouse of a sexual act (the ‘sacrifice’ in the ‘prominent hut’) concerned only, in his account, ‘the very small number of young and pretty island girls I referred to’.

The ‘girls’ and the ‘sacrifice’: comparison with Samoan ceremonies of 1830-1850

Now, turning to the ‘young girls’ and the ‘sacrifice’, the description is self-evident. The ‘victims’ were the ‘girls’. Each girl was ‘weeping’. She was presented by the ‘old women’, and then ‘placed in the arms of an old man’ (an orator tulafale?) who spoke with her. She was apparently held by the orator during the operation, since this ‘old man’ is said by Lapérouse to have himself been the ‘altar’ on which the ‘sacrifice’ was made. She was presented in ‘the most prominent hut’, which seems to indicate a high stone base (pa’epa’e), which in turn identifies the house as belonging to the main chief of the area (from 19th-century data, e.g. Krämmer 1994-95). All the blinds were lowered, and the women ‘sang and howled’.

This exactly matches the description of a 19th-century Samoan marriage ceremony where the young bride is a virgin and is ceremonially deflowered. There are two types of description. In one of them the bride is presented on the sacred ground of the village, in front of everyone, and is deflowered manually by an orator (of the groom’s family) or by the groom in the case of high chiefs. In the other she is deflowered behind the blinds of the house, with no clear indication of whether the man who performs this rite is an orator, tulafale, or the bridegroom.16 Let me quote from the first detailed descriptions available, from the early 1830s (the first missionary visit) and the 1850s, passages which show clearly what was involved.

John Williams’s account of 1830-1832 tells us how girls could be held by older people while the defloration ceremony was performed. The bridegroom is seated in front of his group, on the central and sacred ground (malae) of the village: The female now prepares herself to meet him which in general is attended with considerable delay. The

---

16 See the discussion in Tcherkézoff (2003b: 350-72).
preparation is mostly attended with furious crying & bitter wailing on
the part of the young woman while her friends are engaged in persuading
her that what is about to take place will not hurt her. She at length
consents & is taken by the hand by her elder brother... If she does not
consent to go she is dragged by force to him. She is dressed... [with]
scented oil... finely wrought mats edged with red feathers...on arriving
immediately in front of her husband she throws off her mat and stands
before him perfectly naked. He then ruptures the Hymen of the female
with two fingers of his right hand... [when everyone sees the blood, the
women of the girl’s family] throw off their mats & commence dancing
naked... If the female objects to submit to the above ceremony which is
sometimes the case persons are employed to hold her—some to hold her
down others to hold her arms others her legs. She is thus held in the lap
of another person while the husband ruptures the Hymen. On some
occasions the parties bed immediately after the ceremonies are concluded
(Moyle ed. 1984: 255-6).

This last sentence describes the same procedure that had been used for the
‘marriages’ with the French in 1787. We can easily imagine how, in 1787, the
‘girls’ were terrified when they were brought in to be married to these unknown
and awesome creatures. Hence, for that ‘first contact’, the marriage ceremony
took the form described by Williams when ‘the female objects to submit...’.

Lapérouse’s remark about the ‘matrons singing and howling’ could refer to
what William T. Pritchard (son of a pastor and ‘consul’) observed in the 1850s:

All her mats were taken off by the old duennas; who then slowly paraded
her, naked and trembling, before the silent gaze of the multitude, then
she was seated, with her legs crossed, on a snow-white mat spread on
the ground, in the centre of the square, or malae. There the chief
approached her and silently seated himself also cross-legged, close to
and directly facing her. Then was the critical moment. Though perhaps
more than a thousand spectators looked on, of all ages and both sexes,
not a word—not a sound was heard. Then, placing his left hand on the
girl’s right shoulder, the chief inserted the two forefingers of his right
hand into the vulva, while the two old duennas held her round the waist
from behind. In a moment, the chief’s arm was held up, the two fingers
only extended, when her anxious tribe watched eagerly for the drops
of blood to trickle down—the sight of which was the signal for vehement
cheers...

