Chapter 9

‘On the boat of Tangaroa’. Humanity and divinity in Polynesian-European first contacts: a reconsideration

For Marshall Sahlins

‘The sheer impossibility of thinking that!’ In anticipation of his readers’ incredulous reactions to the marvels he described on Cook’s first voyage, Sir Joseph Banks quoted an old Joe Miller quip to the effect of: ‘Since you say so, I have to believe you; but I daresay if I had seen it myself, I would have doubted it exceedingly.’ But the point once more is that ‘objectivity’ is culturally constituted. It is always a distinctive ontology. Nor is it then some sort of hypothesis or ‘belief’ that is likely to be shaken by this or that person’s skepticism or experimental attitude. It is not a simple sensory epistemology but a total cultural cosmology that is precipitated in Hawaiian empirical judgments of divinity (Sahlins 1995: 169).

1. Who has the right to speak about what?

Anthropology: a study of the Others’ Other

The story of the first encounters between Polynesians and Europeans has, until now, only been told by Europeans, or more generally by Westerners. That is why, too often, it is subject to two main qualifications. First of all the perspective from which the encounters are viewed is one-sided. The ‘discovery’ in question is made by voyagers who set sail one day from the Thames, or from the coast of Brittany, for the Pacific. But what was the other significant discovery that resulted from these voyages, the discovery that the Polynesians were forced to make at the same time? Samoan voices from this time cannot speak to us now, but in Part One I have tried to provide some answers to the question of the nature of the Samoan response to first contacts using an ethnohistorical methodology. This involves critically re-reading the European narratives and looking at both the early and the contemporary ethnographic accounts for clarification and confirmation.

But there is a second qualification. Too often the objective or analytical viewpoint is just as one-sided. The analytical grid applied to the observations contained in the accounts from this period, whether these come from Polynesians
or Europeans, is based on the assumption that all the protagonists had exactly the same thought processes as those of Westerners of the modern period (1750-1970) when they conceived possible relationships to the Other, namely as a relationship of either exclusion or assimilation. What risks being overlooked here is that the Polynesians at that time had adopted a different model of alterity and identity which allowed the integration of every sort of difference into the social structure as a whole by assigning each one to a particular hierarchical level of the same encompassing whole.

For the Westerner, everything comes down to mutually exclusive alternatives, the binary logic of ‘either/or’: man or beast; divine or human; civilised or savage; pristine ‘state of nature’ (the Noble Savage, typical example: the Polynesians) or fallen humanity living in a state of misery (typical example: the Patagonians in Tierra del Fuego, the ‘Hottentots’ in southern Africa, or the ‘New-Hollanders’ [Australians] in the 18th-century versions of Dampier, Buffon, de Brosses, Bougainville or Forster). But for the Polynesians everything was a question of integration and of the relationship between a whole and its different parts, as contradictory as the relationship of identity might seem. A god was an invisible whole and every visible manifestation of this god was a partial form of that whole. A chief was thus a partial form of a god. A new creature could just as easily be a visible form of the divine or meaningless and virtually non-existent.

Which of these two poles did the Polynesian interpretation of the European Others tend towards? It turns out that when the Europeans appeared on the scene particular attention was paid to the colour of their skin. The ‘whiteness’ of their skin seemed to take its luminosity from the light of the sun. And there were all the things that came with that whiteness: their boats, their weapons, their tools and, last but not least, their clothes. Therefore the place that the Europeans were assigned was with the gods rather than with the meaningless creatures. Western Polynesia provides a particularly good example. In Samoa, if the newcomers, whose whiteness of skin seemed to have something of the nature of the sunlight, were considered as partial forms of the ‘luminous’ superhuman world, men whose skin was black (inhabitants of the Solomon Islands for example) who appeared much later (they were brought to Samoa during the 19th century by German colonisers to work on the plantations) were described as ‘black living things’, where the term ‘living things’ (mea ola) applies to the whole of the biosphere and, significantly, makes no distinction between men and animals. The two kinds of strangers were each designated as ‘other’

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2 The word ‘thing’, mea, conveying here the idea of ‘living thing’, mea ola, a category which unites men and animals under the sign of the vital bodily principle with no hierarchical ordering of the diverse cosmological origins of those included in it. It signifies life in an almost biological sense, food that is still raw, body without soul, where the only differentiating principle is that of sex (male/female)–and not that of kinship, or chieftainship, or any other kind of social ranking; for a summary of Samoan classification, see Tcherkézoff (2001a: chapter 1 and 2003b: chapters 7 and 8).
in relation to Samoan identity, but differently other, occupying quite different places in the Samoan conception of alterity.

In these first contacts, there were indeed two discoveries operating simultaneously, as we saw in Part One. But we must also understand that the looks and perceptions that intersected during these first contacts each stemmed from a very different vision of the Other. On one side—for the Polynesians—it was a question of the level of integration into one encompassing whole (the cosmos). I shall give a number of different examples in the following pages where I concentrate on the Polynesian perspective. On the other side—for the Europeans—everything was black or white, the same or different, good or bad, from their ‘world’ or from ‘another world’. Thus Europeans were most likely to assimilate Polynesians whom they judged ‘good’ (before 1787) and ‘almost as white as Europeans’, and to deny similar human status to Melanesians, ‘black as Negroes’, and thought to be incapable of establishing ‘civilised’ societies. But that is another story, the whole misconception by which Western scientists misconstrued ‘Oceania’ as peopled by ‘two races’ (Tcherkézoff 2003a). What also needs to be recovered is the nature of the Polynesian construction—as well as misconstruing—of Europeans.

Valid ethnohistorical questions versus spurious academic debates

One thing is certain: the islanders did not simply take the newcomers for ‘men’, ta(n)gata, and nothing more. At least, they did not use this word. They used words that were applicable to gods, spirits, and ritual objects (atua, tupua; kalou in the Fijian archipelago) or alternatively, when they spoke of ‘men’, they added ‘men who belong to, or come from, the Papālagi’ (Tongan words collected by Cook in 1777; see chapter 11 for discussion of the meaning of the term Papālagi). This was because the Polynesians only knew men like themselves (those who inhabited all the Polynesian archipelagos and the Fijian islands as well as part of Micronesia). Something else is certain as well: in most cases, the islanders did not see the newcomers as monsters who needed to be cast out or destroyed as quickly as possible. There was in fact a desire to integrate them and to capture some of their powers, since the predominant interpretation placed these new arrivals on the side of the ‘sun’, as we shall see. In a civilisation where, for the pre-Christian period, we can talk about a sun cult (Tcherkézoff 2003b: chapter 1), such a desire was quite understandable.

Neither just ‘men’, nor meaningless creatures, nor monsters: this was the taxonomic dilemma posed by the newcomers. The only possibility, therefore, was to make use of the other categories that already existed: gods who created the world, local gods, ancestors, spirits like ghosts, sprites and goblins, and so on. But there was no category that corresponded exactly to what the Polynesians
had before their very eyes. Integration therefore involved a simultaneous process of intellectual inquiry and taxonomic innovation.

