Chapter 4

Lapérouse, the Ignoble Savage, and the Europeans as ‘spirits’

In the preceding chapter all recorded references to female sexual ‘offers’ were collated and discussed. The analysis of this material on the one hand provided conclusive evidence that, in the final pages of his account relating his encounter with the Samoans, Lapérouse was in fact describing a marriage ritual and not sexual hospitality, and, on the other, showed that there were no grounds to support the hypothesis of customary sexual freedom during adolescence.

But additional information about the encounter is necessary in order to provide an exhaustive study of the interactions between the Samoans and their Papālagi visitors. So let us now see what happened during the encounter in other contexts from day to day. The usual elements are present here as well: the offerings made to the Papālagi, the barter proposed by the Europeans and the eruption of violence.

1. Contacts at sea in the Manu’a group: ‘barter’ with men or ‘offerings’ to awesome creatures?

Barter and ‘theft’

At the first meeting at sea, in the Manu’a group, the Samoans gave ‘some twenty coconuts and two blue sultana hens’. In the same way as the Dutch in 1722, the French only understood the transaction as ‘a little barter with us’. This is why they were not only rather surprised ‘to obtain so little’, but why they also became immediately convinced that the Samoans ‘were, like all the South Sea islanders, untrustworthy in their trade’. This judgement was made because the Frenchmen noticed that, several times, the Samoans took the goods handed to them and rowed away as ‘thieves’, ‘without handing over the agreed compensation. In truth these thefts were of minor importance and a few bead necklaces with small pieces of red cloth were hardly worth complaining about’ (Dunmore ed. 1995: 387). Circumscribed by their vision of ‘barter’ and ‘compensation’, the French could only interpret the attitude of these Samoans as ‘theft’. Hence the negative conclusion: ‘untrustworthy in their trade’. The French were quite unable to conceive that, from their perspective, the Samoans were undoubtedly making offerings to these Papālagi and were glad to receive gifts—and even sacred gifts since these objects (the beads and the red cloth) were so highly prized, as we already know from Roggeveen’s and Bougainville’s narratives.
From the Spanish visits in the 16\textsuperscript{th} century up until the various visits in the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century, the ‘South Sea islanders’ were categorised as ‘thieves’ by the Europeans. They could make no other interpretation of the fact that the islanders received from their visitors—and often seized for themselves when they climbed on board—a number of Papalagi objects and hastily jumped into the water or rowed away with their pickings. They could not imagine that this behaviour of seizing and snatching was in line with the mythological and ritual structure of the annual raid that the people perpetrated on the first fruits and on all signs of life send by the gods. The goods of the Papalagi were signs of life and fertility, but they had to be snatched because, in the whole of pre-Christian Polynesia, gods always had to be forced to surrender a part of their powers to human beings as they would not do this willingly. In Tonga, Tahiti, Hawaii and Aotearoa-New Zealand, the festive cycle linked to the seasons always included a ritual raid on the first fruits.\textsuperscript{1} Kava and cloth

Shortly afterwards, the French noticed that a speech was addressed to them: ‘an elderly Indian’s harangue, who was holding a branch of kava in his hand and making a fairly lengthy speech’ (ibid.: 388). Lapérouse’s identification of the branch must have been accurate because, as we shall see, Vaujuas’s report on the events in Tutuila also clearly mentions that the branches of *Piper methysticum* were used to welcome the French. This gesture on the part of the Samoans proves to us beyond any doubt that their attitude towards the Papalagi was an attitude of offering and not of bartering. From 19\textsuperscript{th}-century and recent sources, we know that in Samoa a branch of kava was and is handed over only within the most ceremonial contexts, and then only to highly revered superiors: to sacred chiefs of the village or chiefs visiting from another village.

How did the French respond? By ‘throwing him a few pieces of cloth’ (ibid.) For them it was a way of showing thanks for what they took as a welcome and ‘a sign of peace’. Lapérouse explains that he knew from his previous reading of ‘several accounts of voyages’ that such a presentation (the presentation of any kind of branch) was a sign of peace. Although he does not specify, he may have referred to Bougainville’s and Cook’s accounts relating to Tahiti, where the presentation of ‘green branches’ (mostly young banana trees) had been interpreted by the voyagers in that way. We can imagine that the Samoans, too, saw some logic in the transaction. It so happens that, according to their custom, the presentation of a branch of kava to the sacred chiefs was and is reciprocated with gifts of cloth (fine mats and barkcloth).

\textsuperscript{1} For Tonga, see Ferdon (1987: 94) and Douaire-Marsaudon (1993: 813-38); for Tahiti, see Babadzan (1993: 235-51, particularly 245-6); for Hawaii and Aotearoa-New Zealand, see Sahlins (1985a: 112-20; 1985b; 1989; 1995: 22-31, 206-7). The corresponding context in Samoa was probably the *palolo* festival (the collecting of sea worms which come to the surface once a year).
Later on more canoes came ‘to offer new exchanges’: ‘five hens, several items of their clothing, six sultana hens, a small pig, but above all the most charming turtle dove we had ever seen… [there follows a detailed description] this little animal was tame, ate in your hand and from your mouth’ (p. 389). The description, which is quite precise, corresponds exactly to the multi-coloured fruit dove Ptilinopus Peroussii (as it was named by the naturalist of Wilkes’s expedition in 1838 with due reference to Lapérouse [ibid.: note 2]): it is the Samoan manumā (also called manulua and close to the manutagi). Again, the gift of this tame dove shows us the way in which the Samoans interpreted the nature of their visitors. From what we know in later years, this animal was restricted to high chiefs, being used by them as a sacred pet—these birds represented the link between gods and humans—and not as food.

