Chapter 8

Conclusion

1. Early Western misconceptions about Samoan adolescence

We can see that, from 1722 up until the 1830s to 1840s, the contacts between Samoans and Europeans all followed the same pattern of mutual defiance. This tendency increased markedly on the European side after 1787. For the Samoans, it had probably been there almost from the very beginning, following the spread of the stories about the Dutch cannons, which were reinforced after they had experienced the firepower of the French in 1787 (Lapérouse) and of the British in 1791 (the crew of the tender of Edwards’s expedition).

The only significant change in the overall pattern was that, after 1771, the Tahitian interlude described in Bougainville’s narrative became part of every European captain’s mental landscape. The first to express it was Lapérouse in 1787, in the wake of Bougainville himself who used Tahiti as a benchmark when he met the Samoans. Two things followed from this constant reference to Tahiti. The Samoans in general became ‘less’ attractive, ‘more savage’ than the Tahitians; and their women’s and girls’ sexual attitude came to be systematically compared to the Tahitian scene. Samoan sexual behaviour was invoked either to be rapidly assimilated to its Tahitian counterpart, albeit through supposition rather than observation (mainly Lapérouse and Dumont d’Urville, and Hamilton to some extent), or to be contrasted with it based on more accurate observations (Lafond de Lurcy, Wilkes and his companions).

As for the question of sexual freedom in adolescence, we are now in a position to reach a conclusion that can leave no room for doubt. If we discard the moral judgements and the overinterpreted conclusions of Lapérouse and Dumont d’Urville who reiterated the stereotyped formulas from Bougainville’s account for Tahiti, these two French captains being the only witnesses called upon today by Côté, there is no evidence left for the thesis of customary pre-marital sexual freedom. When we consider only the daily events as recorded by each voyager, including the descriptions of Lapérouse and Dumont d’Urville, we cannot in any way view pre-Christian Samoan custom in the terms set down by Williamson and Côté. From 1722 to the 1840s there is not a single observation that could lead to the view that ‘girls were entirely free to dispose of their persons till married’ and that ‘girls were, before marriage, mistresses of their own favours’. The Old Samoa imagined by Côté via Williamson has never been observed by any traveller.
2. The Western myth of sexual hospitality

In the Samoan case, just as for the first contacts in Tahiti, European interpreters have made a double error. Firstly, the presentation of young girls to early European visitors has been mistaken for sexual hospitality offered by ‘women’, when it was in fact a ritual presentation of ‘(very) young girls’ who were (always or often?) virgins. For Samoa, the sources only give us a description of the ritual presentation of young girls and, later, proposals of marriage as well as explicit ‘refusals’ to grant favours according to a European commercial notion of payment for sexual acts. The presentations of young girls may have been part of a strategy of theogamy and an atua or ‘divine’ pregnancy. This last explanation remains here a suggestive hypothesis.

Secondly, it has been erroneously inferred that these presentations of girls were an indication that an attitude promoting sexual freedom prevailed within the indigenous society. Such reasoning, which equates the relationship between Samoans and the first Europeans with the daily relationship between Samoans themselves, supposes that the newcomers had been viewed by the Samoans as ordinary men coming from some other neighbouring island. But this appears to be a total absurdity: it is contradicted by all the evidence we have about Polynesian attitudes to the Papālagi. The 18\textsuperscript{th}-century encounters in Samoa show clearly that the Papālagi had by no means been viewed as ordinary men, and we shall see in Part Two that much comparative data, as well as the linguistic discussion of the word Papālagi, confirms this.

The European voyagers of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century thought that they had been welcomed as ordinary human foreign visitors. Later, in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, and to an even greater extent in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, European visitors and scholars developed the mistaken idea that the Polynesians had viewed the first Europeans as ‘gods’. Recent academic critiques of this late European invention of an ‘apotheosis’ have led some scholars to reject any inquiry about the Polynesian interpretation of the other-than-merely-human nature of the first Europeans. Some have denounced as victims of a ‘Western-inspired myth’ anyone interested in understanding why the Polynesians had—hesitantly, and with many queries—expressed the notion that the nature of the newcomers had something to do with the ‘sky’ and with the ‘sun’. In Part Two, I shall try to clarify these academic misunderstandings and to give more evidence in relation to the interpretations that Polynesians made about Europeans in those earlier times.