Chapter 7

The late 1830s: Dumont d’Urville and Wilkes; Jackson and Erskine

1. August 1838: J.-S.-C. Dumont d’Urville, an overview

Jules-Sebastien-César Dumont d’Urville is the second and only other witness about Samoan sexual freedom to be called upon by both Williamson and Côté (see Introduction). ‘D’Urville says that girls were entirely free to dispose of their persons till married’, they tell us. And indeed, Dumont d’Urville’s general comments on the customs of Samoa do include this statement. But both authors fail to mention that the French captain was merely summarising the view of a local beachcomber whom he had met. They conveniently ignore the fact that even then the man was only referring to a supposed distant past which he had no experience of whatsoever. And they make no mention of the fact that Dumont d’Urville’s own experience on land was that, ‘contrary to Tahiti’, Samoan females in Apia ‘constantly refused’ to grant their favours to the French; although he adds—and this is his only other reference to the subject—that he had been ‘told’ that, in another village further away from the newly established missionary post, things were different. Contrary to Bougainville’s and Lapérouse’s accounts, Dumont d’Urville’s narrative of his voyage has never been translated into English;¹ hence, as is the case for Lafond de Lurcy’s account, many scholars have not scrutinised the original text.

From 1837 to 1840, Dumont d’Urville was given command, by the King of France, of two ships, the corvettes Astrolabe and Zélée, for a voyage to Oceania and the South Pole. It was his second opportunity to command an expedition to the Pacific, after his voyage in 1826-1829 that included Australia, New Zealand, Tonga, Fiji, the New Hebrides, New Ireland and New Britain. It was as a result of this first Pacific voyage that the French captain proposed his ideas on ‘races’ in the Pacific and, in December 1831, coined the name ‘Melanesia’ to describe a whole geographical and racial region in contradistinction to Polynesia. The second voyage took the French to Antarctica, Australia and Fiji and, in Polynesia, to the Marquesas, Tahiti, Samoa, Tonga and New Zealand. Ten volumes recording the history of the voyage and thirteen volumes on various scientific materials were published between 1841 and 1854. Dumont d’Urville died near Paris in 1842. He had the time to edit the first four volumes (Guillon 1986, Rosenman 1992). The Samoan episode is found in volume 4 (Dumont d’Urville 1842: 91-128).

¹ Only excerpts are available (Rosenman 1992).
In September 1838, the French expedition called at Nuku-Hiva (in the Marquesas) and at Tahiti. It is important to note, in relation to the ‘very young girls’ mentioned by Lapérouse’s officer Vaujuas, that Dumont d’Urville was surprised, in Nuku-Hiva, to see how many females were offered to the sailors (ibid.: 6). All were young, he said, ‘from 12 to 18 years of age’ and ‘some much younger, no more than 8 to 10 years’ (ibid.). There were no missionaries there. In Matavai Bay (Tahiti), in his view the situation was much worse even than in Nuku-Hiva: there was a generalised ‘prostitution’ for European goods, and it was occurring even with the presence in Tahiti of the Protestant missionaries (ibid.: 40-90; Rosenman 1992: 147).

Following these two landings, the French arrived that same month in Samoa, and were thus inclined to make a comparison with their two previous ports of call. We shall see that Dumont d’Urville developed the comparison. He had expected to find the same situation in Samoa and this provoked two reactions: (i) he was surprised, from what he observed, to find great differences, and (ii) he was quite ready to believe that this was only due to recent missionary influence and that, ‘before the introduction of Christianity’, native ‘girls were entirely free to dispose of their persons…’.

In this examination of Dumont d’Urville’s visit, I shall merely note how the sentence chosen by Williamson and Côté cannot be considered as valid ethnographic information and must be left out of any discussion on the topic. Later in this chapter, in my analysis of Commodore Wilkes’s visit, which took place the same year, I shall explain why the question of the missionary presence in 1838 is irrelevant to the debate (1836 was the date of the first establishment). Furthermore, Lafond’s account of 1831 has already precluded any explanation of that kind. And John Jackson’s observations made in 1840, on the remote island of Ta’ū (where missionary influence was just beginning), will robustly confirm this conclusion.

2. Arrival in Samoa: meeting with a ‘Mr Frazior’

First the French arrived in the Manu’a group. They were heading for Apia, on Upolu, and were not interested in landing there. Dumont d’Urville noted only that, on arriving to the west of Ta’ū, he saw ‘some natives gathered on the Western point’ (quelques naturels réunis sur la pointe de l’Ouest), at the same place that, fifty years before, Lapérouse had sighted the Samoans for the first time. In the channel between the three islands, ‘two small canoes’ (deux petites pirogues) each carrying ‘three natives’ (trois naturels) came near, but no contact was made. He passed Tutuila, saw inhabitants from far away, and on 25 September arrived at the bay of Apia, where he made a six-day visit (ibid.: 92-3).