Lapérouse adds, rather surprisingly, that his officer M. de Langle ‘bought two dogs from the Indians, which were judged very tasty’ (p. 390). Unlike the previous items, dogs were not used as gifts between Samoans (again, as far as we can judge from the 19th-century sources). But, through the Tongans, and from everything which had been passed on to them concerning the recent visits of the Pāpālagi (who came from Tahiti and who used only Tahitian words; Lapérouse did so himself, see p. 388), the Samoans may have known that, according to Tahitian custom, the gift of a dog was welcomed (we shall see another occurrence of this during the visit of Kotzebue).

Iron and beads

A final note about the contacts in the Manu’a waters brings us back to an observation made by Bougainville: ‘we never persuaded them to accept our axes or any iron tool and they preferred a few glass beads which could be of no practical use to them to anything we offered by way of cloth or iron’ (p. 390). Lapérouse is of course wrong to combine iron and ‘cloth’: his own observations and Bougainville’s account had shown how much European ‘cloth’, and certainly the highly prized red cloth, was appreciated by the Samoans. But the remark about the lack of interest in iron, in comparison with the great interest in glass beads, is consistent with the observations made by Roggeveen and Bougainville.

Lapérouse adds finally that they sold us a wooden vase filled with coconut oil, which had exactly the same shape as one of our earthenware pots and which a European worker would never have believed could be made without a turning-lathe; their ropes were round and woven exactly like several of our watch-chains; their mats were very fine but their cloth inferior in respect of the colour and texture to those from Easter Island or the Sandwich Islands (p. 390).
Here again we find the barter theme: they ‘sold us…’. We note, too, that Lapérouse follows Bougainville in devaluing Samoan barkcloth in comparison to the Tahitian barkcloth. From an ethnographic perspective, we can note that, among Samoans in 1787 (as will be observed in other Polynesian cultures), coconut oil was a valued offering as part of a category of gifts used to wrap up the body (‘cloth’: fine mats, barkcloth) and to make the body shine (which was pleasing to the gods). Indeed, later ethnographic information recorded in Tahiti and Samoa shows that cloth and oil were given to gods, to ancestors and—in Samoa—to the bridegroom’s family during the marriage ceremony.

2. First landings (Tutuila, 9 December and 10 December) and first incidence of violence

‘They bartered for beads… priceless diamonds’

The next contact was at sea off Tutuila. In the late afternoon of 8 December, writes Lapérouse, ‘three or four canoes came alongside that very evening, they brought us pigs and fruit which they bartered for beads’. On the morning of 9 December, ‘a large number of canoes had come laden with coconuts, pigs and other fruit which we bought with beads; this great abundance increased the desire I had of anchoring’ (p. 391). Before nightfall a bay was found where anchor could be dropped. De Langle, commanding three armed boats, landed: ‘the Indians lit a great fire to light up the assembly, they brought birds, pigs and fruit, and after staying an hour our boats returned to the ships’.

The next morning, 10 December,

a hundred canoes were around the frigates with all kinds of provisions which the islanders were prepared to barter only for beads. For them these were priceless diamonds and they scorned our axes, our cloth and all our other trade goods’ (p. 392).

Lapérouse landed with two long boats filled with empty casks to get water. The ‘Indians’ were now

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, some of whom were very pretty, offered with their fruit and poultry their favours…

We are now familiar with the following passage: although Lapérouse had lined up his soldiers and kept the Samoans at a distance from the longboats and the watering party, even so these women ‘soon crossed the line of soldiers’. The French did not resist (‘Frenchmen have no weapons against such attacks’) and there was ‘some little disorder but Indians armed with sticks, whom we took to be chiefs, re-established order’ (p. 393). A little later, Lapérouse again mentions
that the Samoans ‘had sold on our market over two hundred wood-pigeons as
tame as puppies, that wanted to eat only from one’s hand; they had also bartered
the most charming turtledoves and parakeets as tame as the pigeons’ (p. 394).

The presence of parakeets is confirmation of the ceremonial nature of these
gifts. These birds (certainly the sega) were not raised as food, but for their
feathers. A roll of red parakeet feathers (‘ie ula) was for Samoans a most highly
valued gift. In the 19th century, Augustin Krämer describes how, for example,
these rolls were prepared, along with kava and food, and taken by a chief’s
orators to the family of his wife in another village (Krämer 1995: II: 98, 182n.).
The final destination of the feathers was to adorn the fringe of the beautiful fine
mats, here again an object used only for sacred gifts (Tcherkézoff 2002).

A ‘real act of hostility’?
Meanwhile, a Samoan man managed to steal into the water, and ‘he had climbed
onto the back of our longboat, picked up a mallet and struck several blows on
the arms and backs of our sailors’. Lapérouse, in front of this ‘real act of hostility’,
decided that ‘I should teach them to have a better opinion of us by punishing
this Indian for his insolence’. He ordered ‘four of the strongest [of his men] to
throw themselves at him and hurl him into the sea’ and had three pigeons
‘bought’ and ‘thrown up in the air and shot down in front of the crowd’ (p. 393).