One famous case has been studied in great detail, that of the arrival of Captain Cook in Hawaii in 1778. Marshall Sahlins has shown how James Cook was taken for a manifestation, but one that was partial and new, of the Hawaiian god Lono: an ‘image of Lono’, a ‘body’ (kino) of Lono, a visible aspect of an encompassing principle Lono, a ‘refraction of the inclusive Lono’ (Sahlins 1981, 1985a, 1989: 384-5). The archival sources make this quite clear: Cook was called ‘Lono’ on a number of occasions by the Hawaiians and he was manipulated in ceremonies in the same way that certain images of Lono were normally manipulated in the rites of the ceremonial cycle devoted to this god. In sum, Cook was taken ‘for Lono’. But what we need to understand is this: he was taken for a visible and therefore partial manifestation of Lono. No doubt it was a manifestation that was somewhat unexpected, but the logic of the whole to its parts that regulates the relationship between the divine encompassing principle as invisible and its visible forms allows, by definition, for the possibility of an infinite variety of visible manifestations.

To say that Cook was taken for a god can be confusing to those who are not aware of the fluidity of the Polynesian pantheon. Every ‘god’ in the pantheon is a partial form of the beginning of the world and of the great demiurge, at the same time as it already contains the seeds of all human forms to come. Furthermore, these gods become manifest in the form of images. Lono would traverse the main island each year at exactly the same time in the guise of a large white barkcloth decorated in a special way. Sahlins has shown that Captain Cook was another of these images of Lono: ‘Cook indeed became the image of Lono, a duplicate of the crosspiece icon (constructed of wood staves) which is the appearance of the god’ (1985a: 105). When the rite was over the image was destroyed. And when Cook returned to the island outside this ritual period, he too was destroyed. But ‘Lono’ is immortal, by definition, and each year he would reappear in a new form. And so it was that having killed Captain Cook-image-of-Lono the Hawaiians asked the English to tell them the date that Cook would come back to visit them.

Sahlins’s book *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities* (1981), whose title is rich in layers of meaning, was published some years ago now. There, and in other texts that had appeared earlier, and subsequently, Sahlins has developed his exposition of this particular case (1979, 1985a: chapters 1, 3, 4, 5). This Hawaiian assimilation of Captain Cook was a ‘historical metaphor’. It had serious consequences. Sahlins explained the ritual acts performed on Cook by the Hawaiians after they had led him into a temple, and the fate that they had in store for him when he and his expedition, having left the archipelago as Lono did each year after the ceremonies of the New Year, returned unexpectedly (to
repair a mast). This return of Lono at a date when, in the normal course of events, he would have retired again to the island of the dead, leaving the main ceremonial role to the king, servant of the god Kū, amounted to a provocation in relation to Kū. It caused a battle in which Cook died. But this metaphor Cook=Lono, with the historical consequences that ensued, namely the death of Cook, immediately became a ‘mythical reality’. The Hawaiians hoped that Cook ‘would return soon’ and put this question of his return to the Europeans who landed there after him. At the same time, Cook’s incorporation into the Hawaiian superhuman realm set up the interpretive framework that Hawaiians built around the newcomers and their objects during the visits of the other European expeditions which were not slow in following. A new reality modified the whole of the Hawaiian interpretative structure, even if that structure remained ‘mythical’.

Discussion about the various convergences between Cook’s stay in Hawaii and the ritual cycle built around the god Lono is a matter for those with specialist knowledge of the Hawaiian sources (Sahlins 1989, 1991). A number of significant issues are open for discussion here. A more general but nonetheless quite spurious debate has arisen in relation to a purportedly radical critique of Sahlins’s position. According to this critique, to claim that the Hawaiians were unintelligent enough to believe that a group of men, albeit of quite different appearance, were their gods who were returning to them and for once were appearing before them in flesh and blood, is the kind of proposition revealing yet again that the social sciences are nothing but a Western ethnocentric discourse. Because, as the argument goes, this amounts to affirming once again that non-Westerners are just overgrown children who, driven by pre-logical thinking that is mystical and irrational, will, at the drop of a hat, jump to conclusions that are patently absurd. Only a Westerner could demonstrate such contempt, thereby prolonging the economic and ideological imperialism of the past two centuries.

An anthropologist of Sri Lankan origin, Gananath Obeyesekere, who teaches in the United States but has never done work in Oceania or written about this field of research, has become the champion of this position by claiming that his status as a non-Westerner has allowed him to perceive and reveal this Western manner of ‘mythifying’ other cultures. In 1992 he published The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European mythmaking in the Pacific. For Obeyesekere, Sahlins’s theory about a deification of Cook by the Hawaiians is yet another example of the countless fantasies that Europeans have conceived about Pacific peoples and all such exotic ‘natives’. Sahlins’s analysis is just an extension of the manner in which Westerners have always condescendingly interpreted the cultural representations of exotic peoples. Moreover, the critic, on the grounds that he
is of Asian origin, claims to be in a better position to analyse Polynesian history than a Westerner.

It is clear that we have to reject the notion that Obeyesekere could have, a priori, a point of view closer to the ‘native’ one just because he is not a Westerner. Have we reached the point where it is birth certificates that confer or withhold the right to talk about cultures other than our own? How starkly Obeyesekere’s treatment of this episode of Polynesian history represents a new version of Orientalism! Indeed, Obeyesekere invokes the history of India and Southeast Asia to define his position in relation to the Polynesian case. To support his argument he calls upon the absence of facts similar to the situation as Sahlins reconstructed it—or, that is, as Obeyesekere (over)interprets Sahlins’s reconstruction. No Eastern history source indicates, he says, that men mistook other men for gods:

When Sahlins expounded his thesis … I was completely taken aback at his assertion that when Cook arrived in Hawai‘i the natives believed that he was their god Lono and called him Lono. Why so? Naturally my mind went back to my Sri Lankan and South Asian experience. I could not think of any parallel example in the long history of contact between foreigners and Sri Lankans or, for that matter, Indians (Obeyesekere 1992: 8).

This position has nothing to do with the historical anthropology of Polynesia. Rather it relates solely to the concerns of the members of certain Western intellectual milieux who, as in Obeyesekere’s case, demonstrate their inability to conceive of cultural difference without wanting to assimilate and reduce that difference. Because of course the notion of ‘divinity’ they have in mind is that of the Christian West—or of a certain Orientalism in which ‘Eastern religions’ are redefined and forced into the mould of Western binary logic (human or divine). How can one seriously mount an argument by making a comparison of this sort? For several millennia the history of this South Asian region of the world has been one of migrations, conquests, and the appearance of peoples speaking an unknown language. The idea of the existence of different peoples had long been a familiar one throughout the region. But, at the same time, the Hawaiians, like all the inhabitants of Eastern Polynesia, had only seen and known

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3 See Sahlins’s response (1995) and commentaries criticising Obeyesekere (Borofsky 1997, Zimmermann 1998). Sahlins (ibid.) provides a comprehensive bibliography of his numerous previous works about Captain Cook. And he mentions (p. 3) critiques similar to Obeyesekere’s but published earlier to which he had immediately replied (Sahlins 1989). In the preface Sahlins (1995) suggests that, if the lengthy titles of 18th-century texts were still in vogue, the title of his book could have been: ‘How Gananath Obeyesekere Turned the Hawaiians into Bourgeois Realists on the Grounds That They Were “Natives” Just Like Sri Lankans, in Opposition to Anthropologists and Other Prisoners of Western Mythical Thinking’.