A whaler came to meet him at sea and its captain told the French that ‘the islanders of Samoa (the real name of the archipelago) were easy to deal with’ (les
insulaires de Samoa (véritable nom de l’archipel) étaient fort traitables) and that pigs and all kinds of food supplies were plentiful. The whaler introduced to Dumont d’Urville a British local resident by the name of Frazior, who had arrived, he said, six years earlier and who could pilot the French ships into the bay. Frazior went on board the Astrolabe with Dumont d’Urville. A Samoan canoe arrived, carrying another Englishman who also offered his services as a pilot. The latter was placed on the Zélée (ibid.: 94-6). So from the start Dumont d’Urville was guided by Frazior. We shall see that Frazior accompanied the French captain everywhere on land and was the main—indeed the sole—informant of the French.

On disembarking, Dumont d’Urville noted that the attitude of the Samoans made them ‘seem very shy in comparison with Nuku-Hiva and Tahiti’ (paraisissent bien plus réservés qu’à Nouka-Hiva et à Taiti). We can thus see that from the first day he explicitly compared his observations in Samoa with his two previous ports of call (in Tahiti sexual relations between indigenous females and European visitors had turned into a sexual trade—the time of the first contacts was now remote and nearly forgotten). ‘Slowly’, the Samoans ‘brought some objects to exchange’ (no details are given) (peu à peu… quelques objets à échanger) (ibid.: 97-8).

A Samoan chief came to greet the French. Frazior explained that his name was ‘Pea-Pongui’ and that he was the chief of the Apia district. This chief then presented to the French a board on which some words were inscribed, and uttered several times in English the word ‘dollars’ (at least this is what the French understood). The inscription was actually the first commercial treaty in Samoan history, devised by the missionaries and signed by a Captain Drinkwater of the Conway who had visited Samoa shortly before. Its effect was that visiting ships were now supposed to pay a fee. Dumont d’Urville refused immediately and on seeing that Pea did not seem happy he showed him the ship’s cannons. According to the French narrative Pea immediately dropped his demand.

Dumont d’Urville and some of his officers, together with Frazior and Pea, walked to Apia, and the French captain admired the ‘Fare-tete or public house, a masterpiece of native industry’ (chef-d’œuvre d’industrie sauvage). As in Lapérouse’s case, his

description of the outside and the inside corresponds to the fale tele we know from later sources (ibid.: 100).

The group went to see the local missionary, William Mills, and the French expressed their displeasure regarding the port regulations. Mills, who seemed embarrassed (according to the French narrative), seems to have been quick-witted enough to invent an amendment to the treaty: it was a misunderstanding, he said, because the regulations were intended for commercial vessels and not for warships such as those of the French expedition (ibid.: 101-2). Mills probably
already knew, from his fellow missionary and ‘consul’ George Pritchard in Tahiti, about the military presence of Captain (later Rear-Admiral) Dupetit-Thouars in Tahiti (from 29 August 1838) and the anger of the French at the London Missionary Society’s influence in Tahiti.

A brief summary may be useful. The point at issue had arisen two years before, when Pritchard influenced Queen Pomare to order the expulsion of the French Catholic priests who had just arrived. These priests were from the Mission of the Sacred Heart and had received authority from the Vatican to evangelise Eastern Oceania, while the Marists were created at the same time to do the same in Western Oceania. Established in Mangareva, they disembarked in Tahiti in 1836—which was the first appearance of Catholicism in Tahiti—and told Pomare that they would like to stay and begin their missionary work. Pritchard could not accept this challenge and gave an official response requesting that they be asked to leave the country immediately. But they tried to stay on and found shelter in the house of the United States Consul, J.A. Moerenhout. After a few days, the unruly priests were seized by the Tahitians sent by Pomare, thrown into their vessel, and ordered to leave the country. After an abortive attempt in 1837, the Marists did not return until after 1841 (and arrived in Samoa in 1846, as we know from Father Padel’s letter).

If Mills had no knowledge of the events in Tahiti, then Dumont d’Urville must soon have set him straight. We can be sure about this because his narrative tells us that when he himself was in Tahiti in early September, just before arriving in Samoa, he had immediately planned to use military violence to retaliate for Pomare’s mistreatment of the French priests. But on finding that Dupetit-Thouars had already been there since the end of August, and was dealing with the matter, he left it to him. (The ‘Protectorate’ was imposed by Dupetit-Thouars in 1842, and signed by the French king in 1843; Pritchard was expelled from Tahiti and the Catholic mission eventually flourished).

3. Observations on the trees, the birds… and the women: internal analysis of the text

Coming out of Mills’s house, the group walked around ‘in the nearby bush’ (dans la forêt voisine) which may in fact have been gardens and plantations. Pea took them to a waterfall. Dumont d’Urville wrote an enthusiastic page describing the richness of the vegetation and the variety of birds and concluded that these islands ought to be better known. He then went on directly to the topic of sexual encounters. We should not be surprised: dating from the publication of Bougainville’s account, descriptions of lush vegetation would conjure up, in the mind of every French visitor to the South Seas, visions of women offering themselves in the midst of luxuriant tropical greenery. Such images persisted until the 20th century. Then, with the new Western taste for sea shores, swimming and later for tanned bodies as well, coral beaches and lagoons would gradually
replace the dense tropical forest as the perfect location for depicting, in narratives and films, ‘natural’ scenes of the ‘free love’ which was to be found among the ‘South Seas islanders’.