What we should notice about this ‘act of real hostility’ is that, apparently,
the Samoan man did not plan an attack in a European military sense; otherwise
he would not have come alone and unarmed. Most probably it was an act of
bravado staged for the benefit of his peers, or sheer curiosity about the physical
nature of the newcomers: to dare to board a Papalagi boat, to touch them, to see
if they could bleed… We must remember that this moment is the very first time
that Papalagi had landed on Samoan land. It is the first time that they were quite
near, they were no longer out there on the decks of their great ships, lofty and
menacing, but standing on land or sitting in canoes (the longboats used for
landing). This Samoan man was not the only one to make such an attempt.
Lapérouse was told later by his companions that ‘stones had been thrown at Mr
Rolin, our senior surgeon; an islander pretending to admire a sword belonging
to Mr Moneron had tried to snatch it from him’ (p. 395, no details are given).

A ‘chief’ on board
After this close contact, some of the Samoans dared to approach the ship. At
midday, when Lapérouse returned to the ship, after his extensive tour of the
nearby village (no details are given besides the description already quoted of
the houses and of the malae), he found there on the quarter-deck ‘seven or eight
Indians, the eldest of whom was presented to me as being a Chief’. The officers
explained that they could not have prevented those men from coming on board
unless they had used extreme violence against them, and that knowing that Lapérouse’s orders were to avoid bloodshed, they let them do so. (Nevertheless, some violence may have occurred, if we are to believe one story told in the late 1790s to a beachcomber; see below, in relation to George Bass’s visit in 1802). ‘He added moreover that since the chief had come aboard, the other islanders who had preceded him were much quieter and less insolent’. If we can make an inference from other descriptions of encounters in Eastern or Western Polynesia, the mention of ‘insolence’ in the European narratives always referred to two kinds of behaviour on the part of the islanders: snatching things on board and/or touching the body of a European.

Lapérouse tells us that he gave ‘a great number of presents to this chief’ and had his men fire through planks and at pigeons, but ‘it seemed to me that the effect of our weapons did not make much of an impression on him’ (p. 396). The French thought that the Samoans were utterly ignorant of the fatal powers of muskets. This is of course an absurdity. If that were the case, the noise, the holes in the planks and the bleeding pigeons falling from the sky would have provoked precisely a reaction of terror that could not have been disguised. Much more probably the Samoans were perfectly aware, again through their connections with the Tongans, of the firing powers of the Papālagi, and this demonstration was no surprise to them. The Dutch and the British had made many such demonstrations for the benefit of the Tongans.

3. Second landing: the fateful day of 11 December 1787

‘The happiness in such an enchanting site’

While Lapérouse was giving his presents to the chief, on that afternoon of 10 December de Langle came back to the ship and described his discovery of another cove that seemed extremely attractive. We must remember that, up to this moment, the French vision of Polynesia was heavily influenced by Bougainville’s narrative on Tahiti. The manner in which Lapérouse commented on what he had seen up until then in Samoa makes this quite clear:

What imagination could conjure up the happiness one would find in such an enchanting site, a climate requiring no form of dress; breadfruit trees, coconuts, bananas, guavas, oranges &c growing quite naturally offered these fortunate inhabitants a pleasant and healthy nourishment; hens, pigs, dogs living on surplus fruit allowing them to vary their diet. They had such wealth and so few needs that they scorned our iron tools and our cloth, and wanted only beads—with a surfeit of real goods they hankered only after frivolities (p. 394).
Thus, Lapérouse accepted de Langle’s plan to bring a contingent of Frenchmen back to this cove.2

‘Massacre Bay’: twelve Europeans and thirty Samoans

The next day, a group of 61 men landed at the cove. Lapérouse had decided to stay on his ship. Until the survivors of the ‘massacre’ came back, Lapérouse did not know what was happening, as the cove lay out of sight. For de Langle, the difficulties began immediately. It so happened that the tide was unexpectedly low and, instead of manoeuvring in a large bay, as he had seemed to do the day before, the French officer had now to navigate a very narrow channel. The officer Vaujuas, who was with de Langle and who survived the attack, noted in his narrative that on arriving near the shore the French were welcomed by the Samoans who ‘threw into the sea several branches of the tree from which South Seas islanders obtain their intoxicating liquor’ (this clearly refers to kava: p. 406). Again, this gesture tells us much about the Samoan interpretation of the newcomers.

The casks were filled under the protection of a line of soldiers as was done during the first landing. Vaujuas adds that the Samoans were ‘allowing themselves to be fairly well contained by the armed soldiers’ and everything went ‘peacefully’ (p. 407). This is where he inserts the lines that we have already seen: ‘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’ (p. 407; no further details).

But when the French boarded their longboats again they were unable to move, probably because of the added weight of the casks. The boats were stuck fast. At least this was the case for the group that had landed with de Langle and who had brought the longboats very near to the shore, while another group, commanded by Vaujuas and Mouton, stayed further from the shore and afloat. The sailors who were with de Langle had to stay put and wait for the tide to come in. The other group waited with them. On seeing this, the Samoans waded into the water near where the boats were stranded; the water reached only to the men’s knees. Moreover, a number of Samoan canoes, which had gone out to the ships for ‘bartering’, were now coming back to the cove. The French found themselves surrounded by several hundred Samoans. Shortly after, stones began to fly.