Once more, the old duennas loud in songs that told of rivers flowing fast
water no banks could restrain, seas no reefs could check—figurative
allusions to the virgin blood of the chaste bride—once more those stern
old duennas led their trembling and bashful girl, still naked as before,
to the gaze of the cheering and excited multitude, to exhibit the blood that trickled down her thighs. Cheers of applause greeted her, which were acknowledged only by the tears which silently stole down her cheeks.17

‘The blinds lowered’: comparison with ethnography of the 1930s-1980s

Lapérouse’s observation that ‘all the blinds were lowered’ is also very important. As far as I know from my discussions with Samoans in the 1980s, there were only two cases where something would be conducted inside a house with (all) blinds lowered. One was a defloration ceremony for marriage (some of the old people remembered cases from the 1930s). The other was a ‘meeting with the spirits’ (fono ma aitu) (which was attested at a village level until the 1960s), when chiefs of the village, faced with making an important and difficult decision, met at night and sat silently for hours, seeking inspiration from the superhuman world. In the morning they were supposed to emerge from the meeting convinced of the kind of action that needed to be taken. Such meetings, which require those attending to sit in silence, are called tapua’iga, from tapu: people put themselves in a state of taboo (Tcherkézoff 1995a, 2003b: 189-90). They can also be enacted in the daytime but inside a closed house, and could also, and still can, be organised by a small family group for a matter concerning only themselves.

In all other cases, even when there is a storm, Samoans have told me that some of the blinds—at least one—should always remain up because if all of them are lowered ‘it becomes very dangerous’. It seemed to me, from their tone and the way they abruptly started speaking very quietly, that having all of the blinds lowered afforded an opportunity for the ‘spirits’ (aitu) to enter the house, which would thus cause great danger to the people staying within it—but this intrusion by the spirits was a necessity in the case of ancient marriages and of tapua’iga meetings.

Although paradoxical, it should be understood that a closed Samoan house, with all of its blinds down, is in fact open to the spirits’ agency. The ‘sacred ring’ which gives the house its significance in terms of genealogical and territorial history is the circle of posts supporting the roof. When there is a formal meeting, each chief leans against one of the posts of the ring, sitting cross-legged. Chiefs of lesser rank sit in between the posts and their titles are exactly that:

17 The description was published by W. T. Pritchard in his ‘Notes on Certain Anthropological Matters respecting the South Seas Islanders’ (Pritchard 1864: 325-6) and is cited by Danielsson (1956: 116-17). In his well-known book Polynesian Reminiscences, published two years later, Pritchard did not include this description, as ‘amenities of decorum’ forbade it, and only alluded to it: ‘The ordeal by which the virtue of the chiefgirl of Samoa was tested was as obscene as severe, and the amenities of decorum forbid the description here’ (1866: 139).
'between-the-posts chiefs'. The ring of posts is the sacred circle of titles that defines a village and that can be enacted any time chiefs meet in any house. When the blinds are up, the ‘space between the posts’ (va—significantly, the word is also used in the general sense of ‘social relation’) is significant because it is visible. Each man must then choose his point of entry into the house and his sitting position according to his rank in relation to the rank of the other men seated there.

From these elements, we can hypothesise that, when all of the blinds are down, the sacred ring—which is the ‘sacred circle’ defining all Samoan social contexts of belonging to a group as these relationships can be ‘seen’ in ‘daylight’ (ao) (Tcherkézoff 1997a, 2003b: chapter 2)—is no longer active. Then things have returned to the ‘night’ side of the world, where the sources of life are located, but are hidden, and must be seized from the gods and the spirits, as was the case for a marriage (the marriage finding its meaning only with the procreation of a child) and for a tapua’iga meeting.