At the end of this passage from Dumont d’Urville’s narrative we shall come to the particular sentence that Williamson chose to quote from the original, but the passage preceding it is certainly not to be omitted. This is the relevant passage (ibid.: 102-6):

...[we were] strolling in the nearby forest ... I have never seen more beautiful trees, not even in New Zealand or in New Guinea ... beautiful pigeons, parakeets darting about in these great woods where they carry the movement of life. Ordered Nature there already appears much richer than in Tahiti ... All my companions and especially Captain Jacquinot seem enchanted to find themselves on these little-known islands. This port of call promises us a thousand benefits both for the health of our crew and for the accumulation of the treasures for Messrs. the naturalists. Today the surface of the globe has been so explored that one needs to congratulate oneself for having found some corner that has been missed by the research of voyagers. The Samoan islands fit this case, unless the companions of Captain Drink-Water have made observations in this regard, for only they have preceded us on this land.

Our Frenchmen, used to the easy beauties of Nouka-Hiva and Tahiti, have wanted here to resume their philandering, but to their great surprise, they are disappointed. The women who at first seemed disposed to accept our sailors’ advances, have constantly refused the serious propositions, and they seem to have submitted with sincerity to the prohibitions of their new religion. But they willingly indicate to our men the path to a neighbouring tribe, where the people, holding to their original beliefs, are still completely disposed to barter the favours of their women, and since that moment this path has been frequently and daily travelled by the corvettes’ crews.

Frazior, who appears to know the country and the archipelago of Samoa fairly well, has also given me the real names of the islands... (p 102-4).²

²...promenade dans la forêt voisine... Jamais je n’ai vu de plus beaux arbres, pas même à la Nouvelle-Zélande ou à la Nouvelle-Guinée... de beaux pigeons... des perruches... voltigent dans ces grands bois où ils portent le mouvement de la vie. La nature organisée s’y montre déjà bien plus riche qu’à Taiti... Tous mes compagnons et surtout le capitaine Jacquinot paraissent enchantés de se trouver sur ces îles encore si peu connues. Cette relâche nous promet mille avantages et pour la santé de nos équipages et pour l’accroissement des richesses de MM. les naturalistes. Aujourd’hui la surface du globe a été tellement explorée, qu’il faut se féliciter d’avoir trouvé quelque coin qui ait échappé aux recherches des voyageurs. Les îles Samoa sont dans ce cas, à moins que les compagnons du capitaine Drink-Water n’aient recueillis des observations à cet égard, car ils nous avaient seuls précédés sur ce terrain. [pp. 102-3]

Nos Français habitués aux beautés faciles de Nouka-Hiva et de Taiti, ont voulu ici renouveler leurs galanteries, mais à leur grande surprise, ils sont désappointés. Les femmes qui d’abord avaient semblé disposer à accepter...
The information contained in the preceding paragraphs—on the lush ‘forest’; the ‘surprising’ and ‘constant refusal’ that the Samoan women opposed to the French sailors’ advances; and the story about this other village where women would be more hospitable—is all presented by Dumont d’Urville as his own observations or as something he heard from his men. We can therefore take the sentence about ‘the women who have constantly refused’ as a description and not an interpretation. We cannot know what sort of welcome the ‘neighbouring tribe’ gave to the French, as clearly Dumont d’Urville did not go there. Apparently he heard from his men that the ‘favours of their women’ were granted. In the absence of any further information, we cannot know if the reception was of the sort described by Lapérouse or something different.

But from now on, in Dumont d’Urville’s account, everything is presented as information given to him by Frazior.

Frazior, who appears to know the country and the archipelago of Samoa fairly well, has also given me the real names of the islands [there follows a long list and discussion of the names].

Frazior estimates the population of this group to be 80,000 souls allocated thus: Sevai and Opoulou with 25,000; Tou-tou-ila, 10,000; Manono, 7,000; Apolima, 3,000; the Manoua group being the least inhabited.

There are already today three missionaries on the island of Opoulou, two on Sevai, two on Tou-tou-ila, and two on Manono. It is only three or four years since the English sought to establish themselves on these islands, but previously they had the way prepared for them by the Tahitians sent under the name of Teachers. (pp. 104-5).

The following passage is a reconstruction of the supposed former religion: there were ‘no cult, no temples, no prayers’, and this would explain, Dumont d’Urville added, why the Samoans accepted Christianity without any difficulty. Also, ‘they had the tabou under the name of Sa, the Kava was known under the

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les provocations de nos marins, ont refusé constamment les propositions sérieuses, et elles paraissent se soumettre avec sincérité aux défenses de leur nouvelle religion. Mais elles indiquent volontiers à nos hommes le chemin d’une tribu voisine, où ces peuplades conservant leurs premières croyances, sont encore toutes disposées à trafiquer des faveurs de leurs femmes, et dès ce moment cette route est chaque jour souvent parcourue par les habitants des corvettes. [pp. 103-4]

Frazior qui paraît assez bien connaître le pays et l’archipel des Samoa, me donne aussi les véritables noms des îles.

3 Frazior qui paraît assez bien connaître le pays et l’archipel des Samoa, me donne aussi les véritables noms des îles… [long list and discussion of the names].