De Langle, as well as many others in his group, ‘had only time to fire his two shots’ and ‘was knocked over’ by the stones. Those who could not escape were

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2 The idea was also to get some more fresh water, although the supply for that day was good, and to bring back some provisions for the sailors suffering from scurvy; de Langle also wanted to put some of these sick sailors ashore, in the hope of restoring them to health more rapidly. At the time it was still believed that, at sea, it was the lack of the air found on land, and not only the lack of fresh food, that was the cause of the sickness (see ibid.: 432 note 1).
then clubbed. Eleven or twelve men died while the others who could make it to the farther longboats escaped; thus some fifty men made their way back to the ships. Besides the eleven or twelve dead among the French, some thirty Samoans fell, according to what Lapérouse learned from the survivors. But he did not record the Samoan losses in his main report of the incident, which he devoted entirely to expressing his sorrow for the fallen Frenchmen. This is why it is rarely mentioned; Lapérouse only alludes to it, among other things, in a letter written when staying at Botany Bay.  

4. The precious beads, again

Lapérouse’s and Vaujuas’s interpretations

According to Lapérouse—who had not been present and had to rely on the narrative of the survivors—the Samoans were busy climbing on the longboats that had been seized and ‘breaking up the thwarts and everything else to look for the riches they thought we had, none of the islanders took much further notice’ of the other boats, which were thus able to escape (pp. 399-400).

Vaujuas’s description adds an important detail here, where once again the role of the beads appears central:

Towards the end [of filling up the casks], the number of natives increased and they became more troublesome. This circumstance caused Mr de Langle to give up his earlier intention of buying some provisions, he gave the order to get back at once into the boats. But before then (and this I think is the primary cause of our misfortune) he had given a few beads to some kinds of chiefs who had helped to keep the islanders at a little distance; we were sure however that this pretence at policing was only play-acting, and if these alleged chiefs have any authority it is only over a very small number of men. These gifts being made to five or six individuals aroused the others’ displeasure. From that moment a general murmur arose and we were no longer able to control them; however they let us get back into the boats, but a number of them followed us into the water while the others were picking up stones from the shore (p. 407).

Then, according to Vaujuas, de Langle fired into the air and tried to have the boats pushed into the water. The immediate result was that some of the Samoans held on to the cables, trying to retain the boats, while others began hailing stones on the French.

Lapérouse’s interpretation was that the Samoans wanted to seize everything that the boats contained, but from the additional information in Vaujuas’s narrative we can infer that this desire was probably exacerbated—or indeed

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3 The letter was appended to the 1797 publication of the narrative; I found mention of it in Jocelyn Linnekin’s article on Lapérouse and the theme of the Ignoble Savage (1991: 7).
triggered—by the Samoans’ observation that the landing party had brought with them their famous beads.

**A Samoan view? The recipient of the gift**

Let us take the interpretation a little further. It may well be that it was not just the showing of the beads, but also, or mainly, the way these beads had been distributed by de Langle that had played a critical role. It is almost certain that the Samoan men whom the French saw ‘policing’ the crowd during the filling of the casks were either the taule’ale’a of the village (unmarried non-chiefly men constituting ‘the strength of the village’ as they are called, who are in charge of the collective work and indeed are responsible for maintaining order) and/or some tulafale of low rank (orators). No high chief would have performed this low-status job of policing the crowd. That these men were chosen by the Papālagi to receive beads might have raised within the crowd the idea that everyone could, or indeed should, get some.

Furthermore, the idea of taking their sacred goods violently from the Papālagi was not something illogical according to the ritual ideology of the time.

**5. A Samoan view? ‘Killing’ a Papālagi and a raid on the life-giving goods**

This attempt at interpretation must also take into account what happened shortly after the fight. Lapérouse wished to make a punitive expedition and to destroy the whole village. In fact this proved impossible. He was unable to come in near enough to the cove with his ships. As for the idea of attempting another landing in the longboats, it was abandoned once the survivors explained to him that the stones used by the Samoans were thrown ‘with such skill and strength that they had the same effect as our bullets and had the advantage over our muskets shots of following each other much more quickly’ (p. 402). Nevertheless, the French spent two days tacking off the bay, full of anger. So we can well imagine how astonished they were to see that ‘five or six canoes came from the coast with pigeons, coconuts and pigs to offer to barter with us’. As Lapérouse warns his reader, this ‘will sound incredible’ (p. 403). He decided to avoid firing his cannons at the men in the canoes; they stayed for a long time and only departed when Lapérouse, who wanted to disperse them, ordered his men to fire into the water near their canoes.

‘Incredible’! How could ‘murderers’ return to engage in barter as if nothing had happened? Lapérouse may have been less surprised if he had known that shortly before, in 1778, a similar event had happened in Hawaii. After the Hawaiians killed Captain Cook on the shore, they rowed to the ships and asked when he would come back to visit them (Sahlins 1985a: 122). Their thinking
was that Cook was not just a man but a certain temporary embodiment of their god Lono (see our chapter 9).

The whole context of these violent encounters can no longer be interpreted according to the instrumental European point of view that sees the battles generated by the contact situation as competition for goods or land. It must now be looked at from the Islanders’ point of view. The Papalagi boats were bringing superhuman goods, they were ‘boats of Tangaloa’ (the great creator), as ritual chants expressed it in the Cook Islands (see chapter 9). The goods of the Papalagi were signs of life, and the way to gain possession of them was to snatch them in a raid.