4 It needs to be emphasised that Obeyesekere is an American professor, even if he originally came from Sri Lanka. It is in the United States that his book has been given prominence by different associations.
men like themselves, neighbouring peoples whose languages were closely related, since the settlement of their islands by the Eastern Polynesians a thousand years ago, and after the Western Polynesians (and the Eastern Fijians) had colonised the previously uninhabited western islands one or two thousand years earlier. It is therefore necessary to accept the hypothesis that, in the Polynesian case, the appearance of creatures who were totally different has given rise to particular interpretations and responses that were drawn from the non-human world.

We must also inquire into the way in which the Polynesians conceived the non-human. The logic operating here was not necessarily based on that of distinctive opposition. We can see Obeyesekere’s sleight of hand in placing on the same level of equivalence a fact reported by Sahlins and attested to in the relevant documents—‘they called him Lono’—and an abrupt summary of Sahlins’s analysis—‘he was their god Lono’—, as if this latter statement of identity were self-evident and did not demand precisely that the Polynesian relationship to the divine (‘to be a god’) be differentiated from other similar relationships in other cultures. Obeyesekere is unaware that in this broad Polynesian terrain the notion of atua—which signifies ‘god’ but also, if I may offer a definition, ‘every person or thing presenting a mysterious aspect and to which one attributes the productive power of mana’—has no more to do with the Western-Christian notion of ‘divine’ than it has to do with the gods of India or Southeast Asia. But we still need to use the word ‘god’ for Lono, Kū, Tangaroa, and so on as there is not another more appropriate term. Furthermore, Obeyesekere does not seem to realise that the Hawaiians, like all the peoples of the earth, only knew their gods through the ‘images’ that they themselves made of them for their rituals. The interpretation of Cook’s arrival was subject to this same way of thinking. Thus the sails of the European boats bore a strong resemblance to the image of the god Lono which was carried around to be displayed throughout the island during the ritual (the white barkcloth fixed to a wooden frame).

There is no point in devoting any more attention to this critique of Obeyesekere’s. But it does serve to remind us once again of the extent to which Western scientific thought falls so easily into the trap of dichotomous thinking: exclusion/assimilation (Tcherkézoff 1987). Some exclude: in Obeyesekere’s view that would be Sahlins’s attitude. Others assimilate: that is in fact Obeyesekere’s attitude when he forcibly assimilates Polynesian cosmology to a Western (or ‘Oriental’) one in which the divine is irrevocably cut off from the human world, as it is for Westerners or in what Westerners call ‘Oriental’ thought (this category being itself constructed by Westerners in what is a mixture of straightforward oppositions and naive assimilations to a Western model).

Let us leave all of this aside and try to rediscover what happened in that last third of the 18th century when this scenario was being played out. I am going
to refer here to other cases than the Hawaiian one and use as supporting evidence what we already know from the Samoan example.

These cases reveal that the Polynesians asked themselves more questions than they formulated answers, just as the Amerindians did two and a half centuries earlier when facing the Spanish conquest. Sometimes the answer that was given to these questions was ambiguous. When we look more closely at the linguistic forms used at the time to formulate ideas about the newcomers, we can see that the Europeans were indeed taken for superhuman beings—there is no doubt about it—but as envoys and representatives, in a rather new form, of the great creator (often the god in question was Tangaroa). The newness of the form was no obstacle: Tangaroa (literally ‘the Unlimited’) had unlimited powers of innovation. The newcomers were neither gods nor ancestors properly speaking, then, but a partial form of these higher powers.

2. The hierarchy of ‘light’

The idea of an assimilation to the divine is obviously troubling if one makes the mistake of interpreting it in the Christian manner. For the moment, let us simply say that the Polynesians considered the strange nature of the Europeans in the light of divinity rather than of barbarism (at least in the beginning). Or, more simply still, let us accept the notion that the newcomers were seen as superhuman, not subhuman, beings. What was the reason for this? A number of factors were operating here: the way the Europeans looked to the Polynesians, as well as the objects they brought with them. These objects were terrifying (firearms) or amazing (items made of linen, metal and glass).

‘Luminous’ appearance

There is no doubt that the look of their skin played a part in the way that the Europeans were viewed by the Polynesians. The word used in Western Polynesia since the 17th century to designate the Europeans (Papāla(n)gi), and still used today (see chapter 11), continues to be applied only to light-skinned foreigners. It is not used for a ‘Melanesian’ or African visitor. The paleness of the visitors became incorporated into a pan-Polynesian cosmology in which light, clarity and whiteness were and still are highly valued as beneficent signs of the divine, and stand in opposition to the obscurity of night, where death reigns supreme. The world was first of all the Night-darkness, Po. The primordial gods and the source of the powers of life are found there in perpetuity. But there would have been no life if, subsequently, Night had not left a place for the appearance of Day-light, Ao. Since then, the work of ritual which guarantees social life consists of extracting from the Night certain powers which, once brought into the Day,

can be domesticated and used to reproduce life. Agriculture and fishing—with their complementary stage of cooking—as well as producing children, are based on this dynamic. The reference to the ‘sky’ and to the ‘light’ is therefore fundamental.

The appearance of superhuman beings of ‘luminous’ appearance was the promise that the (re)production of life would be guaranteed through this ritual activity. The missionaries who came much later on were not to know the extent to which this religious interpretation of first contact with Europeans had already established frameworks that would make their integration into Polynesian society much easier. It may be that certain legends were born at this time, legends that would be invoked by the chiefs much later, in the 19th century, about a power that the sky had been promising them for a long time (Ma’ia’i 1960).

Throughout Polynesia much attention was paid to the fairness of the skin. It was never a question of ‘skin colour’ as Europeans said and still say. On the contrary, in places where, as in Samoa, age-old conceptions concerning the high value placed on the fairness of the skin are still current, modern experience has produced a notion now thought to be of great merit, a notion that defines anti-racism. When talking about American or South African history, Samoans (young people, not just teachers) condemn the racism that has been rife in those countries and say, ‘one should not be fa’ailogalanu’, ‘one should not attribute any meaning to [skin] colour’. The fairness of the skin (Samoans say ‘the whiteness’) relates to the cosmological and cosmogonic value of the sun’s ‘light’, ao—which, for Samoans is not a question of skin ‘colour’.

Persons of high status stayed inside their houses in order to avoid the fairness of the skin darkening under the rays of the sun. Those who were deeply tanned thus showed that they worked for others, in the plantations or at sea. In Samoa, this imperative to keep the skin as fair as it had been at birth applied particularly to women who were not married and who were said still to be virgins. In Tahiti, women of high rank would often withdraw from their normal outdoor activities with this aim.\(^6\) In the Cook Islands when it was decided to hold a great feast, the participants allowed themselves a year of preparation not only to rehearse new dance movements and prepare a mountain of yams, but also to give the main actors time to become whiter and fatter since, at the feast, there would be competition over who would ‘be the fairest and the fattest of all present’.\(^7\) Obesity was doubly significant: the abundance of food meant an abundance of ‘services’ offered by dependants and, too, a tauter skin more easily regained the fairness of skin that everyone loved to see in the newborn child. In Samoa the

\(^6\) For Samoa, my field notes; for Tahiti, see Oliver (1974: 157, 435).
\(^7\) Account given to the missionary William Wyatt Gill at Mangaia for the period at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th. The words are Gill’s who gives a summary without quoting (1880: 181).
chiefs avidly sought the young girls with the lightest hair. When a girl fitted this requirement, she was forbidden to cut her hair because, once it was long enough, it was used for making ceremonial headdresses after it had been bleached with different preparations to produce a reddish colour.