Frazior estime la population de ce groupe à 80,000 âmes, ainsi réparties: Sevai et Opoulou en contiendraient 25,000, Tou-tou-ila 10,000, Manono 7,000, Apolima 3,000, le groupe de Manoua serait le moins habité.

On compte aujourd’hui déjà trois missionnaires sur l’île d’Opoulou, deux sur Sevai, deux sur Tou-tou-ila et deux sur Manono. Il n’y a que 3 ou 4 ans que les Anglais ont cherché à s’établir sur ces îles, mais auparavant ils avaient fait préparer les voies par des Taitiens envoyés sous le titre de Teachers. [pp. 104-5]
name of Ava’. Then comes a description of arms used in war, and the final sentence: ‘Everything leads one to think that they have never been cannibals’ (Tout fait prêsumer qu’ils n’ont jamais été cannibales) (p. 105).

It is clear that this naïve reconstruction of an old religion quite without ritual was not Dumont d’Urville’s own hypothesis but was described to him in this way by Frazior. The evidence for this is that (i) the preceding paragraphs begin with ‘Frazior gives me the names’ and ‘Frazior evaluates the size of the population’, and (ii) the next paragraph, which touches on Lapérouse’s visit, ends with Dumont d’Urville’s statement that he has obtained all these details from Frazior.

Right after that comes the passage in which we find the sentence about the girls:

The massacre of Captain de Langle and his companions was committed by strangers aboard two canoes who wanted to seize the Frenchmen’s goods … [Dumont d’Urville adds that there would have been survivors and that one of them would still be alive but] …Frazior by whom I am informed of these details seems to have never seen him.

The territories of the archipelago are divided into districts, each governed by a single chief (Arii). They are each independent of the other. There was a time when the entire archipelago recognised a supreme chief, but today that is no longer the case.

Before the introduction of Christianity, the young girls enjoyed complete liberty and disposed of their charms as they liked, but once married, they were obliged to be faithful to their husbands, and there was the threat of death for the adulterous wife. The men had as many wives as they could support, and Pea, although a self-proclaimed Christian, even today has two very young wives, only he keeps them in separate houses.

(pp. 105-6).4

This is the passage from which Williamson took his other key sentence!

4 Le massacre du capitaine de Langle et de ses compagnons fut commis par deux pirogues montées par des étrangers qui voulaient s'approprier les objets des Français… et Frazior de qui je tiens ces détails paraît ne l'avoir jamais vu.

Les terres de l'archipel sont divisées en districts, gouvernés chacun par un seul chef (Arii). Ils sont tous indépendants les uns des autres. Il y a eu une époque où l'archipel entier reconnaissait un chef suprême, mais aujourd'hui cela n'a plus lieu.

Avant l'introduction du christianisme, les jeunes filles jouissaient d'une entière liberté et disposaient de leurs charmes suivant leurs caprices, mais une fois mariées elles étaient obligées à la fidélité envers leurs maris, et il y avait peine de mort pour la femme adultère. Les hommes avaient autant de femmes qu'ils pouvaient en nourrir, et Pea, quoique se disant chrétien, en a encore aujourd'hui deux très jeunes, seulement il les tient dans des cases séparées. [pp. 105-6]
We can see, then, the source of Dumont d’Urville’s supposition that ‘girls were entirely free…’: a resident of a mere six years, who claimed to know everything about Old Samoa (he claimed, for instance, to be able to reconstruct the ancient religion) but who appears to have been a naïve and ignorant man, thus prone to repeating the familiar clichés (as can be judged from the content of his reconstruction).

Thus, the second quotation cited by Williamson and reiterated by Côté is just as worthless as the first, selected from Lapérouse’s narrative.

4. The first perspective of colonisation

The French account does not present the series of events as they happened day by day, and the following pages in Dumont d’Urville’s account continue to mix observations and hypothetical reconstructions, as in the pages that we have already examined.

The paragraph following the interpretation made about the freedom of girls in pre-Christian times mentions that about thirty English and American whalers came every year to Samoa, either to ‘Apia’ or to ‘Pango-Pango’. Then the narrative remarks on the existence of a recent sectarian Christian movement in Samoa, founded by ‘two natives who had been to Sydney on a whaler and had seen there the religious ceremonies observed by the English’ (p. 106).

According to the missionaries, the Samoan religion enjoyed the notion of a ‘unique Supreme Being’. The ‘pagans’ still have their ‘chapel’, ‘which is no further than 300 yards (300 pas) from the place where the Christians gather’ (p. 107). A short description follows (p. 108). Dumont d’Urville, who is again guided by Frazior, once more describes the scenery and admires the vegetation. Then, with Frazior and Pea, the expedition group leaves this pagan village and goes on to ‘Fale-Ata’. The French are welcomed and given food inside the houses. Dumont d’Urville notes the circular arrangement of the village (p. 111).

He again admires the vegetation, raises the possibility of establishing ‘plantations of sugar and coffee’, and dreams of a full-fledged colonisation of these

nearly uninhabited lands (dans ces solitudes) [for the benefit of] our old Europe where millions of men usually argue about a few square metres … Our surplus population [should be brought to] these happy islands of Oceania; and the white race will quickly take the place of the primitive race (p. 112).