Of course, this discussion about the Polynesian view of the Papalagi and about the pre-contact annual ritual cycles in itself requires a detailed study of various sources. At least, though, this hypothesis which links the Papalagi boats and goods to the pre-contact ritual cycle with its raids on the first fruits is more useful than the various attempts dating from the 19th century that were made, mostly by the English missionaries of the London Missionary Society (LMS), to ‘explain’ the Samoan attitude on that fateful 11 December 1787. Let us now turn to a review of these attempts.

6. The missionaries’ interpretations: thieves from elsewhere

While in Samoa in the 1840s, the missionaries heard vague accounts memorised by the Tutuilans, which blamed another group of Samoans for the massacre (Krämer 1995: II: 16-18, Linnekin 1991: 18-20). As the story went, this offending group had supposedly come from another island and just happened to be at the cove where de Langle landed. One of these men had tried to ‘steal’ something from the boats and had been hit by the French. He had returned to shore and called his comrades. Or, in another version, he had been shot dead and the event had aroused the anger of his group. The missionaries were prepared to believe any such story, because it was impossible for them rationally to reconcile the opposed attitudes that were supposed to have characterised a single group of villagers: the initial attitude of ‘welcoming’ (including the supposed sexual welcoming) and the final attack and outright ‘hostility’. Hence the idea that the incident involved two different groups. The first missionary to tell the story would have been the Rev. Archibald Murray who passed it on to Captain Bethune, who had visited Samoa in 1837-38 (but left no detailed narrative). The following year he in turn passed it on to Commodore Wilkes (Linnekin ibid.).

Later, the Marist priests, who of course remained faithful to the French view, recalled the initial interpretation as suggested by Lapérouse: the cause had been greed for European goods (Krämer ibid.). Theirs was a more developed 19th-century version of the 17th-18th-century cliché about the South Seas Islanders as ‘thieves’. And they allowed for alternative nuances. Father Padel had asked
questions—but sixty years after the event. According to him, there were Samoans who held that the reason for the attack was greed for the garments worn by the French. But he himself supported the other interpretation: that an individual and unplanned fight, probably because of a ‘theft’, had led to a general fight between the two groups.

7. A Samoan view? The Papālagi as ‘spirits’ and the virgins in the first line of battle

Padel added another comment, noting that some of the Samoans had told him that the French ships had been considered a piece of ‘the land of spirits’ (terre des génies). Hence, thought Padel, the feelings of the islanders must have been a mixture of ‘admiration and terror’ (admiration et terreur) so that in this tense context a small fight gave way immediately to a generalised fight (Monfat 1890: 84).

Thirty years later, enlarging the scope of this discussion, Mgr Vidal, who stayed in Samoa in the 1880s, commented on Padel’s interpretation. He held that for the Samoans the people on the ships were indeed ‘spirits’ (‘esprits/aïtou’) and hence dangerous beings; thus violence was an expected outcome: As soon as they [Papālagi ships] were seen from far away, the inhabitants gathered on the shore. They would sit and form half a circle; in the middle, a young girl of rank who enjoyed a reputation for chastity was chanting and moving her fan, as if she was moving the ships away, and she was uttering sacred words: ‘Go away, go away from our peaceful land, you malignant spirits’ (Monfat, ibid.).4

We have no way of ascertaining the conditions under which these stories were recorded by the Marists nor the exact phrasing of their indigenous informants. Nevertheless, the idea that in the first contacts the Papālagi were considered by the Samoans as some kind of spiritual beings is consistent with the kind of offerings that had been presented to them (we have already noted the presence of sacred birds and branches of kava).

As for the ceremonial virgin’s chant, the description is too different from any of the Western clichés about the South Seas to be a sheer invention. But most significantly it is consistent with some later ethnographic data. The girl was chanting while the rest of the people ‘sat’ in a ‘circle’: it is likely that they were holding a tapua’iga, the silent gathering which I mentioned when discussing the lowered blinds of the marriage house and which was always required in the

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4 Les Samoans, convaincus que l’universalité par les hommes se concentrait dans leurs îles, tenaient pour des génies (aïtou) les hommes des vaisseaux qu’ils voyaient passer au large. Aussitôt qu’on les avait signalés, tous accouraient sur le rivage. Ils s’y rangeaient en demi-cercle; au milieu, une jeune fille noble, ayant une bonne réputation de vertu, chantait en agitant un éventail, comme pour éloigner le navire, des paroles sacrées: ‘Eloignez-vous, éloignez-vous de notre paisible terre, aitous malfaisants!’
context of a difficult endeavour. Her central role and her words are also congruent with what we know of the role of ceremonial virgins in case of war: they would stand in the front line to attract the attention of the protective deities of the group and/or to be taken as wives by the enemy in case of defeat, thus allowing a massacre to be avoided and war to be transformed into alliance (Schoeffel 1979, 1995; Tcherkézoff 2003b: 395-7). We could also note Lapérouse’s first observation when he entered Samoan waters. After a night in the channel between Ta’ū and Ofu-Olosega before any canoes had approached the ship to make offerings, the following day he noticed that there was a large group of Samoans, seated in a circle, who were observing them: ‘when we were to windward of the island [of Ta’ū] we have seen some houses and a fairly large group of Indians seated in a circle under some coconut trees who seemed to be enjoying quite calmly the spectacle we offered them’ (Dunmore ed. 1995: 386).