Polynesian notions about chieftainship and hierarchy also illustrate the high prestige accorded to sunlight and its brightness, as Sahlins has already noted for Hawaii. The Hawaiian chief is currently referred to as ‘the heavenly one’ (ka lani). More generally, says Sahlins,

The specific quality of aristocratic beauty is a brilliance and luminosity that Hawaiians do not fail to connect, in myth, rite, and chant, with the sun. Such beauty is properly called divine, for like the gods themselves, it causes things to be seen (1985a:18, my emphasis).

The objects of the Europeans also fitted with the premium placed on light and brilliance: the fire from cannons and muskets, the gleaming of objects made of metal and glass, and of course the reflective power of mirrors. We might add that if all this cosmic sociology remained opaque to the Europeans, they knew perfectly well what could be of use to them. They managed to conduct a rather profitable trade in glass (we have seen the extraordinary fate of glass beads in Samoa) and then, quite rapidly, they made huge profits selling coloured materials (after their initial success with red fabrics at the time of the earliest contacts, as we have seen too). Today the sale of printed fabrics with floral designs in the brightest colours has made Southeast Asia the supplier of the shirts that are described as ‘Hawaiian’ for the whole of Polynesia. And the demand is not about to dry up. Everyone can compete easily enough when the competition for ‘brilliance and luminosity’ is limited to garments. A shirt with a new design can be acquired more easily than the power of old (often called mana) which called for wars and sacrifices.

Let me say something more about this basic notion of visibility. Sahlins also quotes a warrior legend (ibid.). The hero gets ready to join battle. When he appears, the crowd shouts out, praising his beauty. Even the animals sing his praises. The pebbles on the beach clash and clang. The thunder rumbles, the dead come back to life and the spirits suddenly become visible. The grass goes yellow, smoke descends towards the ground. This legend provides a particularly good illustration of the power of visibility. The brightness of the chief is cosmic: men, animals and things are affected by it. Like every manifestation of the divine it is also simultaneously an act of wonder, ‘beautiful’ and luminous, and immensely dangerous: the world could easily turn upside down. Indeed, the smoke descends and the spirits, who by definition are invisible and dangerous, become visible. But here too there is ambivalence. If the spirits are made visible, do they not then become more controllable? Or at least one can avoid them more
easily. Night becomes visible—hence controllable—and that is thanks to the *luminous source* that the person of the chief embodies.

Sahlins also mentions the importance of the gaze in old Hawaiian ritual. ‘To respect’—or ‘to desire sexually’—someone was expressed by ‘to set one’s eyes on’ *kau ka maka*. He adds: ‘“to see” (*ike*) in Hawaiian (as in French or English) is “to understand”, but it is also “to know sexually”’ (*ibid.*: 18-19). ‘To see’ is ‘to understand’ (similarly in Samoan). In human sacrifice, where the victim was generally a man guilty of transgressing, his eyes were dealt with first (gouged out; the left eye was given first to the god to ‘eat’). Indeed, through his transgression, the victim, it was said, was ‘he whose eyes were “cooked” *makawela*’. In the same vein, you could not look at a chief: to do so would have broken a taboo.

**The Polynesian hierarchy**

‘Such beauty is properly called divine, for ... it causes things to be seen.’ Sahlins is not generalising, but we have here, with these notions about the source of light and visibility, *the best illustration possible of the functioning of the Polynesian hierarchy*, both in the east (Tahiti, Hawaii etc.) and in the west (Samoa, Tonga etc.), at the time of contact and still today in some cases, particularly in the west. This hierarchical logic relating chiefs to dependants explains the continuity between gods and men. This continuity characterises the whole set of Polynesian social representations which were called into play in early contacts, as in the context of Cook’s arrival in Hawaii.

In Polynesia, before the introduction of Western commerce, the relationship superior/inferior was always a question of status, within an inclusive hierarchy (holism), and not of stratification where difference arises from quantitative comparisons between individuals of their relative amounts of power, wealth and so on. The hierarchical relationship implies two aspects which are not incompatible despite appearances: mutuality and unilaterality. The relationship is one of interdependence, and this interdependence is oriented in one direction.

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8 Sahlins says only ‘burnt eyes’ for *makawela* (p. 19).
9 In the Polynesian conception of taboo, *tapu*, which acts to maintain social distance, contrary to the Indian logic of the *varna* and the caste system of avoidance, it is not the superior who is contaminated, but the inferior. Of course, as the transgressor who had dared to look at a chief was cooked (in a real sacrifice) before he could become fully contaminated and ‘burned’ by the brilliance emanating from the chief, the burning power of the chief’s gaze could never actually be put to the test. The pan-Polynesian manifestations of respect by lowering oneself in front of a superior took various forms: bowing the head and thus avoiding looking into the eyes of the superior, sitting down, getting out of one’s canoe and swimming beside it when passing (at sea) in front of a chief’s house, and also, as we shall see in chapter 10, undressing the upper part of one’s body.
10 I have explored elsewhere the pertinence of this distinction between two forms of inequality: in relation to categories of social differentiation in Samoa (Tcherkézoff 1995a, 2003b: chapters 5 and 6) and, from a trans-cultural point of view, in the area of dual classifications (Tcherkézoff 1987, 1994a, 1994b).
only. Interdependence exists because each of the two poles in this dual relationship is meaningless without the other. But there is a hierarchical orientation to the relationship since one of the poles is everything for the other but the inverse never holds true.

Indeed, when the value which is the point of reference is something like ‘light’ rather than, for example, the production of metal tools, that value implies interdependence. What is a source of light if this source finds nothing to illuminate? What is a god without a world that he has created? One would not even know that there was a light. A light is not seen unless it rests on some being or on some object. In the same way a Polynesian chief without dependants has no existence. But the relationship is directional: one of the participants is the source of light and the other becomes visible because he is illuminated. The dependant finds a way to participate in life (the world of ‘light’ Ao) solely through his relationship to the chief: he is then illuminated. For him, the chief is therefore a source of life. The same goes for the chief in relation to the gods. In Western Polynesia, this relationship has continued into the present (Samoa, Tonga), even if the divine point of reference is now that of the Bible.

That is why, in the Polynesian hierarchical system, social differentiation is always conceptualised as the local replication of a divine/human relationship. In this sense, every person who is superior to me is an ancestor-god to me, a source of light, a source of life. But this does not imply any kind of mysticism or theory about a superhuman substance found in the body of the chiefs. On the contrary, it is a very down-to-earth form of reasoning which stems from the physical nature of light.

According to this way of thinking, the gods are ancestor-gods: the first ancestors are always ‘children’ of the gods and they acquire their powers; the chiefs personify these gods and ancestors, they are said to ‘incarnate’ them (see below). In the same way, the gods are already human and by definition they possess the character weaknesses of men (therefore one could cajole them in the rituals with offerings, or take them unawares by seizing their wealth in ritual raids).