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5 Another remark should be made in relation to the last passage. We have here a comment about the kind of ‘polygamy’ practised by Samoan chiefs of the time: the wives were kept ‘in separate houses’. In this case the two wives are ‘very young’. It is probably once again a case where a young virgin has been presented to a chief for marriage and impregnation (see Tcherkézoff 2003b: 378-83 for the limited data about polygamy for the years 1830-1860).
These lines remind us that here, in 1838, we stand at the beginning of a new era impelled by colonial, and racist, vision that would last well into the next century. The years of ‘discovery’ between 1760 and 1780 are already well behind us. Gone is the discourse of a Bougainville or a Lapérouse. The question is no longer that of deciding whether the Savage is Noble or Ignoble, but of ascertaining whether the land is large enough to accommodate Europe’s ‘surplus population’ and fertile enough to accommodate the establishment of the ‘white race’.

The next pages describe a specific incident: a soldier is led by a Samoan into the bush and then, threatened with a club, is divested of his clothing. Dumont d’Urville sends Frazior to the chief of the man’s village (‘Sava-lelo’) with a simple message: deliver the culprit, or pay a fine of twenty-five hogs, otherwise the village will be torched, and anyone resisting will be shot. Finally, an agreement is sealed with the provision of ten hogs and the restitution of the stolen garments (pp. 115-20).

This episode, together with the initial threat delivered to Pea when Dumont d’Urville refused to pay any port fees, is also a landmark in the history of contacts between Samoans and Papâlagi. It was the first time in Samoan history—but certainly not the last—that foreign ships imposed a policy under threat of using cannons or burning a village to the ground. And again, as with European intrusion on Polynesian land, the first expedition to do so in the Samoan case was a French expedition. It is indeed appropriate to remember that Lapérouse and Dumont d’Urville played a key role in the history of the first contacts in Samoa, but certainly not for the reasons invoked by Côté.

On the other side of Apia, two other villages were mentioned by the French. Again the houses were said to be arranged around a central area (p. 121). The final part summarised observations about the physical appearance and characteristics of the men and women. In the last lines, Dumont d’Urville again noted the ‘reserved’ attitude of the Samoans. This was ‘in contrast’ with what he read in ‘Lapérouse and Kotzebue’, where there were ‘hundreds of canoes surrounding the ships’.

We are therefore nearing the end of this inquiry. But one visit remains to be examined, that of the U.S. exploring expedition of 1839, which marks, together with Dumont d’Urville’s visit, the turning point between the voyages of ‘discovery’ and the new era of military and colonial enterprises.

5. 1839: the Wilkes Expedition in Tutuila

This U.S. expedition, comprising several ships, manned with soldiers as well as scientists (naturalists and philologists), cruised for four years and twice visited the Samoan islands. Having studied the various vocabularies collected by
travellers in Polynesia (the short lists composed by the Dutch in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century and the long and accurate lists of words for Eastern Polynesian languages recorded during Cook’s expeditions), some of the scientists were able to have considerably more meaningful interactions with the inhabitants than before. One of them was the philologist Horatio Hale who made the first systematic comparisons and who, forty years later, would oversee the first modern ethnographic enquiries (directing Franz Boas’s field studies among American Indians). Wilkes’s comment (relative to Tutuila) was the following:

The women are far from being good-looking, with the exception of some of the younger ones. They are remarkably domestic and virtuous, exhibiting a strange contrast to those of Tahiti. Here, there is no indiscriminate intercourse, the marriage tie is respected, and parents are extremely fond of their offspring [this last remark is still intended to contrast with the ‘Tahiti’ of Cook where the infanticide practised by the Arioi had so shocked British readers] …. They are betrothed, without regard to age, the girl being saa, or tabooed, until of marriageable age. During the intervening time, all kinds of native property are accumulated, such as mats, etc., for the bridal day (Wilkes 1845, vol. 2, quoted in Richards 1992: 83, 89).

As we can see, in comparisons Tahiti remains the norm, so that in matters of physical attractiveness, Samoan women are still judged unfavourably. In relation to sexual practices, Wilkes also makes the comparison with Tahiti and confirms the impressions of Lafond de Lurcy. Samoa seems to stand in ‘strange contrast’ to Tahiti—in strange contrast to what the travellers thought that the ‘Tahitian custom’ was.

Of course, Wilkes mentions the hard work of the missionary Murray who was in charge of Tutuila from 1836. But it can be readily admitted that three years would not be long enough to establish a general, and entirely new, ideology and custom of declaring all girls ‘saa’ until marriage (the word sā, with a long ‘a’, is still today the Samoan word for ‘forbidden, tabooed, untouchable’). For many other practices condemned by the missionaries, such as tattooing, polygamy and night dances, it took some fifteen to twenty-five years to impose a more or less complete control over the behaviour. It is thus impossible to imagine that the major and complete transformation constituted by the change from a generalised sexual freedom in adolescence to a situation in which all girls were ‘untouchable’ before marriage could have taken place in just three years. Moreover, the kind of contrast Wilkes is stressing in relation to Tahiti implies that he is speaking about what seemed to him to be a Samoan ‘custom’ and not some very recent transformation due entirely to the missionaries’ presence.

