Chapter 6
Commercial vessels. Another French visit: Lafond de Lurcy

1. Whalers and merchants of the 1820s-1830s

Besides the scientific expeditions in the Pacific, which were under way by the 1760s, issuing mainly from England and France, and the military-diplomatic expeditions, which began in the late 1830s, a whole fleet of whalers and trading vessels invaded Pacific waters from the end of the 18th century and during the first half of the 19th century. The whalers extracted oil from the harpooned whales by heating. The merchants were searching for sandalwood and bêche-de-mer (and furs in the North Pacific), which they took to Manila and Canton, and returned with tea. Soon after, the trade for coconut oil, first transported in its liquid form, later as copra (dried flesh of the nut), greatly increased shipping traffic. The Pacific thus suffered an invasion by these ships beginning in the late 1790s. But as we have seen, the Samoan archipelago remained relatively isolated for some time. Until the late 1820s and early 1830s, ships looked elsewhere for provisions of water and food during their whaling campaigns or their search for sandalwood. Kotzebue’s narrative of his visit in the mid-1820s, published in English only in 1830, was the first ‘discoverer’s’ narrative to inform captains that the contact could be pacific. Although Kotzebue still described the Samoans as the ‘most ferocious people’, he himself had never been attacked by them.

But even before the publication of Kotzebue’s account, tales from whalers had begun to change the reputation of Samoa. Thanks to the detailed study of Rhys Richards (1992), we know for certain that the traffic within Samoan waters remained very low until the mid-1830s. In the previous ten years there were less than a dozen visits. But those returning on these ships told that the reputation of Samoa was perhaps inaccurate and that, in any case, the islands there had much to offer in terms of provisions of wood, water and fresh food. In 1834 and 1835, the number of recorded visits suddenly jumped to forty-two. The first permanent establishment of missionaries in Samoa also occurred in the year 1836. This followed on from short visits by Methodists from Tonga in the late 1820s and the pioneering visit of John Williams for the London Missionary Society in 1830 and 1832, not to mention the presence of the small group of Tahitian and Rarotongan ‘teachers’ left in Samoa by the same Williams from 1830.

Ships brought beachcombers (seamen quitting their job or escaped convicts from Botany Bay); and the news that established adventurers were present
brought new ships, because captains knew that they would find people who could act as interpreters and intermediaries with the local inhabitants. Beachcombers made their profit in two ways: by offering their services to captains of incoming ships; and living off the backs of the islanders by exploiting the prestige that accrued to them from their specialised knowledge (iron instruments, firearms) and activity (military adviser and firing man in local wars, blacksmith, carpenter) (Ralston 1977, Campbell 1998).

In Samoa, from 1836, missionaries posed a challenge to these adventurers, as they now themselves assumed the role of intermediaries and interpreters. From 1839, newly established ‘consuls’ from Great Britain or the United States also began to play their part. Britain initiated the trend in Samoa with a ‘vice-consul’, W.C. Cunningham, while the ‘consul’ (and former missionary) George Pritchard was based in Tahiti. Later, when Pritchard was expelled by the newly French colonial administration, he took up the position in Samoa. From 1839, regular trading was active. Commercial exports from Samoa were taking place in 1842: J. C. Williams, the son of John Williams, the pioneer missionary, established himself as a trader and began to export coconut oil. The German firm Godeffroy and Son arrived in the late 1850s and started the copra-drying process. The commercial plantation system was established in the mid-1860s.

But let us return to the 1820s. The first commercial ship was a whaler, which apparently came in 1824 but no documentation is available (Richards 1992: 20). The second or third visit would have been in 1827. It was made by Captain Benjamin Vanderford on the Clay.

2. 1827: Vanderford

Barter was conducted with the Samoans, at sea, off Tutuila and Upolu, by the crew of the Clay. Captain Vanderford’s account remained within the tradition of reporting inaugurated by Bougainville and reinforced by Lapérouse. Vanderford accordingly found the Samoans more ‘savage’ than the Tahitians and lacking any physical beauty. He even quotes Bougainville to that effect. His conclusion was brief regarding Tutuila: ‘The natives were very distant and shy. Never a woman with them. At 4 p.m. a person of some note among them came on board, the first that would venture’.