The reasoning behind ownership is quite different. With a principle of superiority based on the possession of metal tools, each person can establish an independent productive capacity (using these tools to produce carved goods) and enter into competition with other producers in selling these goods. In fact, since contact, this notion of stratification, which is differentiation through ownership, has been added on to the concept of hierarchy, in order to increase an actor’s prestige very rapidly. In some cases, it has nearly eliminated the traditional hierarchy. The new political powers and the new markets that arose in 19th-century Polynesia illustrate this socio-economic transformation. In Hawaii today the way in which it developed could not even be guessed at without
consulting the archival sources. In some other places, as in Samoa, this transformative process is being completed right now, and a wealth of information applicable to the whole of Polynesia can be gained from observing the way in which it is happening.¹¹

The example of land, a crucial issue in contemporary Samoa, also provides one of the clearest illustrations of this process. As long as land is not an individual good that can be bought and sold, as long as it remains ‘customary’, that is a good whose sole owner is the founding ancestor, rivalry between clans is expressed by claims relating to the length of time that has elapsed since the founding of their respective territories. Length of settlement is shown by the seating positions around the ceremonial ‘circle’ at gatherings that bring together all the families of the village. Rivalry thus presupposes a minimal level of agreement about the rules of belonging to this ‘circle’. This is still the situation in eighty per cent of Samoan territory. Competition is played out within the hierarchy. But, on the island of Oahu in Hawaii where the capital Honolulu is situated, rivalry is played out on the foreign exchange market between the dollar and the yen, because most of the land (we need to talk rather of buildings and building sites) belongs to foreign firms. There is no common belonging that needs to be reaffirmed at each gathering. Membership here no longer depends upon local landowners but on a global notion: the foreign exchange market.

To summarise, when we talk about a ‘chief’ in relation to Polynesia, we need always to ask what is the system of social differentiation by which this ‘chief’ has established his status: stratification or hierarchy? At the time of contact, there is no doubt that it was the second system that held sway. That fact is important to this discussion, because hierarchy, by contrast with stratification, involves a continuous gradation which includes within it the social body in toto. There is a continuum stretching from the greatest gods to the humblest of men.

Every human being is therefore a part of the divine. According to this logic, every individual exists solely because a source of light illuminates them. This source of light is referred to by the idea of ‘god’ and of ‘ancestor’; it is personified on earth by the ‘chiefs’. The Europeans arrived in this context: a hierarchy of light. By their appearance and their objects, they seemed to be situated on the side of the light, and they even appeared more luminous than some of the ‘chiefs’. They were therefore asked, quite reasonably, if, during their voyage, they had ‘passed through the sun’ (see below).

### 3. Weapons, tools, glass jewellery and fabrics

A basic element of the Polynesian perspective relating to contact was to observe the mastery of lightning by the Europeans, from within their muskets and

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¹¹ For concrete examples, in the Samoan case, see Tcherkézoff (1997a: second part; 2003b: chapters 3, issues about land, and 6, issues about the political system).
cannons. Thunder and lightning, besides their intrinsic power, are ‘celestial’ elements, attributes of the demiurge Ta’aroa-Tagaloa-Tangaroa and/or of the other primordial gods. There is a tendency in the ethnohistory of early contacts to overlook the presence of firearms, but all the first contacts brought with them scenes of violence and death. As soon as the Europeans believed that they were being attacked because the canoes which were coming to meet them were too numerous or because the men who climbed on board, sometimes without being invited, began seizing or just touching what they could, sometimes throwing the strange objects that they saw on the deck towards their canoes, they would use their muskets and then their cannons. I have already discussed, in relation to the visit of Lapérouse, how we might understand these ‘thefts’.

The story should be told of how, at the first salvo that killed a Tahitian in a canoe, the man’s companions tried to sit him up again in his seat, and were a long time in accepting that this body which made no response to any entreaty was quite lifeless, even though it had been struck neither by spear nor club. And then there is the terror of a group of Tahitians who, standing on the beach watching the first skirmish between the warriors of the island and Wallis’s soldiers, suddenly found cannon balls fired first on to the sand and then into the forest when women and old men tried to take refuge there in their fright.

The guns and cannons were not the only new objects which seemed to be superhuman. The Polynesians also admired the metal tools (in a number of cases, but not in Samoa, as we know) and glass jewellery. The hardest wood, the finest basalt blade, the most highly honed bone and the sharpest cutting shell were no match for the axe and the knife, as well as for the nails that could be made into gimlets and fish hooks (at that time the European nails used at sea were the size of a small dagger). Cutting tools were already highly revered since they made it possible to build houses and boats, which were always dedicated to the ancestors and whose size was a clear sign of status. These tools were themselves subject to rites of consecration. So the new metal tools were a great boon because they were classified as part of the class of tools that were already ‘taboo’, while at the same time they increased tenfold the effectiveness of these taboo implements in cutting pieces of wood. The hooks were no less sacred. They

12 Clearly we need to make a precise interpretation for each particular case. In Tonga, for example, Tangaloa was the great god of the sky at Tongatapu, the southern part, but only the god of the craftsmen in the northern part of the archipelago. Elsewhere he was only one of the four creator gods. Generally speaking, the gods normally lived at Pulotu (an invisible island, situated in the west), and when thunder was heard, it was, some Tongans say, the sound of the heated discussions between the gods which reached human ears (Ferdon 1987: 70-1).

13 This relationship of one to ten was attested to by the Tahitians in 1797, by which time stone adzes were already a thing of the past, thirty years after Wallis’s arrival (Baré 1985: 180, and see p. 178 for the incantation for the consecration rite of the adze).
featured in the ceremonial exchange of precious goods. It is therefore not at all surprising to see that the first nails that were obtained from the Europeans were not even made into tools but were kept as sacred objects in the ritual basket of a chief or priest.

Furthermore, the Europeans did not only come with prefabricated metal tools but they also brought their forge which was needed for doing repairs in the course of a voyage. The Polynesians saw these newcomers gain control over an element which was first of all malleable, reddish in colour, and gave off the kind of heat that only lava flows can produce, but which then turned hard as stone. So it is no surprise to learn that in Western Polynesia the term chosen to designate iron is a word which was used for volcanic lava. This association with subterranean forces must have strongly influenced the Polynesians’ interpretation of the kind of being that the newcomers were in the direction of a certain form of divinity-superhumanity, especially since, on occasions, heavenly fire and earthly (volcanic) fire are associated. In Hawaii, thunder and lightning depended upon the god Lono, volcanoes on the goddess Pele. Now Lono was the uncle of Pele, and it was he who made sure that Pele’s fire never went out. Volcanic activity could be directly associated with storms. And the rain clouds were manifestations of Lono.

The topic of mirrors and glass jewellery (the Samoan case of the blue beads is enough to show the importance of this category) would need to be taken up again if we wanted to provide a fuller discussion of this topic. And we also need to mention fabrics: we have seen how they have featured in all the first contacts in Samoa and we shall see them again in the first contacts in Tahiti (chapter 10). The quantity of fabric with which the body was swathed was a sign of status in Eastern and Western Polynesia. We shall meet this again at the end of this discussion when Captain Cook, and then, after his death, his portrait, which was carried by a local chief, were offered ceremonial fabrics. The Polynesians

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14 For instance in Tikopia where, in 1928, Raymond Firth was able to observe the social life of Polynesians who had only been acquainted with white men for a very short time, as well as in Samoa where hooks have been a category of objects conferred at marriage by the man’s side.