The same remark applies to the observations of his companions. Wilkes is not the only one to make such comments. Joseph Clark (1848: 79) wrote that:
The females are very reserved in their manners. I was struck with admiration and astonishment at the conduct of these females on all occasions. They never suffer any liberties to be taken with them, and seem particularly cautious in their intercourse with foreigners. Salaciousness does not exist here, with the females, in such a high degree as at many other islands which we have visited, and particularly Otaheite.

Of course Clark was an admirer of the civilising work of the missionaries, as he noted several times in his account. This is why he condemned the Tahitian custom—again according to what he thought that the Tahitian habits were—and praised the Samoan one. But this does not explain why he found such a contrast in Samoa. We can also quote another companion of Wilkes, the Lieutenant Colvocoresses (1852: 86): ‘The girls are pretty and quite modest’ (no other details are given).

Our study of pre-missionary accounts must stop here in relation to the larger islands of Savai’i, Upolu and Tutuila, where missionary work started in 1836, even though it would take another fifteen years for the handful of missionaries there to train enough Samoan ‘teachers’ to spread the Christian message to most of the villages. But we can make a last visit to the tiny and rocky island of Ta’ū, in the Manu’a group, which did not receive the flux of visitors that had been arriving in the larger islands since the mid-1830s. There, in 1840, the highest chief, Tu’i Manu’a, had adopted a young British mariner.

6. 1840: John Jackson in Ta’ū

The kidnapping of a Papālagi

We learn from his own account that this twenty-year old man was kidnapped by the Samoans in Ta’ū, and kept in the compound of the great chief Tu’i Manu’a for three months (Jackson 1853). When his companions bartered for pigs and cooked them on the beach before re-embarking on their whaling ship, Jackson went walking a little further. He was immediately seized and hidden. His companions looked in vain for him and departed.

This incident reminds us that, in the first half of the 19th century, every Samoan or Tongan chief wanted to have near him ‘his Papālagi’. The chiefs looked to take advantage of these men’s technical knowledge in war and to learn from them the secrets of the Papālagi. They would also use them as interpreters and as intermediaries with incoming vessels.6

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6 See the remarks made by several visitors: a Salem trader, on the Emerald who called at Upolu in 1835 (Richards 1992: 45) or the missionary Turner who remembers from the 1840s that ‘A chief thought it added vastly to his importance to have a white man in his train’ (ibid.: 35). For comparative examples throughout Polynesia, see Campbell (1998: 111 ff).
Jackson managed to escape and to jump on board another boat. Opportunistically using his role as intermediary, he persuaded the Chief to let him go on board one of the passing ships to explain to the visitors how many pigs they could get in exchange for their goods. He helped with the transaction and managed to return to the ship delivering the load of pigs, but this time he was careful to stay on board! As the captain ‘had his full complement of men’, he agreed only to take Jackson as far as Tutuila. Later on, Jackson told his story to Captain John Erskine, who asked him to write it down, and who published it as an appendix to the narrative of his own journey (Jackson 1853; Campbell 1998: 74-80).  

Jackson knew of three boats that called into Ta’ū in the three months that he found himself on the island. The first one brought him there; the third took him away (Jackson had tried to board the second one but failed). The number of European residents must have been very few. Jackson mentions only ‘one New Zealander’ whom he met briefly (but does not describe) and reported that ‘some time previous to my being taken’, a missionary vessel had landed two Rarotongan ‘teachers’ who ‘soon mustered many converts’. The consecration of the first church occasioned a great feast, with hundreds of pigs slaughtered, and the gift of ‘most valuable presents to the teachers, consisting chiefly of fine mats’. But mass conversion was only just beginning, as Jackson notes that on Ta’ū there were still Samoans who held to their ancient customs as well as those who had been converted: ‘I was equally well treated both by the Tevolo and Lotu parties’ (the ‘Devil’ side and the ‘Church’ side). The virtual absence of Europeans can also be deduced from Jackson’s description of the oil lamps (a half coconut, containing some coconut meat to which coconut oil had been added) and of the way the Samoans lit them with two wooden sticks.

**Fifteen or twenty virgins**

Jackson was treated at first like a child of the house. He was washed, anointed with oil, his hair was combed, ‘which they said was lelet ['good'] and faa Samoa ['customary in Samoa’]’ [Jackson 1853: 412]). Then he was treated as a guest of honour. This is indicated by his sitting-place in the house and by the fact that he drank the kava just after the Chief did. His description of the main house (‘fale-tele’) corresponds with what we know for the *fale tele* throughout the 19th century. He mentioned the meetings in the house. The Chief was seated between his two ‘fula fela’ (*tulafale*, the orators). In the middle of the house there were three kava bowls. Jackson noted that these bowls were ‘surrounded by fifteen or twenty virgins, who were chewing the root’.