This man appeared to have been ‘kissing the Captain’s feet’. If this really happened, we may see in his gesture a sign that, for the Samoans, the Papālagi had now become a closer kind of creature to themselves. The ‘kiss’ signifies a relationship between humans—keeping in mind that throughout Polynesia what was often called a ‘kiss’ by Westerners was in fact contact between the nose of the person saluting, and either the nose, or the hand, or the feet of the person

---

1 And was briefly succeeded by his son William, the author of Polynesian Reminiscences, to whom we owe the second earliest first-person account of a Samoan marriage (see chapter 3, section 5).
saluted, according to equality (nose to nose), or inequality, of rank. The Samoan then proceeded to tell a long story. By picking out some words, the captain had the impression that the story told of men killed on the other side of the island (the violent encounter with the French in 1787?). The captain, of course, found in this man all the signs of extreme ‘savagery’, even thinking that he heard his story make reference to cannibalistic meals. And so, ‘not liking our new friend, we sent him away’.

Captain Vanderford noted that the canoes around his ship were filled with armed men. He has something to say about the ‘ugliness’ of the men, and adds for the women:

The women were tolerable. Two of them those of Oupora and Oyolava [Upolu and Tutuila] had crooked hair. It is true that many of them and some of them [sic] looked very savage. At first sight (recollecting Bougainville’s misfortune together with many wondrous [sic] sailor’s tales [Vanderford is probably confusing Bougainville and Lapérouse]) one is led to look at them with a sort of horror (Richards 1992: 21).

The ‘crooked’ hair of two of the women could mean that two virgins were presented as brides-to-be—as with Kotzebue—although the vagueness of the term used by the captain does not allow any certitude.

3. 1827: Plasket

In 1827, the whaling ship *Independence* also came to Samoan waters. The Captain, William Plasket, noted in his log-book:

3 January. Began trading… We have now on board the greatest chief of these islands, his name is Matta-tow-ata, and about 26 girls of the first quality. Canoes all around the ship trading.


8 January. Employed in discharging the ladies and sent them ashore. Also the head chief of these islands. Took our departure (Richards 1992: 22).

The Chief apparently came with a whole aualuma (the ceremonial group of unmarried girls of his village), as was customary when receiving visitors from another village or another island. The captain does not mention any sexual proposals, which is not surprising because no instance of a collective sexual offering to visitors by an aualuma has ever been mentioned by any source. And if we were to suppose that the puritan attitude of these captains—indeed a number of them were Quakers—would prevent them from mentioning any such happening, we would then have to ask why in this case the Captain mentioned
the presence of these ‘26 girls of the first quality’ at all instead of omitting the whole episode.

4. April 1831: Gabriel Lafond de Lurcy

It is not unexpected that it was again a French captain who would explicitly recall Bougainville’s scenes of the ‘New Cythera’ in relation to Samoa, but it comes as a surprise that his conclusion bears on the stark difference between the two places. Lafond insists that the need for him to make a factual report obliged him to admit that Samoa presented none of the opportunities that greeted Bougainville’s men in Tahiti:

The women were the joyous children of nature described with such charm by Bougainville and Lapérouse. All seemed to suggest that they would be found with little virtue, but my task as a historian forces me to add that the only favours they accorded our seductive lovelaces on board were inconsequential frustrations.

An unexpected visit

Lafond de Lurcy lost his ship in a storm in Tongan waters and embarked on the Lloyd, a whaler bound for Guam. In April 1831, the boat called at Apia for provisions of water and food (Lafond de Lurcy 1845: 5). The visits of foreign ships had by then become common enough for a system of piloting to be in place. A man came up in his canoe to meet the Lloyd and to guide her through the reef. He spoke in Tongan (using the words ‘lélé/covi’ [‘right/wrong’], to correct the direction taken by the whaling boat; ibid.: 6). Was he Tongan, or did he think that speaking Tongan would make him better understood? Numerous canoes approached the ship and the Samoans seemed quite self-assured.

Lafond disembarked and met two British men who ‘had been residing in the place for long time’. These men pretended that they had been taken by force by the Samoans of Tutuila when their boat had called there. Lafond suspected that this was a pretext to hide what could have been a desertion, and he refers to rumours about a British whaling ship that had lost seventeen men in Apia a few months before. We can see that in 1830-1831 Samoa was already an appealing place for beachcombers.