December 1787: the first marriages with Papālagi

Thus, apparently, the scene described by Lapérouse belongs to this very specific context where young virgin brides were presented for ‘marriage’. This context had been adapted by the Samoans in order to make a sexual presentation to the first European men who appeared on their land. The Europeans were seen as ‘Papālagi’, beings in some measure endowed with super-human powers (chapters 9, 11). The young girls were presented to them, perhaps according to a mythical logic of theogamy, the strategy being to bring about the creation of sacred progeny.

But, whatever the motives of the Samoan chiefs who had these girls brought forward, there is nothing in that very specific scene which could allow us to conclude with Lapérouse that, in the local custom, girls were free to give themselves sexually. The scene described by Lapérouse strongly contradicts any idea, from the girls’ perspective, of a search for sexual pleasure. The French tell us that the girls were ‘young’, felt great ‘sorrow’ (or ‘pain’: modérer sa douleur), were ‘weeping’, were directed by old people, and were held by adults during the procedure.

Thus, Lapérouse makes the same mistake as Bougainville in Tahiti, who thought that the French were welcomed as ordinary men, as travelling visitors, and that the behaviour of the Tahitians towards them, in the presentation of girls, was indicative of everyday behaviour between Tahitians. Indeed, one of Bougainville’s companions, Felix Fesche, even went so far as to suggest, in his journal, that what he had seen of the presentation of girls offered to him and his friends allowed him to explain to his French audience the conduct of ‘a marriage
ceremony between Tahitians’ (Tcherkézoff in press-1). Lapérouse’s often-quoted conclusion about young girls’ sexual freedom (reproduced by Côté via Williamson) is therefore completely unfounded. As we have just seen, this refutation can already be supported by evidence contained in the two pages where Lapérouse wrote about the ‘favours’ bestowed by the women. Now we must also look at Lapérouse’s previous chapter, where he describes the daily events during his stay and includes a narrative from his officer, Jean-François Tréton de Vaujuas (Dunmore ed. 1995: 386-414). In this narrative, we shall find an important observation relating to the sexual encounters: the presence of ‘very young girls’. Moreover, the content of this preceding chapter allows us to make a precise reconstruction of the whole visit. I shall limit my analysis in this chapter to any episode that mentions a sexual offer made by women or girls. Other aspects of the visit will be discussed in chapter 4.

6. Daily events: the presence of women and ‘very young girls’

After some first contacts had been made at sea in the Manu’a group and at Tutuila on 7 and 8 December, the expedition dropped anchor on 9 December at 4 p.m., in a small bay on the north coast of Tutuila. As the bay was not well protected, the French decided to anchor there only for a short time. Lapérouse remained on board and his officer, M. de Langle, commanding three small, armed boats, attempted a short landing (‘staying an hour’, ibid.: 391). Offerings (food, birds, etc.) were brought by the Samoans, and the French returned to their ships. In the early morning of 10 December, a second landing was made at the same place in order to get fresh water. Two armed longboats, followed this time by Lapérouse himself in another boat, made the landing. But de Langle ‘decided to go in his small boat for an excursion to a second cove approximately one league from our watering place’ and ‘returned delighted, enchanted by the beauty of the village he had visited’. Meanwhile, at the watering place, the French established ‘a line of soldiers between the Indians and the shore’, while filling up the casks at the river:

Messrs de Clonard and Monty established the most satisfactory order, a line of soldiers was placed between the Indians and the shore, we invited them all to sit down under the coconut trees lining the coast less than 8 toises from our longboats. They numbered about two hundred, with among them many women and children, each one had with him some hens, pigs, pigeons, parakeets, fruit and they all wanted to sell them at the same time, which created a little confusion.

The women [les femmes] some of whom were very pretty, offered with their fruit and poultry their favours to anyone who was prepared to give

---

18 See the English translation of Fesche’s journal in Dunmore (ed.2002:259).
them beads;\textsuperscript{19} soon they crossed the line of soldiers who pushed them back too weakly to stop them; their behaviour was gentle, merry and beguiling; Europeans who have sailed around the world, and especially Frenchmen, have no weapons against such attacks; they went through the ranks, the men came closer, then there was some little disorder, but Indians armed with sticks, whom we took to be chiefs, re-established order; each one returned to his post and trade began anew to the great satisfaction of buyers and sellers (\textit{ibid.}: 393).