15 As Firth found when he arrived in Tikopia, a small Polynesian island situated in Melanesian territory and where contact occurred very late. See Firth (1936: 33) for iron objects, obtained in Vanuatu, that came from Lapérouse’s shipwreck, and were kept in a temple; for the sacred basket holding the nails, see Firth (1967).

16 In Tongan ukamea, in Samoan u’amea, from uka, meaning a state that is viscous but still hard (mud for example), and mea, reddish. These two basic words derive from proto-Polynesian. This note about metal has benefited from a comment made by Françoise Douaire-Marsaudon (1993: 795, 799 note 15) about a Tongan creation myth concerning a stone referred to by this word that is linked to a volcanic eruption.

17 These mythological connections, pointed out by specialists such as Pukui, Beckwith and others, are revisited by Sahlins (1989: 379-80).

18 In Samoa, the mother-of-pearl fixed to the great ceremonial headresses, the tuiga, was replaced by little mirrors. Today these mirrored headresses—which are still used on grand occasions—are considered as being made according to ‘tradition’ (aganau).
desperately wanted to get the sheets, shirts and jackets of the newcomers, especially as these fabrics were water-resistant, whereas barkcloth, the material used in making Polynesian ceremonial attire, came from bark that had to be beaten out for a long time (the resulting pieces then being stuck together along their edges) and it disintegrated in the rain. The coats and jackets of the captains had great appeal: several layers enclosed the body, and red and gold braid shone brightly along the edges. Now the use of red braid to envelop the body was already a central ritual element in the great Tongan ceremony of the first fruits (yams symbolised the body and were entirely swathed in red bindings made from the tender part of the pandanus leaf) (Douaire-Marsaudon 1998). The large Hawaiian and Tahitian ceremonial capes were made of red and yellow feathers. The supreme Tahitian insignia, the maro’ura, was an ornament of red feathers, and the gift cycle in which it figured was of fundamental importance in the society (Babadzan 1993). I have already mentioned how, on the fine Samoan mats, rows of red feathers along the edges were, and still are, the most sought-after decoration. It should also be noted that, in pan-Polynesian mythology, the gods were supposed not to have hair (which appeared with men), but feathers.

4. The ‘gods of here below’ and the notion of atua

To summarise the situation, all of these perceived similarities placed the Europeans in the category of ‘celestial’ beings. But there is no need to see in this a new or extraordinary category. The creator god is celestial and the first chiefs are always the product of unions between the celestial beings and a mortal woman; so begin the genealogies of the great chiefs’ names.19 The legends are full of comings and goings between heaven and earth, involving the gods and the heroes as well as mere mortals. It is simply the case that sacredness is on the side of heaven. And the Europeans were very logically placed in this classification. Here again the idea of a hierarchy contrasted with that of stratification is relevant. The category of heaven is not a supernatural world, another ‘stratum’ of a stratification, but it is an ideal for humanity, the best that there can be along a continuum.

Therefore, to reject Sahlins’s proposition that Cook was seen as a ‘god’, akua, by the Hawaiians and to overlook other sources that are equally clear on this point, is to refuse to accept that the Polynesians saw their chiefs as the descendants of divine unions or of unions that were half-divine and half-human. But this is exactly what the genealogists in these Polynesian societies related. It is quite undeniable that the Polynesians took the Europeans for ‘atua’ (akua and so on), for ‘aitu’, or for ‘kalou’ (in Fijian). They actually used these words. For example, in the Marquesas Islands several sources from the end of the 18th

19 Krämer (1995) has a number of Samoan examples.
century show quite unambiguously that the word *atua* was applied to the
Europeans (Sahlins 1995: 174; Dening 1974: 73-4). In Tahiti, certain diviners or
prophets in a state of trance were similarly called *atua*, where, too, the word
also applied to the gods (Baré 1985: 115). We shall meet the Fijian example of
*kalou* again. But we should keep in mind that the Hawaiian word *akua*
applied at the same time to the gods (the entities of the Hawaiian world which seem to
correspond to a Western notion of divinity) and to any supernatural entity, to
any cult object, as well as to any strange and frightening object like the different
instruments of the first voyagers (Sahlins 1995: 173). In short, there was no
‘divine’ form (*atua*) that was, by itself, (all of) god.20

This same logic operated when the Polynesians called the Europeans—or at
least the captains—‘chiefs’, *ari’i*, since in this period chiefs were always
manifestations of the gods and ancestors: manifestations, that is to say images.
In 1788 the Tahitians mentioned Cook’s name to Bligh as being ‘the *ari’i* of Tahiti’
(Baré 1985:160). We shall come across this expression again in the prayer that
the Tahitians addressed to a portrait of Cook in 1790. Already in 1774, when
the exchanges that were taking place between Cook and the Tahitian chiefs had
become frequent, the Tahitians made an explicit comparison between their own
social hierarchy and that which they observed on board the European ships:
Cook was already an *ari’i* in the simple sense when his behaviour showed that
he was the chief of his own people; it was the same thing in the case of
Vancouver, and for the officers of the first missionary ship, the *Duff*, in 1797
(Baré 1985: 159, 162). The Samoan case presents a significant particularity. There,
little by little, all the Europeans came to be called *ali’i* ‘out of politeness’
(*fa’aaloalo*), so that in Samoan the word took on the sense of the English ‘Sir’,
and *ali’i* thus gained an additional meaning to that of ‘chief’. Today, in the
contemporary language, in verbal exchanges between Samoans, there are really
two words *ali’i*, one of which means ‘chief’ and the other simply ‘Mister, Sir’.
But we should not forget that, at the time of contact, the chiefs (*ari’i, ali’i*) were
themselves a manifestation of the divine.

The Europeans were therefore both *atua* and *ari’i*. Does that mean that they
were untouchable in the way that the most prominent manifestations of the
sacred would be untouchable in any religion? Not at all. When we examine the
archival sources we see that the Polynesians of that period had great respect for
what the European represented, but at the same time had no hesitation in treating
this or that European familiarly, or harshly, or even abusively if he did not
respect the local customs. The Tahitians had no hesitation in striking or even
killing one of their European guests if, for example, he had conducted himself

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20 The remarkable study of the Hawaiian pantheon by Valeri (1985) shows this as well. The same logic
was recognised by Durkheim who made use of it in constructing a model of the relationship, operating
in the religious conceptions of numerous societies, between the concept of the individual soul and the
collective sacred (Tcherkézoff 1995b).
improperly with a woman, or if he had killed another European adventurer whom they had adopted (Morrison 1989: 66, 72; Baré 1985: 162). We have already encountered a very good Samoan example in the adventurer Jackson’s 1840 sojourn when he was residing with the Tu’i Manu’a, the chief, and was almost killed for having struck his host.