Descriptions

Lafond visited the houses (ibid.: 10, 16); noted the tattooing of the men (from the navel to halfway down the thigh, depuis le nombril jusqu’à la moitié des cuisses, p. 17) and the hair style (long for men, very short for women); wrote down estimates of population, as given to him by his European informants (in thousands: ‘Seval’ twenty-five, ‘Opouzou’ twenty-two, ‘Tou-Tou-ila’ twelve, ‘Manona’ nine, ‘Apolima’ five, ‘le groupe seul de Manoua’ twenty-five); and
established a short list of words. His text also contains a description of such items as canoes and tools.

5. Beads and girls. ‘Grandeur et décadence’ of the gift of beads

Lafond and the captain, a man named How, went on to visit the village of Faleata. Lafond observed the canoes with sails and outriggers, the beautiful canoe of the Chief, ‘35 pieds’ long, the fishing gear, the wooden kava bowls (ibid.: 15-18). They were received with great hospitality and gave the Chief some metal objects. The Chief was pleased, made the formal gesture of thanks by bowing slightly and lifting the gifts above his head, and then asked for blue beads: ‘the chief asked us for Souma-mea-Houni, that is, blue glass beads, about as big as a fingertip, which were very much in demand in these islands’.  

Lafond and How then saw that six or eight beads were enough to acquire a large hog, and they bartered in this way for several of them. They made the Chief understand that they had more of these beads on board. As soon as the people assembled there understood what was being conveyed, all the men sent their children to go and take all kinds of provisions to the ship. Lafond adds:

The chief went even so far—I will confess his shameful act—that he offered us two of his daughters, and he added that, in return for some of these beads, there wouldn’t be a single mariner among us who couldn’t find a wife for himself on the island (ibid.: 16).

This is the only other passage in Lafond’s description where the question of sexual contacts is mentioned.

It is important, of course, to note the second sentence before trying to interpret the first one. This was not an offer of sexual hospitality for one night. It was an offer of marriage, in the sense that in Samoa in those days it signified that the girl’s family was trying their best to have her marry a man of superior rank. Between Samoans, the young girl would be offered to a chief, the family hoping to beget progeny that would link them to the chief’s name. The family would also receive a large share of those marriage gifts that came from the male side: cooked food, implements for house building, canoe building and so on. This scheme had been applied by Samoans to the Papālagi and to the Papālagi’s riches (‘oloa), which included food (salted beef, tins of biscuit), implements (metal

---

2 Le chef nous demanda des Souma-mea-Houni, c’est à dire des grains de verre d’un bleu porcelaine, gros comme le bout du doigt, qui étaient alors très recherchés dans ces îles. (As there is no Samoan word referring to beads that resembles the awkward ‘Souma-mea-Houni’, Lafond’s transcription could indicate that he heard the Samoan chief say: se aumai mea uma! ‘would you bring all of it!’; ‘mea-Houni’ could have been mea umi ‘long things’, referring to the beads ‘about as big as a fingertip’, in which case the whole expression could have been se uma mea umi ‘[bring] all the long things!’.)

3 Le chef alla même, je l’avouerai à sa honte, jusqu’à nous offrir deux de ses filles, et il ajouta que, moyennant quelques-uns de ces grains de verre, il n’était pas un de nos matelots qui ne pût prendre femme dans l’île.
tools and European cloth) and also those famous beads. I have already hypothesised that this was the context of the scene described by Lapérouse.

It is my contention that these beads had long been famous, possibly since 1616 as a life-giving gift, when the Dutch killed a number of Tongans and then gave gifts of beads to the survivors. In fact, Lafond noted that when they went on and called at the Samoan island of Savai’i two British residents (‘escaped, I think, from Botany Bay’) told him that ‘Samoan chiefs immensely value these beads, and prisoners in wars can purchase their freedom with a necklace of about twenty of these beads’ (ibid.: 24).