We cannot tell from the use of the word ‘women’ whether this included girls (I shall return to the account of Vaujuas for de Langle’s landing). But we do know that it is was common practice in the English and French narratives of the time to include in the category of ‘women’ any girl, whatever her age, who seemed to the visitors to be making sexual proposals, or who was brought by adults making sexual gestures that indicated why the girl was being presented.\textsuperscript{20}

What are we to make of the ‘women’ demanding beads? We need to keep in mind that we are examining the very first contact on land. We know from the Hawaiian and Tahitian cases that the initial attitude of the Polynesians was to present young females without specifically expecting a definite material gift in return. And although they did not ask for anything in return, they still tried by whatever means they could to force the visitors to accept their sexual offer.\textsuperscript{21} It is only when they noticed that the Europeans—for whom such a presentation could only be understood in terms of sexual trade—were constantly handing over material gifts in return, that the Polynesian leaders understood the European trade mentality and then brought forward older girls and women as well to engage in the ‘trade’ proposed by the Europeans. In the Samoan case, because of the high value they placed on the beads traded by the Europeans and the stories of previous contacts with \textit{Papālagi} (through Tongans or directly in 1722 and 1768), this first contact on land was not a completely new discovery for the Samoans, hence their demand for beads.

But was it really ‘in exchange for favours’? We must be careful about this. For Lapérouse, as for every European traveller, there was no doubt that any presentation of females was sexual in intent and was used by local inhabitants as ‘trade’ for obtaining material gifts. But we know from later descriptions (Edwards, Lafond de Lurecy) that the beads were considered by Samoans to be of great value and even a life-giving gift. Therefore it was not, for the Samoans’

\textsuperscript{19} The French text is: \textit{Les femmes dont quelques unes étoient très jolies offroient avec leur fruits et leurs poules leurs faveurs à tous ceux qui voudroient leur donner des rassades; bientôt elles traverseront la haye des soldats …} ‘Rassade’ is an old French word for coloured beads. ‘Donner des rassades’ is also used by Lapérouse in another passage to refer to gifts given to the chiefs (‘Donner des rassades…Ces présents distribués’, p. 461).
\textsuperscript{20} See, for example, the narratives for Tahiti (Tcherkézoff in press-1).
\textsuperscript{21} For Hawaii, see Sahlins (1985a: 2); for Tahiti, we have Fesche’s Journal (Taillemite ed. 1968: 16 n.1).
part, a matter of profane greed for a decorative shining object. The whole context (including the question of the ‘young age’ of the ‘girls’ presented) cannot be reduced to a sexual trade in which women were merely satisfying (or were used by men to satisfy) a greed for European goods. More likely, the ‘women’ were asking for beads while the presentation of a ‘young girl’ for sacred marriage was being made or planned. This kind of demand conforms to what would be described in the 19th century as expected marriage gifts given by the male side (the category of ‘oloa) when the groom was a European. He was expected to provide all kinds of European goods and tools of the type introduced by the first adventurers and merchants.

Lapérouse also raises a different topic, that of a Samoan who struck a French soldier (I shall return to it later). In the following line, Lapérouse tells us how he himself, and presumably a group of his men, took the time to visit a village that was ‘a couple of hundred paces away’ from the watering place; he gives a very precise description of the spatial arrangement and of the houses, thus providing us with clear evidence that Samoan architecture as we know it today dates back at least to the 18th century.22

After filling the casks, and after the extensive tour of the nearby village, the French party went back to the ships. Nothing in the description allows us to decide if it was during this reception at the village that Lapérouse and his companions were presented with the scene described in the concluding chapter as the ‘sacrifice’ performed in the ‘prominent hut’. It could instead—or also—have been at the next village where de Langle and his men spent the day as the presence of a village in this next cove is mentioned in the narrative. Or it could have happened the next day, on 11 December, when de Langle and his men returned to this village in the next cove, while Lapérouse stayed on his ship.