Finally, the conclusion that the Polynesians did not wish to have the Papālagi on their shores, or at least did not wish to have them there for long, is consistent with some of the data recorded about other first contacts. There are descriptions of how the Tahitian and Hawaiian chiefs did indeed try to have their visitors’ stay shortened (Tcherkézoff in press-1). The presence of the Papālagi certainly inspired both ‘admiration’ and ‘terror’ in the Samoans, as Vidal expressed it. But once that sense of ‘admiration’ was fulfilled through receiving (or seizing) the Papālagi objects (and, in a number of cases, through having girls impregnated by the Papālagi powers), the possibility that these creatures, who delivered death (they had shot dead a number of their fellows) as well as life, would stay forever or for a long time was quite understandably a source of ‘terror’ for them. This was not the kind of religious terror and awe that leads to prayer and submission, as in the attitude shown towards the great gods, the main atua such as Tagaloa. Rather, it was the kind of terror that leads to combatting an enemy, and this was precisely the Samoan attitude towards their ‘spirits’ (aitu). This attitude was recorded several times by the early LMS missionaries: people would call the aitu to come and ‘fight’ when they attributed some misfortune to the spirits’ actions.5

If we assume that the Samoans considered the French to be some kind of aitu, then a feeling of terror leading to fighting may have arisen among them. Perhaps it grew even stronger when they saw that the French, although they had boarded their longboats now that the episodes of gift-giving (and possibly impregnation) were over, were not moving away. The French were just waiting for the tide, but to the Samoans it might well have looked as if their visitors were there to stay.

5 See Stair (1897: 181-2, 228-9, 231, 265-6). In 1983 I was told by eye witnesses that such things occurred in the 1970s.
8. Other interpretations

The story of a beachcomber

We should also take careful note of what a beachcomber from Tonga, who came to Samoa in the late 1790s, told George Bass, the first visitor to arrive in Samoa after Lapérouse (Bass was getting supplies for Botany Bay and came once, sometime in the period from 1802 to 1806. The beachcomber related an incident that was said to have taken place on Lapérouse’s ships: a Samoan chief had several times offered a roast pig to one of the French officers, but as the latter was busy with his work, he became annoyed with the Samoan and struck him with his sword, causing him to bleed (Linnekin 1991: 16). In contemporary Samoa, to strike a chief offering a pig would indeed be an immediate declaration of war. If we pay any credit to this story, it may be remembered that the attack in the cove began after the return of the numerous canoes that had been ‘bartering’ at sea with the ships, and therefore after this deeply offending incident. But this could only have been an additional reason for the Samoan assault on the stranded party. The main context that we should keep in mind is the European (mis)handling of the beads and the Samoan will to seize those signs of life.

Augustin Krämer’s interpretation: ‘Où est la femme?’

Augustin Krämer, the noted German Samoanist of the late 19th century, offered his own interpretation of the killing (1995: II: 16-18). Kramer had formed the impression, during his various trips in the archipelago, that the Tutuilan boys, by comparison with the men of the other Samoan islands, were particularly violent: ‘among the Samoans indeed those of Tutuila are the most savage and brutal’. He also thought that these boys could not accept the fact that the girls had been ‘sold’ by their relatives to the French, and so a fight had started immediately. In fact, it seems that this interpretation had been proposed by some earlier European visitors, in relation to certain ‘stereotypes of French national character’ (Linnekin 1991: 16). It provides an interesting case of a European, non-French, projection of their own negative feeling towards the stereotype of the French male as sexual conqueror onto the Samoan males. And indeed, this stereotype was already well-entrenched by that time: one of Bougainville’s companions, Felix Fesche, wrote in 1768 that, in front of the Tahitian women, he and his mates had to keep up their reputation as ardent lovers that Frenchmen enjoyed all over Europe.6

Interestingly enough, Krämer adds that, from what he could observe in Samoa in the 1890s concerning the behaviour of female adolescents, he could not

6 …la galanterie et de la bouillante ardeur si généralement reconnue dans les francois, Journal de Fesche, in Taillemite (ed. 1968: 12-13 note 2).
possibly accept Vaujuas’s suggestion that the girls offered themselves willingly. In 1787, the girls whom Vaujuas wrote about must have been forced to act as they did. They would have to have been ‘sold’ by their ‘greedy’ parents, and all of this must have angered the young men.

There are several steps to Krämer’s interpretation. First, Krämer himself reveals the preconception informing his interpretation that the problem had arisen from the sexual offers purportedly made by the young girls. As he sees it, ‘in the South Seas’, female sexuality is frequently at the root of conflict:

It is well known that Samoans are thieves, as will be enlarged upon further below under Jurisprudence [Krämer is introducing his second volume of ethnography]. Accordingly one must not consider acts of violence among them impossible, such as Cook, the Duff and the Port au Prince on which Mariner served, suffered among the Tongans. However here it would indeed seem to me that, as is unfortunately so often the case especially in the South Seas, the issue was in part ‘où est la femme?’ [in French in the text: ‘where is the woman?’]. For de Vaujuas states p. 256: ‘Il y avait parmi eux un certain nombre de femmes et de filles très jeunes qui s’offraient à nous … (There were among them a certain number of women and very young girls who offered themselves…)’ [Krämer quotes the 18th-century publication of Lapérouse’s narrative] (Krämer 1995: II: 16).

Krämer then advances his argument about the violent character of the Tutuilans who would have been angered to see that the girls were sold. Finally, he is able to conclude that ‘the blame must be sought on both sides’.