This comment by Lafond is arguably the most important observation about the social importance of these beads in Samoan history. It also turns out to be the last time that these beads are mentioned at all. Soon after, the two-century-long story of the blue beads will come to an end. It is not clear exactly how long the high value of these beads lasted, but sources indicate that in Samoa, by the mid-1840s, it was European cloth and rolls of material which were most valued, certainly under missionary pressure and the new rules of dress for church services. Not only did beads lose their prominent role in the exchanges with visitors, but they were no longer even mentioned.5 A new era was beginning. By that time, according to what the missionary Mills said to Captain Home, who visited in 1844, there were sixteen missionaries in Samoa (they were highly concentrated: there were ten just for the island of Upolu), and there were also some sixty ‘Englishmen deserters, all of bad character’ (Home 1850). The same year saw the opening of the Malua Theological College, near Apia, where all the Samoan ‘teachers’ were to be educated.

6. Last days of Lafond’s visit
In Savai’i, Lafond and his party again met with a Tongan, who introduced himself as ‘Tangata Tonga’ and told them he was a member of a crew that navigated regularly between Tonga and Samoa. Lafond mentions this ‘grande pirogue double’, the same, he says, as one he had seen previously in Tonga, and which, according to his memory, had been coming from Fiji with ‘about thirty people’ on board (ibid.: 25-6). He also mentions that the Tongan had his two little fingers cut at the first joint. This is a common occurrence in Tonga, Lafond adds, and is practised as a sign of grief when one loses one’s parents or one’s chief.6

---

4 Les chefs samoens attachaient une importance immense à ces grains de verre, et [que] les prisonniers faits dans les guerres pouvaient racheter leur liberté avec un collier d’une vingtaine de grains.
5 See Home (1850: 220, 223; his observations of 1844) and Worth (1852: 542; his observations of March-May 1846).
6 Lafond provides specific details about the man they met: ‘les petits doigts étaient coupés à la première phalange’; and then generalises: ‘Vous savez messieurs que la plupart des habitants de Tonga ont les deux premières phalanges des petits doigts de chaque main enlevées. Ils se les coupent en signe de douleur lorsqu’ils perdent leurs chefs, leurs parents, et les mères ont même la barbarie, à la mort d’un chef vénéré, de faire à leurs enfants cette cruelle opération avec leurs dents, la blessure étant ensuite cicatrisée avec des charbons
Lafond’s description of their landing in Savai’i is also worth noting (*ibid.*: 20-3). The ship was left out at sea and they embarked on two small boats. Immediately, ‘two hundred young and old women swam towards us’. The only comment made by Lafond is that the women manifested a great ‘curiosity’ and that it was difficult to prevent an invasion by these ‘sirens’.

Men also surrounded them, sitting in canoes or swimming. Lafond allowed the ‘Chief’, escorted by a young man, to climb on board; both were swimming among the others because the force of the waves had prevented them from sitting on their canoe. Food was offered to the Chief. Soon after, other Samoans managed to climb onto the ship. But when the food left by their Chief was presented to them, they refused to eat it and did not even want to drink from the coconut which ‘the *arii*’, as Lafond says, had in his hand. Showing great curiosity, the Samoans seemed to discover a number of things, including mirrors, as if for the first time.

The young man accompanying him hid from the Chief for a time and gave Lafond and How to understand that he wanted to stay on board and to depart with them. How refused and Lafond felt that the young man seemed to express an immense sorrow:

The savage was very vexed at the lack of success of his request; for he seemed to want to hide from the old chief when he was asking this of me, and tears glinted in his eyes, when he left with his venerable companion, proving to me that in the Samoas, as everywhere, there are men who instinctively have a burning desire to travel (p. 23). We will never know the name of this Samoan who had wanted to emulate the fate of ‘O-mai’ and ‘Aotourou’, the two Tahitians who, sixty years earlier, had convinced Cook and Bougainville respectively to accept them as passengers on the trip back to Europe. Indeed, in all these Polynesian-European first contacts, there were Polynesians who wanted to make a ‘voyage of discovery’ and to

---

7 Nous eûmes toutes les peines du monde à nous défendre contre l’invasion de ces sirènes qui manifestaient à notre égard la curiosité la plus vive. Les hommes ne tardèrent pas aussi à nous entourer …

8 Lafond is using the Tahitian word *arii*, or transcribes in Tahitian fashion the Samoan word for ‘chief’, *ali‘i*. We have here a clear instance of the rule relating to the well-known Polynesian taboo regarding sacred chiefs: no one could touch them or anything they had touched (out of fear of sickness and ensuing death). They were ‘untouchable’, *tapu* (in Samoa: *sā*), because of the *mana*-type powers that were incorporated in them.