De Langle, who was in command of the second ship, had returned from his own excursion and told Lapérouse that before setting sail he would like to bring his ship in nearer to the next cove in order to take on a greater quantity of water and let his sailors, who were suffering from scurvy, get some rest on land. Meanwhile, night was approaching and there was no time left to attempt the landing. It was decided to wait until the next morning.

22 ‘While all this was going on quite peacefully, and our water casks were being filled, I thought I could walk a couple of hundred paces away to visit a charming village situated in the middle of a forest of trees that were heavy with fruit and which one could call an orchard; the houses were placed along the circumference of a circle some 150 toises in diameter, the centre of which was empty forming a wide public place covered with the finest grass; the trees shading it and the houses preserved a delightful freshness; women, children, old men had accompanied me, they all pressed me to enter their houses, and stretched out the finest and freshest mats …’ (Dunmore ed. 1995: 394). There follows a precise description of a fale tele (see note 4 above). We should note this very first description of a Samoan village, with the pattern of a circle (Tcherkezoff 1997a: 322, 327–8; 2003b: chapter 2, 5), centred on a malae consisting only of a grassy ground. The well-known 1850-1890 descriptions of villages and ceremonial houses by missionaries, ‘consuls’ and German ethnographers correspond to what Lapérouse had already observed in 1787.
At dawn on 11 December, de Langle and about sixty men landed with their longboats. This is where the so-called ‘massacre’ took place. Lapérouse stayed on board his ship, and later was given an account of what happened by the survivors who managed to get back to the ships. His journal cites only the narrative of Vaujuas, one of the officers who was with de Langle. Vaujuas reported that in the cove the same arrangements had been made as on the previous day during the water-fetching expedition when Lapérouse was present:

We peacefully rolled out, filled and reloaded the water casks, the natives allowing themselves to be fairly well contained by the armed soldiers, there were among them a certain number of women and very young girls who made advances to us in the most indecent fashion, of which several people took advantage. I saw only one or two children there (ibid.: 407; my emphasis).

Soon after, stones began to fly and the attack was launched.

These are Vaujuas’s only lines on the topic of sexual encounters. If we relate these lines to Lapérouse’s description of the ‘sacrifice’ in the ‘prominent hut’, we must conclude that the French ‘took advantage’ of the ‘advances’ of the ‘girls’ only. We can then interpret the ‘advances’ made by the ‘women’ as sexual gestures inviting the French to ‘take advantage’ of the girls. If the women were really ‘offering’ their own favours, there is no reason why the French would not have accepted them. And there is no reason why Lapérouse would have omitted to mention it in his concluding pages and decided to mention only the sexual act with the ‘girls’.

Lapérouse adds nothing more than the lines already quoted from his final chapter. Thus, we cannot know whether his precise description of the ‘sacrifice’ within a ‘prominent hut’, with an ‘old man’ as the ‘altar’, which is given only in those concluding pages, refers to his own landing on 10 December or to what he was told by men of de Langle’s party. In the latter case, it may refer to their first excursion on 10 December to the ‘next cove’ and/or to the landing on the following day whose events we have just seen described by Vaujuas. The hypothesis that the description does in fact relate to 11 December is supported by the fact that, in all his narrative, the only time when Lapérouse, through his quotation of Vaujuas, admits that some of the French sailors ‘took advantage’ of the sexual ‘advances’, relates to that day. A further argument is that Vaujuas talks about ‘women and very young girls who made advances’ (my emphasis), and that Lapérouse, when he describes the ‘sacrifice’ in his concluding chapter, mentions that the only females offered were ‘young girls’.