We can, of course, discard all of this as a fantasy on the part of the German Doctor, but we must remember his observation relating to the 1890s: in his time at least, young women could not be seen offering themselves to strangers. In Krämer’s account, these ‘excesses’ (the ‘girls who offered themselves’ alluded to by Vaujuas)

must have enraged the Samoan young men. For this was not a case of girls voluntarily debasing themselves, as de Vaujuas claims; La Pérouse points that out too clearly [in the previous lines, Krämer quoted Lapérouse’s description of the ‘sacrifice’ in the ‘prominent hut’]; the young Samoan women do not loosely give themselves to strangers today any more than in former times, but those were forced by their greedy relatives to sell themselves (ibid.: 17).

A similar observation about the reserved attitude of Samoan adolescent girls would also be valid for contemporary times (Tcherkézoff 1999, 2003b: chapter 7). Although Krämer reflected male bias in his belief that everywhere and ‘especially in the South Seas’ the ultimate reason for fighting among men would
be ‘la femme’, at least he had noted the contradiction between the description of the only sexual scene found in Lapérouse’s narrative (where the ‘girls’ are forced to act as they did) and the remarks by Lapérouse and Vaujuas that the girls ‘offered themselves’.

9. Noble and Ignoble Savage…

‘I am angry with the philosophers…’

The killings of that fateful 11 December provoked a century of discussions which sought an explanation for the outbreak of violence (Krämer ibid.; Linnekin 1991) and also contributed to the creation of the image of the Ignoble Savage. I have already cited Lapérouse’s words describing the Samoa he had seen on his first landing: the tone was entirely in the vein of Bougainville’s vision of the Noble Savage. But, after the attack at the cove, the impression now conveyed was somewhat different. It was not so much that the Garden of Eden and Land of Abundance theme was abandoned but, rather, that the philosophical conclusions about the ‘Savage’ which could be drawn from it were different. Jocelyn Linnekin has drawn our attention to a letter written by Lapérouse in Botany Bay two months later:

I am… a thousand times more angry with the philosophers, who so enthusiastically extol savage nations, than with the savages themselves… Lamanon [the naturalist of the expedition, who was among the 11 dead]…, told me, the evening before his death, that these men were better than ourselves… A navigator… ought to consider the savages as enemies… whom, without sufficient reason, it would be… barbarous to destroy; but whose hostile attempts he has a right to prevent (Linnekin 1991: 8).

Lapérouse thereby inaugurated the transformation of Bougainville’s stereotype of the Noble Savage into an equally stereotyped Ignoble Savage, whose image was to persist for many decades. Already, in his narrative, Lapérouse wrote that right after leaving Tutuila where the ‘massacre’ occurred, he decided to abandon his previous interest in the ‘history’ (the customs) of the Samoans and to avoid any further landing in the Samoan archipelago:

I decided that I would land only at Botany Bay in New Holland where I proposed to build the longboat I had on board. But for the advancement of geography I felt that I ought to explore the various islands [of the Samoan group] I would come upon, accurately determine their latitude and longitude, communicate with these people through their canoes which, laden with foodstuffs, travel two or three leagues from the coast to trade with vessels, and I left to others the task of writing their history which like that of all barbarous people is of slight interest. A 24-hour
stay with an account of our misfortunes is sufficient to describe their atrocious ways, their crafts and the products of one of the most beautiful countries of the world (Dunmore ed. 1995: 405).

The tone was left for posterity: Samoans are barbarians with ‘atrocious ways’ but they nonetheless inhabit a ‘most beautiful country’.

**The London Missionary Society and the Marists**

Linnekin’s study of 1991 also showed clearly how Lapérouse’s complete narrative, published in France in 1797, was widely read in Europe and immediately translated into several languages. One of the consequences was the publication of numerous fictional or biographical writings about Lapérouse which were in great demand among the general public—the complete disappearance of the expedition in 1788 had created an aura of mystery around the French captain which was to last for forty years. All of this literature of course accorded a central place to the ‘massacre’ in Tutuila, and heavily exploited Lapérouse’s theme of a contrast between a beautiful country and its ferocious inhabitants (Linnekin 1991: 11 and ff.). This literary tradition began at the beginning of the 19th century and continued for fifty years.

But, after the late 1840s, the interpretation of this event changed with the advent of the English missionaries. In their writings and commentaries it now appeared that the Samoans had been provoked by the French, a view which they passed on to Commodore Wilkes who visited Samoa in the period when Anglo-French rivalry was increasing in the Pacific. Furthermore, by the mid-1830s Samoa had become a common port of call for commercial vessels and had thus acquired a reputation as a peaceful and hospitable country. Accordingly, after this we find that the dominant theme of the Anglophone literature was that the Samoans were not to be blamed for what had occurred at the cove: they were a peaceful people, and what happened there was due to the French having shot and killed one of their number (ibid.: 21).