We should not be surprised at this. Even today we can observe how Samoans treat their own ‘chiefs’ (matai ali’i / matai tulāfale) and what they say about them. A matai is chosen to be the receptacle for the name of the founding ancestor. Every insult made to the ‘title-name’ and thereby passed down from generation to generation is avenged by death. But if the man himself shows that he is unworthy of representing this ‘title’, there will be no hesitation in abusing and even deposing him. The chief is a temporary ‘body’ of the founding ancestor, as the Samoans and the Tongans used to say and still do today: the category of the Tongan high chiefs is called the category of the ‘chiefs-who-have-incarnated’, sino’eiki (‘body’ is tino, sino). A chief has ‘incarnated’ the original sacred principle represented by the name of the ancestor and the corresponding land. All of this is atua.21

That is why still today the Samoan chief can be called, in a ceremonial way, ‘an atua from here below’. In contemporary Samoan the chiefs are ceremonially referred to as o atua o lalonei (atua, ‘god’; lalo, ‘below’; nei, ‘here’). The chief is ‘an atua from here below’, while God (previously the pre-Christian gods, now ‘The Father’, O le Tamā ‘is the God’, O le Atua, with no other specification. The chief is a divine manifestation: a visible form here below of the sources of light-and-of-life situated in the sky. And even then it is only the ‘title-name’ that this chief bears (the name of the founding ancestor). We are not talking about the actual person that one has before one’s eyes; he is a man like any other.

Here is a case where contemporary ethnographic observation notes that ‘the Samoans can call their matai chiefs “atua”’ in ceremonial forms of address. And yet, as anyone who has spent any length of time in Samoa will know, no Samoan sees his matai chief as ‘god’ (O le Atua, the name of the god of present-day Samoan Christianity). What is the ‘atua’ dimension of this matai chief? Quite simply it is that title-name with which he is invested, the name of the founding ancestor.

21 I have pointed out that Father Padel would have gathered from the Samoans that they took the Europeans for ‘aitu’. The word aitu is post-missionary terminology for everything that is supernatural and which is not God. But, in the pre-contact era, and for some time after, all the atua (the spiritual forces that were behind or above, that were celestial) and all the aitu (the spiritual forces far on the horizon or down below, hidden in the forest, beneath the earth and in the sea) formed a continuum, as far as we can ascertain (from Cain’s analysis, 1979, and the fact that missionaries like Stair or Turner had the greatest difficulty in coming to grips with the cosmology and were unable to provide coherent tables of classification which could discriminate between atua and aitu). It is only after Christianisation that a clear dichotomy was set up between an Atua as unique, sheer heavenly light, and the numerous aitu reduced to the status of nocturnal and malevolent spirits; in the case of the Australs, see Babadzan (1982).
ancestor. From the moment that he is invested as matai, at the death or deposition of the preceding matai, he incorporates the name of the founding ancestor and the group’s genealogical memory. He becomes the visible proof that all the members of the family are ‘the children of this land’ where the founding ancestor settled.

What different behaviour can be observed among the members of the family to show that, after his investiture, this man has become an ‘atua from here below’? Firstly, there is the way of addressing him. He had a birth name. From the day of his investiture, it is the family name that he now takes as his name: the name of the founding ancestor replaces his birth name. And it can be seen that everyone, including his own, even his very young, children, suddenly changes their way of addressing him, even in private. They no longer call him by his birth name but by his ‘matai name’ and in so doing address themselves as much to him as to all the matai who have borne this name, beginning with the founding ancestor. This, then, is what it means to be an ‘atua’ man in Polynesia in the 1990s. I do not think that things were very different in 1770, in Samoa or in Hawaii.

The Polynesians took the Europeans for ‘atua’ entities. This translates, admittedly a little too rapidly, as: ‘they took them for gods’. But to say that the Polynesians took men for gods is a summary expression used to indicate the hierarchical continuity that links the creator of the world, passing through the chiefs, and the lowliest little worm. The Polynesian chiefs were gods metonymically, because a Polynesian god, as a total being, always and only ever manifested itself in an infinity of partial forms. We have seen that this idea was often expressed in Polynesia by the word ‘body’ (tino, kino, sino), or ‘image’ (ata, aka). For, even today, in the case of the Samoan chiefs one can say that in a certain way the body of the individual who has been invested as chief in each generation is only the image of the title-name (the family name).

As soon as we recall these ideas, we realise that Obeyesekere’s recent critique is completely inadequate, despite the bestseller status that it seems to have enjoyed. It is our vocabulary (‘god’ versus ‘man’) that creates a false impression of discontinuity where there is in fact none at all, as well as a false impression of identity in the notion of ‘god’, since Polynesians did and do discriminate the invisible atua and all its visible and partial bodies and images.

5. The boat-islands and images

It is the same linguistic trap that blinds us when it stops us from seeing that ‘boats could be islands’. In his study of the way in which the Tahitians perceived

22 For information about the whole of the contemporary matai system and its evolution since 1850, see the analysis in Tcherkézoff (1997a, 2003b: chapters 5 and 6) and, in English, but more briefly, Tcherkézoff (1998a, 2000a, 2000b).
the boats of Wallis, Bougainville and Cook, Baré (1985: 113-17) cites the 19th-century observers who collected local traditions and he draws on them to make an appropriate critique of all the readings that he terms ‘positivist’. According to the missionary William Ellis, the European boats were described as ‘islands inhabited by beings of a superior nature, upon whose orders lightning flashed and thunder rumbled’ (the muskets and cannons). According to the trader and consul J.A. Moerenhout, ‘the O-Tahitians mistook Wallis’s ship for a floating island, seeing the masts as trees, the pumps as streams’. Teuira Henry, who assembled the notes of her grandfather, one of the first missionaries, adds that the stern or the prow of Wallis’s ship ‘was compared to a rock’. Baré notes that Sahlin finds the same traditions in Hawaii.

For the idea of a ‘floating island’, Baré recalls the presence of this metaphor in Tahitian myths that certainly seem to pre-date contact. These relate how the islands such as Tahiti arrived where they are ‘like a ship’ (the big Polynesian canoes which could carry scores of people, even as many as two hundred, and which were to disappear in the 19th century), how the cliffs in the east of Tahiti were compared to the sculpture on the prow, how the political structure of each territory was called a ‘canoe’, the relative status of the dignitaries being shown by places occupied ‘at the prow’, ‘on the mast’, ‘on the rigging’ and so forth.

It is in this light that we might be able to understand an account from 1840 relating how a Tongan chief would have interpreted the arrival of Cook seventy years earlier.

... the old Chief gave me the following account of Captain Cook’s visit:

‘I was a little boy when Captain Cook and Captain Clark came. I went onboard ship, and took up a nail. Man called me “teef” (thief); me no teef. At first we went with our canoe, yams, and pigs, and seeing the fine figure-head on the vessel, thought that [emphasis in original] Captain Cook. We called to it a long time, and it would not speak or buy yams. We continued crying, “Will you buy yams, hogs, &c.”; but there was no answer. So we stood gazing and wondering, till at last the Captain appeared, and then we found out our mistake. They sent up sky-rockets, and we were greatly alarmed, They went [up] to the sky, and then burst. We all thought them gods, and were much afraid.24

23 In Henry there can also be found myths comparing the island of Tahiti to a ‘fish’ that has arrived there and that the civilising hero has carved, which has immobilised it and produced the particular shape of the island (two islands linked by a narrow plain). See the myth cited by Danielsson (1981: 51).