23 Il y avait parmi eux un certain nombre de femmes et de filles très jeunes qui de la manière la plus indescente nous faisoient des avances dont plusieurs personnes ont profité (Dunmore and de Brossard eds 1985: 461).
7. A comparative hypothesis for Polynesia concerning the ‘young girls’ and the sexual presentations in first contacts

The mention of ‘very young girls’ (filles très jeunes) may appear surprising. In my view, it must in fact be a crucial piece of information that can assist us to interpret the whole context. But this view is built on a limited comparative study and it is offered here with due reserve as a working hypothesis that has yet to be tested against other existing data on first contacts in Polynesia.

If what these accounts can tell us about Samoan beliefs and practices concerned only sexual advances and a search for sexual pleasure, if indeed the goal were just to attend to the sexual desire of male travellers who had been deprived of female company for some time, then the presentation of young—therefore inexperienced—and weeping girls would be somewhat surprising. Similar scenes to those recorded in Lapère’s narrative can be found in reports describing Tahitian, Maori, Tongan and Marquesan cases of sexual presentation. The obvious conclusion is that the ‘women’ were bringing and presenting the ‘girls’, and that the girls were not presented for a kind of sexual hospitality offered to European sailors. Why were they presented? One possibility (is there any other?) is the kind of ‘theogamic’ scheme that has already been mentioned. Here I am following Sahlins’s well-known hypothesis for Hawaii (Sahlins 1985a: chapter 1). But why the ‘(very) young’ girls?

The Tahitian and Hawaiian, as well as the Samoan, data on ritual dances indicate that, in following a mythical theme, only young girls who were virgins were presented to the gods—and later to the Papalagi when these creatures appeared on the scene. Why such a presentation to the gods? Because in Polynesia the pre-contact mythical idea of a divine pregnancy, rightly identified by Sahlins as the central aspect of the mythical structure that Polynesians applied to the historical conjuncture of the first encounters with Europeans, had two characteristics which historians and anthropologists have tended to overlook. One of these was an essential requirement. It was also accompanied on occasions by another, paradoxical, aspect.

The essential requirement was the virginity of the girls. More exactly, the girls must not yet have given birth. Here, too, a specialised discussion is necessary. The critical issue—very far from any masculine Eurocentric representation of ‘female purity’—concerned certain cosmological theories about the fecundity of the female blood within a ‘closed’ body, with a symbolic link between the blood in the veins, the hymeneal blood, and the menses. Bligh was told in Tahiti that when a girl of high rank married, the first child was the result

24 In every case the girls’ sorrow is noted; in every case the girls are brought in by adults; where the presence of the women is noted, the women both assist and sing; in the Tahitian case and one of the Tongan cases, the virginity of the girls is explicitly stated (Tcherkezoff in press-1). The only recorded case of the girl being held by older people while the sexual act is completed occurs in Samoa.
of a god’s action (and not of the husband’s). Cook and Banks were given to understand that girls were allowed to stay in the Tahitian dancing schools only as long as ‘they did not have any connection with [a] man’. The question was not the integrity of the female body seen from a masculine Eurocentric point of view, but the ritual work of producing ‘sacred children’ through a first giving birth (the Samoan tamasā, the Tahitian matahiapo, etc.).

The other and paradoxical aspect was, apparently, that this mythical presentation of females to the gods was disconnected from the physical reality of pubescence. The girls were often rather young, for the reason just given, but, sometimes, they could be extremely young: the age range of ‘8 to 10 years old’ is mentioned occasionally, in Tahiti and elsewhere (for instance, Dumont d’Urville noted it in the Marquesas, as we shall see in chapter 7). This applied to the dances and, apparently, some of the presentations to the Papālagi (Europeans). There are some indications that families tried their hardest to get their daughters into the dance schools (in fact schools where students received instruction about the entire cosmological system, as is well known in relation to the Hawaiian performance, the hula) as soon as possible. We can see that it did not matter greatly if the girls were of a very young age, since, as long as the scene was limited to dancing with the male gods and to the mythical idea of virgin birth (girls impregnated by the rays of the sun, etc.), the presence of pre-pubescent girls obviously did not present any practical contradiction to the mythical template.25 But in the scenario of the first contacts with Europeans, things became different.