We have seen that the Marists of the time, even though they still held to the French explanation of Samoan greed for European goods, also inferred a kind of unfortunate escalation, from an unplanned single assault to a general attack, in a context of tension and terror (the Samoan considered the new visitors as ‘spirit’-like creatures). Among the Marists, Padel also repeated what he has been told by the Protestants: the theory of the offending Samoan group from another island. But he added a remark that could only have been invented by a French visitor. It shows us that, for the French visitors at least, the ‘massacre’ was still viewed in the mid-19th century as a recent event. Padel wrote in 1847 to his superior in France: My dear Revered Father,

… we left Täitì at the end of August and touched the first islands of the *vicariat central de l’Océanie* on the 7th of september [1846]; the first land
we touched was the island of Tutuila; we stayed there about eight days. We were not really welcomed: our cross on the flag at the top of the mast and the presence of eight catholic priests were more than enough to distress the protestant ministers who are the masters here. Moreover our French identity was a source of fear for the natives; in this island, but in a different bay than our mooring place, Lapeyrouse’s second in command and eight or nine sailors have been massacred; hence the name of the place: baie des Assassins. Since that time, the natives always fear that the French will come back to avenge the death of their compatriots. Yet those who perpetrated this assassination are not the inhabitants of this island, but some young men of Upolu who were here to make war and who, taken by the feeling of victory as if they were drunk, massacred these men whom they found unable to defend themselves (Padel, letter of 15 April 1847, in Girard ed., 1999: III: 336; my translation).

Of course, one can guess that it was the LMS missionaries, and British beachcombers working with them, who did their best to make Padel and his comrades believe that, as French people, they would not be welcomed by the ‘natives’. But apparently Padel took the bait without question.

The Noble and the Ignoble… gender: ‘Diana’ and ‘Hercules’

Let us return to Lapérouse, who decided that he did not want to make any more landings or spend any more time describing the Samoans’ ‘atrocious ways’ of living. It was with this vision of the Ignoble Savage that Lapérouse left Tutuila island and sailed past Upolu and then Savai‘i, following his westward route. But his comments on the contacts made at sea off the coast of these Samoan islands reveal an interesting nuance. Standing offshore from Upolu, on the morning of 14 December [we] were surrounded by numberless canoes loaded with breadfruit, coconuts, bananas, sugar cane, pigeons and sultana hens; but very few pigs... [In the afternoon, we were] opposite a very wide plain filled with houses from the hilltops down to the edge of the sea … roughly in the middle of the island … The sea was filled with canoes … As there were women and children among them it was almost a sure sign that they harboured no evil intentions, but we

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7 This is the first reference to the event by Padel: it is not yet his own interpretation but only what he hears from the Protestants on his arrival: Nous sommes partis de Taiti à la fin du mois d’aôût, et nous sommes arrivés aux premières îles du vicariat central d’Océanie le 7 du mois de septembre; la première terre que nous avons rencontrée, c’est l’île de Tutuila; nous y avons relâché, et y avons séjourné une huitaine de jours. Nous n’avons pas été trop bien reçus dans cet endroit; la croix qui flottait au haut de notre grand mât et la présence de huit prêtres catholiques étaient plus qu’il n’en fallait pour émouvoir les ministres protestants qui y dominent. De plus notre qualité de Français effrayait les naturels; dans cette île, mais dans une baie différente de celle où nous étions mouillés ont été massacres le second et huit ou neuf matelots de Lapeyrouse, qui donna à ce lieu le nom de baie des Assassins. Depuis ce temps les naturels craignent toujours que les Français ne viennent venger la mort de leurs compatriotes. Ce ne sont cependant pas les habitants de cette île qui ont commis cet assassinat, mais des jeunes gens d’Upolu qui étaient allés là faire la guerre et qui dans l’ivresse de la joie que donne la victoire massacrèrent ces hommes qu’ils trouvèrent sans défense.
had strong reasons not to trust in it any longer … they preferred a single bead to an axe or a six-inch nail. Among a fairly large number of women I noticed two or three who were very pretty and one could have thought had served as a model for the charming drawing of the Present Bearer of Cook’s third voyage, their hair was adorned with flowers and a green ribbon like a head-band plaited with grass and moss, their shape was elegant, their arms rounded and very well proportioned, their eyes, their features, their movement spoke of gentleness whereas those of the men depicted ferocity and surprise. In any one sculptor study the latter would have been taken for Hercules and the young women for Diana, or her nymphs whose complexion would have been exposed for quite some time to the effects of the open air and the sun (ibid.: 412-13; my emphasis).

We can see that the Ignoble Savage type, which, after 11 December, came to dominate Lapérouse’s characterisation of the Samoans, was largely restricted to the men. Lapérouse was certainly influenced by Bougainville’s book and the narratives of Cook and Banks (as re-phrased by Hawkesworth). In his references to the Samoan women, the descriptive style continues to resemble Bougainville’s. This is another strong indication that we are entitled to take the influence of Bougainville’s views into account when we read Lapérouse’s and Vaujuas’s allusions to the ‘favours offered’ by Samoan females. Indeed, the Western ideal-type of the lascivious-but-innocent vahine, invented by Commerson in 1769 and by Bougainville in 1771, and confirmed by Hawkesworth in 1773, was the vision of Polynesian women that would overwhelm all others in the Western imagination. This was particularly true for the French, even a captain lamenting the ‘massacre’ of his men.

17 December: offshore from Savai’i, no canoes came out, probably because the French were now more distant from the coast. So ended this memorable French visit to the Samoan islands—the first encounter on land, the first time that Samoans were killed by the Papālagi, and the very start of Western misconceptions about the sexual behaviour of Samoan girls.

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8 Once again we see the Samoans coming forward with ritual decorum, as in 1722 (the girl with the necklace of blue beads), and as in 1791 (headdresses and necklaces made from flowers, see next chapter).