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7 The real name of our adventurer was William Diaper, but he used the name of Jackson while in Samoa and in Fiji (Legge 1966, Campbell *ibid.*).
Thus we find that, in 1840, on Taʻū (the very island which Mead was to visit in 1925), the ceremonial status of virgins was clearly attested to by our witness. These twenty girls could not all have been ‘taupou’ (ceremonial virgins)—the only kind of virginity recognised by Côté and other defenders of Mead’s version as highly valued. For there was normally only one taupou per village, and two or three at the most. The other girls obviously constituted the aualuma of the place—the village group of unmarried girls. Nevertheless Jackson called all of them ‘virgins’; and we may judge from what follows that he knew what he was talking about.

An intercultural dialogue

One particular episode is revealing about the way Samoans related to the Papālagi at that time. Nothing in their behaviour could give the impression that the Papālagi were still seen as some kind of extraordinary beings whereas, when he was in Fiji, Jackson noted a dual attitude: in some villages he was treated as an ordinary person; in others he was called a kalou, ‘spirit, ghost, god’, which implied a link to the super-human world.

Disgusted by a piece of pork which was given to him but which seemed rotten, Jackson threw it away. This was, in fact, a serious offence, since cooked food was and always is a ceremonial offering in Samoa. For instance, early sources already show that it was by accepting the cooked food brought by the party of a boy from another village, that a girl (and her family) signified that the talks for a potential marriage could be initiated. Eating is an act performed only when ‘sitting’ (nofo), and that attitude is a ceremonial one, in distinct opposition to profane activities which are performed while standing. It was wholly to be expected that the Chief would shout at Jackson. Indeed he told him: ‘pua alo!’ [pua’a elo] ‘stinking pig!’ Jackson, whose hot temper erupted many times in his future peregrinations in Fiji, responded very violently: ‘I slapped him on his face in my passion’. The Chief, perceiving that the young boy did not realise that he had suddenly condemned himself to certain death, immediately tore off a piece of the barkcloth that he was wearing and put it on Jackson’s neck, saying ‘faa saa’ (‘forbidden’, that is: ‘he has become untouchable’) (ibid.: 413).

A quite remarkable episode in a number of ways. It was the Tuʻi Manuʻa who did the anthropological work of interpretation in perceiving that Jackson did not properly understand the rules and the situation in which he found himself. We learn too that the Papālagi could be cursed, and of course killed (Jackson tells us that after he had slapped the Chief, ‘all the natives immediately rushed up with their clubs’). We also see evidence of a particular practice characteristic of the High Chiefs of the time: the placing of temporary taboos on objects, on

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8 ‘Taupou’ in the sense it had in the European literature (see the discussion in the following section).
land, on sea, and on individuals as well (the word *fa’asā* is still the term used today for the announcement that something is forbidden by a village law or a State law). This episode also provides one of the earliest descriptions we have of the *ifoga* gesture by which one covers oneself with a sacred cloth (barkcloth *siapo* or a fine mat) in order to avoid the bloody revenge of another party. And finally, the Chief’s protective gesture is one of the early indications that the barkcloth did not just have a practical use as clothing (kilts made with strong leaves were often used for that purpose) but it was also a sacred item (see chapter 10).

### On women as ‘wife’ (ava)

Jackson stayed only three months but we can see how intimately he was integrated into the islander community. We are then justified in assuming that what he has to tell us about the access to women is accurate. At no time does he report any form of sexual hospitality for visitors or sexual freedom for unmarried people. Of course, as an adopted young man, the Chief proposed to him that he should marry: ‘he frequently asked me to point out the prettiest girl, and then asked me if I would like her for my “avaa” (wife), but at the same time telling me I was too young for a wife’ (*ibid.*: 413). We note that the word used by the Chief is *avā*, which is indeed the word for ‘wife’ and never for ‘girl’ (*teine*, ‘girl’ in a general sense and, in the parlance of young males, in the sense of potential sexual prey). And Jackson does not suggest that the Chief ever proposed that he could share his wives, but he does mention such offers when he lives with Fijian chiefs.

When Jackson managed to leave Ta’ū, he was disembarked at Leone on Tutuila. He thought for a time that he might stay in Tutuila and establish himself as a trader, ‘as the natives were all Christians in this place’ (nominally that is: mission work had begun four years ago). He tells us: ‘I found a young girl to my liking, and then took her to the Missionary and asked him if he would marry us’. The missionary refused, arguing that Jackson would not stay long and would leave his wife behind. Our young man then decided to leave for Fiji and took the first boat which called at Pago-Pago.  

None of this bears any correspondence at all to the Samoa which Côté would like us to imagine, one in keeping with the scenario invented by Mead—on this very island of Ta’ū—and which elaborates to an even greater degree the idea of an ‘institutionalised’ sexual freedom prevailing in pre-missionary times. If Jackson had been a young man looking for girls and had easily been able to find them, then he would have told us about it. And if, on the other hand, he was  

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8 Eight years later, a traveller noted that missionaries in Samoa tried to proscribe such marriages between European men and Samoan women for the same reasons, but that many Samoan females were determined to have a *Papâlagi* husband (Walpole 1849: 354).
someone whose religious upbringing made him eager to abide by the Church’s rules about marriage, he would hardly have failed to describe the sexual freedom among the adolescents—had it existed—that would have been obvious everywhere and would have shocked him.