I hypothesise that, at the initiative of the chiefs and/or orators, this whole cosmogonic context, a complex mythical structure, was transposed onto the scene of the encounters with the Papālagi, and this therefore included those aspects of the female agent (the ‘(very) young’ age) which have not been taken into account in previous discussions of the first encounters between Polynesians and Europeans.

But, at the time, the European visitors, who understood the scene only in terms of sexual hospitality offered to them, were astonished to see the young age of (all or some of) the girls presented. Of course, they could rationalise this observation in only one way. It gave them a further reason to conclude that the

25 It is possible that real presentations of very young girls to chiefs also took place. One of Margaret Mead’s informants mentioned sexual acts with girls under ten years old (Tcherkézoff 2003b: 371). This discussion leads to another point: in Samoa (but there is no reason why Samoa should be a unique case) there was also a belief, recorded in the 19th and 20th centuries, that the marriage ceremony (defloration) could provoke the beginning of menstruation, if the bride was pre-pubescent (ibid.: 373-84). Somehow, the very flow of hymeneal blood itself and the act of smearing it on the sacred cloth was symbolic of menstrual blood and of the divine action which had brought life to the girl’s blood. Significantly, a belief clearly attested to in the 20th century, in Samoa, and also in Eastern Polynesian, was that the days on which impregnation was thought possible were right at the end of the menstrual period (ibid. and Hanson 1970).
main goal of the children’s education, according to the ‘customs’ of the islanders, was the proper or even ‘artistic’ performance of sexual acts; in effect, an apprenticeship to what would later become the ‘main preoccupation’ and activity of their adolescent and adult lives. John Hawkesworth was an even more active proponent of this particular misinterpretation than Bougainville and his companions; in 1773, when he was given the task of editing for publication the manuscript of the narrative of Cook’s first expedition, he unfortunately re-phrased Cook’s and Banks’s observations, noted in 1769 in Tahiti, to accord with this view. Being himself a director of a school, Hawkesworth misinterpreted what he read in terms of a whole educational-cultural value specific to these societies. Shortly afterwards, from his reading of Bougainville’s book and Cook’s narrative as rephrased by Hawkesworth, the French philosopher Voltaire concluded in 1775, and made it known to all Europe, that, since the French and the British ‘observations are identical’, this vision of the ‘Tahitian custom’ must indeed be true. The Western myth of Polynesian sexual freedom was then ready to spread in every direction. Twelve years later, Lapérouse’s interpretation was already a consequence of that myth. Furthermore, the interpretations of Williamson a hundred and fifty years later and of Côté more than two centuries later, are no less due to the cultural misreading which created the Western myth of ‘Polynesian sexuality’.

There is no further information on our topic to be found in Lapérouse’s narrative and we can let his ships sail away. After 11 December, Lapérouse stayed for the next two days ‘tacking in front of the bay’ where the attack happened. On the morning of 14 December, he set sail for Upolu and had to cruise along the coast for the next days because of the lack of wind. Brief contacts were made at sea (see next chapter). On 17 December, he was in front of Savai’i. No canoes came out to make contact with his ships. On the evening of that day, the French lost sight of land and sailed towards the islands of ‘Cocos’ (north Tonga).  

---

26 As this book was going to press the following came to my notice. For the shipwreck of the Lapérouse expedition on the reef of Vanikoro and the debate about the existence of survivors, see the recent archaeological findings (including the location of what appears to have been the camp of some survivors) by Jean-Christophe Galipaud (IRD, Noumea) et al. in Lapérouse à Vanikoro: résultat des dernières recherches franco-salomona ses aux îles Santa Cruz, Association Salomon (ed.), Noumea, Centre IRD, 2002, 113pp.