9 Le sauvage fut vivement contrarié du peu de succès de sa requête; car il avait paru vouloir se cacher du vieux chef lorsqu’il me faisait cette demande, et quelques larmes que je vis briller dans ses yeux, lorsqu’il nous quitta avec son vénérable compagnon, me prouvèrent qu’aux Samoa, comme partout, il est des hommes que tourmente un instinct voyageur.
discover the *Papālagi*… *Comme partout, il est des hommes que tourmente un instinct voyageur.*

### 7. Conclusion on Lafond’s visit

Lafond’s various descriptions and notations, such as on the life-saving use of blue beads, indicates to us that he had time to make some inquiries and to converse with the people, at least with the newly-established European residents mentioned in his narrative. If these Westerners had really seen in Samoa a generalised free-sex pre-marital life, they would have undoubtedly talked about it with Lafond de Lurcy. He himself must have asked questions of this kind, since he tells us that he had in mind Bougainville’s description of Tahiti and that he had been surprised to find such a difference in Samoa.

Lafond’s account will be confirmed by Dumont d’Urville’s own surprise in 1838. But Dumont d’Urville will account for this difference as being entirely due to missionary influence (exercised permanently since 1836). Yet, Lafond’s account—based on his observations of 1831, before any discernible missionary influence—bears testimony that Dumont d’Urville’s explanation of this difference in 1838 cannot be sustained.

### 8. 1832: John Stevens

A young surgeon on a whaler, John Stevens quit his ship when it called at Manono (one of the two small Samoan islands situated between Upolu and Savai’i). The missionary Williams met him on his arrival in 1832 (during Williams’s second visit) and saw in him ‘a respectable young man’. In his journals, Williams tells us how Stevens described to him his own arrival in Samoa:

> When he first went on shore among them, the females gathered around him in great numbers, and some took their mats off before him, exposing their persons as much as possible to his view. Perceiving him bashful, the whole of women [sic], old and young, did the same and began dancing in that state before him desiring him not to be bashful or angry as it was Fa’aSamoan, or Samoan Fashion (Moyle ed., 1984: 232).

In order to understand what happened, one must read Williams’s description of the Samoan dances of the time, when a village group welcomed visitors from another village. It was the ‘most obscene’ dance, says Williams, that the Samoans practised at that time. But his description, far from mentioning any sexual offers and sexual hospitality, shows how groups of adolescents did indeed strip off during the final moments of the dance and had a competition to produce the most outrageous and hilarious display in their telling of sexual jokes and their

---

10 There was no missionary on the islands, only the few ‘teachers’ left by Williams *less than a year* before.
sexually suggestive movements. But all of this took place under the surveillance of the old people, who were in charge of the whole performance. The only girls involved in this final performance were the village virgins. After the dances by older women, the young ‘virgins’ of the village (as explicitly stated by Williams), who always played the main role in receiving the visitors from another village, presented themselves in a state of nudity. But this presentation was not the prelude to anything more (Tcherkézoff 2003b: 384-98).\textsuperscript{11}

As to an explanation of the girls’ nakedness in such performances, it lends itself to three possible interpretations each of which is in fact a variant of the same fundamental hypothesis about the sacredness of the unmarried female. The first, following Sahlins’s analysis for Hawaii, would see in it a theatrical display deriving from a mythology in which male fertility gods were attracted by mortal females. A second hypothesis would refer to how, throughout Polynesia, a very formal manner of greeting a visitor was for high-ranking females to undo the fine mat or barkcloth that enveloped their body and then offer it to the visitors (see chapter 10). A third explanation would look to the typical battle formation of pre-Christian Samoa in which the virgins stood in the front line of the army (see chapter 4, section 7).

\textsuperscript{11} Williams’s account is in his journals (Moyle ed. 1984: 246-7) and in Moyle’s study of the Samoan music and dances (Moyle 1988: 208-9, 222). Richards (1992: 29) gives some details about Stevens’s life.