There is no reason to think that his surroundings (the household of the Tu’i Manu’a) had been already transformed through Christian influence, because Jackson also describes one of the ‘marriages’ of the Chief. It was performed entirely in the pre-Christian way (public defloration of the bride) and explicitly contradicted the rules enacted by the missionaries and their ‘teachers’. Finally, when Jackson describes, in one page, how he spent his days in Ta’ūũ, he only discusses three topics and gives each of them equal importance: meals, fishing, and the evening dances (unfortunately these are not described). Thus, although they are both talking about the same small island, Jackson provides nothing approaching the ‘Day in Samoa’ which Mead depicts in the first chapter of Coming of Age in Samoa, and where she constantly evokes lush images of adolescent sexual encounters (Tcherkézoff 2001a: 57-8).

7. 1848: John Elphinstone Erskine

John Erskine, the Captain who met Jackson in 1850 and who, struck by what he heard from him, asked him to write down his story, had himself called at Samoa in 1848. That date is already outside the historical frame of this study. By the mid-1840s, the missionary influence was beginning to be quite noticeable. Although these historical processes are continuous, a useful endpoint can be placed at 1844, the year that saw the opening of the Malua theological college, which produced all the Samoan ‘teachers’ (and later the ‘pastors’). We have already noted that 1844 was also the year that, for the first time, glass beads were no longer mentioned in the description of exchanges with a European ship.

But one of Erskine’s observations undoubtedly reveals an aspect of the pre-Christian era and should be noted. Erskine narrates that, after anchoring, he saw ‘several young ladies of the district’ coming towards him and his crew. One of these young ladies seemed to be about fifteen years old and was presented as the daughter of a High Chief. She wore around her waist a ceremonial white mat made of hibiscus fibres. There can be no doubt that this was the ’ie sina, which could be worn only by a girl who was a virgin who was presented as a bride-to-be—for this ceremonial mat was supposed to receive the stain of the blood from her deflowering. Indeed, Erskine notes that ‘her hair was cut short, which, our informant told us, intimated she was ready for a husband’. Erskine

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10 The narrative is given in my description of marriage ceremonies of the 19th century (Tcherkézoff 2003b: 354).

11 As it is attested in early descriptions of marriage ceremonies (Tcherkézoff 2003b: 351, 354, 361, 365); see also Te Rangi Hiroa (1930: index ‘’ie sina’’).
goes on, apparently summarising what his ‘informant’ (not named or detailed) explained to him:

Although associating familiarly with the other young women, she is looked upon as of a higher grade, being under the special care of the Chief, who, with the consent of the council (or ‘fono’), will probably provide a suitable match for her. When visits of ceremony from other tribes take place, she is called upon to play the part of the ‘te mai-tai’, or great lady, and is then dressed in her smartest garments, and gives directions to the other women. Should she misconduct herself, however, or make a marriage without the consent of the authorities, she would certainly lose this position – one, probably, not much coveted; indeed, she was said to have lately narrowly escaped from the wiles of a Tutuilan dandy, who had almost persuaded her to elope with him (Erskine 1853: 50-1).

The narrative then switches to another topic.

We find here the word tama’ita’i, which is a confirmation of the high status and the virginity of the girl (probably, the full expression given to Erskine had been: sa’o tama’ita’i). Clearly, this ‘great lady under the special care of the Chief’ is what subsequent literature will call a ‘taupou’. It is interesting to note that this word ‘taupou’ has not appeared yet; at least it is not the first word used to define such a girl, since Erskine did not note it but only heard ‘tama’ita’i’. It confirms an hypothesis suggested to me in the early 1980s by Professor Aiono Dr Fanaafi Le Tagaloa (personal communication) who said that, in the European literature and, to some extent, in Samoan discourse, ‘taupou’ possibly came to designate the village ceremonial virgins only in the last third of the 19th century. ‘Before that, the word was augafa’apae’, she added, without further explanation. It seems to me that the explanation for this linguistic change relates to significant social change: the end of the 19th century was the time when a certain levelling of the hierarchies of titles and ranks began throughout Samoa (Tcherkézoff 2000a, 2000b). This levelling had as a consequence that the status of ceremonial virgin which was formerly restricted to certain high-ranking names, the sa’otama’ita’i, became diluted, now expressing the general idea of ‘virgin daughter’; consequently, the specialised terms such as augafa’apae and sa’otama’ita nearly disappeared and the word taupou which was formerly used as the general ‘polite’ term (formal vocabulary) for ‘virgin’ now began to be applied to the specialised status of village ceremonial virgin as well. Soon its meaning became restricted to this status, and the only general term for ‘virgin’ which remained was the non-formal expression (teine muli).

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12 A linguistic discussion confirms this view if we consider that the etymology (taupou ‘still new’ [tau-pou<’fou’ [Pawley 1982]]) corresponds exactly to the expression for ‘virgin girl’ used in the non-formal vocabulary: teine muli ‘girl still behind, still not ripe’. 
No other part of Erskine’s narrative contains any allusion to an upbringing and environment that permitted or encouraged a generalised free expression in pre-marital sexual behaviour.