24 ‘John Waterhouse, Journal of a Second Voyage from Hobart-town, Van-Diemen’s Land, to the Polynesian Islands, commenced Wednesday, October 29th, 1840’, entry for 22 March 1841 – Tongatapu, pp. 18-19: the text and the reference were given to me by Fergus Clunie (personal communication, February 2003).
Overlooking this translation from 1840 (‘buy’ etc), and assuming that, quite obviously, the word ‘god’ here translates *atua*, we should take note of how the prow of these ships might appear to Polynesian eyes. They would not have suddenly worked out a specific representation for the European boats, still less would they have had recourse to animism. But, quite simply, they saw the Europeans in the way that they did because the sculpture on the prow of a big ocean-going vessel often represented the *image* of the ancestor or the clan.

Our modern scruples are therefore unwarranted. In a sense, the *Dolphin* (Wallis’s boat, the first European ship to come to Tahiti) was like a boat and the Europeans were like men. In another sense, the *Dolphin* was not a boat from the Polynesian perspective. For if the largest Polynesian craft could carry as many men as the *Dolphin*, or even more, such a craft nonetheless had two small keels instead of one large, deep keel. Moreover, it was a lot lower, it had no decks, hull, cabins, or iron anchors, it had only one sail—and, most significantly, it did not carry cannons. And these men were not men: they had mastery over lightning, they could forge the lava flow, and, as certain Hawaiians expressed it, they pulled from their bodies (their pockets) unknown riches, like iron and glass. In summary, if the islands could be ships to the Tahitians, then ships larger than their ships could easily ‘be’ floating islands. And if the Tahitian or Hawaiian chiefs ‘were’ gods, then men who were more than men could easily be ‘chiefs’ (*ariʻi*, *aliʻi*, etc.) and ‘gods’ (*atua*, *akua*). The two sets of terms were used to refer to the Europeans.

The image of the Hawaiian god Lono was a white barkcloth, which was stretched over a wooden framework for display as it was carried around. The sails of the Europeans ships resembled this image. *The European captains and sailors, swathed in layers of material, also resembled this image.* Indeed we need to be aware that the barkcloth was used as ceremonial dress and as the covering for the *tiki* (wooden or stone images representing the gods). The European captains, who were covered in even more material, were more similar still to the image of the god: *a likeness running from image to image*. And in the example of the Tongan narrative from 1840, we should bear in mind that the prow firstly, and then James Cook in person, were both taken in turn for the image of the invisible principle that was supposed to guide these strange creatures, *Papālagi*.

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25 In Hawaii it was said that the Europeans thrust their hands into their bodies to take out riches (see the references in Baré 1985: 135). No Polynesian item of clothing had a pocket. (Clothing was made of leaves, or from mats of leaf strips, or of barkcloth, beaten out bark. All of these were wound around the body. No part of the mat or barkcloth would be in exactly the same place when the wearer put the garment on again. The technique of fine sewing was unknown.)

26 The reader who is not familiar with Polynesia might be very surprised that a boat could be mistaken for a sacred place. It needs to be made clear that certain Polynesian boats were double canoes with a deck and carried a shrine on the deck: most reasonably, one departed with one’s family, one’s warriors and one’s gods (as well as pets).

27 In the case of Hawaii, see Valeri (1985) and for Tahiti, see Babadzan (1993, 2003).
on their boat. The Tongan’s mistake is therefore understandable. He did not mistake a piece of wood for a man, but he wanted to know what these images stood for or represented. An *atu* image could as easily be inanimate, like the cult images that the Tongans and the other Polynesians possessed, or animate, as in the case of the ‘chiefs-who-have-incarnated’—and in the case of James Cook as well, when he sailed in Tongan and Hawaiian water.

6. The sun as the point of reference, the canopy of heaven and Polynesian space-time

Sun, clouds and sky

As we have seen in the preceding section, the partial and particular character of the Polynesian attribution of ‘divinity’ (*atu*) to Captain Cook and other European visitors is shown by the fact that some European objects were just as ‘divine’ as their owners. It is also shown in a logic which unified geographical space and genealogical time.

The time the scientists on Cook’s third voyage spent in looking at the sky and the instruments they used to do so was all observed with the utmost attention. The Hawaiians had numerous questions that they tried to articulate about what they saw. They came to the conclusion that the Europeans were intimately connected with the sun. John Ledyard, a member of Cook’s expedition, wrote:

> [The Hawaiians thought that we] had so much to do with the sun and the rest of the planets … [that] we must either have come from thence, or by some other way [be] particularly connected with these objects. … to strengthen this inference they observed that the colour of our skins partook of the red from the sun (cited by Sahlins 1995: 173).

Another of Cook’s companions relates how the Hawaiians seemed to assume that the route followed by the Europeans passed through the sun and that the flash from the fire of their muskets came from this same source.²⁸ An Australian newspaper published an article in 1804 on ‘The Manners and Customs of the Inhabitants of Tongataboo’, based on the recollections of a European resident, the wife of a Tongan chief:

> …they adopt by common consent the strange and ludicrous supposition that such European visitors as have in too many instances unfortunately touched at their inhospitable spot have fallen in a state of exile from the clouds, and still retain the power of exciting thunder. Devoid of every idea that could be productive of a probable inference, they regard a

European with a jealous eye, because his difference of complexion implies something preternatural.\textsuperscript{29}

In 1798, Captain Edmund Fanning, when he was at anchor in the Washington Islands (now the Marquesas), was given to understand by the missionary William Pascoe Crook (who was translating) that the inhabitants said of the ship that it must certainly have come from the clouds, and very soon after paddled off to a more respectful distance, but did not, however, cease their shouting or blowing their war conks [\textit{sic}: conchae]. When some of the nearest chiefs beheld the bright blade of a broad-sword glittering in the sun’s rays, they declared, one to another, that that battle axe must have come from the sun, it was so dazzling.

Later on, at Nukuhiva, an ‘old chief’ came on board to present ‘a green branch’ and ‘a small pig’. The chief, in an ‘uneasy state of mind’, ‘presented in the first place the green branch, accompanying this act with a short address; after which, doing in like manner with the pig’. The chief then bowed or touched the deck with his head:

when on deck he insisted upon paying homage, but such I informed him, while raising him from his posture, and handing him to a seat on the quarter-deck, was not the manner of salutation when friends meet friends in my country, and as such I hoped we had now come together, adding that I myself was but a chief like himself: yet, said he, as I was given to understand through the interpretation of Mr Crook, there is this difference, you come from the thunder in the clouds, and are therefore more powerful than even my king.\textsuperscript{30}

In the same period, in the Marquesas, Edward Robarts had noted in his journal, on arriving at Hivaoa:

Great numbers of the inhabitants came to see me, my being the first white man that ever came to that part. In fact some was [\textit{sic}] afraid to come near me, said I was a ghost. Others said I was from the sky. I endeavoured to undeceive them. Some of the fair sex would come and feel my hands, arms and feet. Others more rude would pinch me to see if I had feeling.\textsuperscript{31}

A visitor to Fiji in 1808 noted that some of the women had told him where they thought he had come from. They pointed to the sun and said: ‘peppa langa

\textsuperscript{29} ‘Said person was Elizabeth Morey, ex-ship ‘Portland’- wife of Tongatapu chief Tukava’ (Fergus Clunie, personal communication, February 2003). The emphasis is in the original text.

\textsuperscript{30} ‘Edmund Fanning’s Voyages and Discoveries in the South Seas 1792-1832 (1989: 103, 113)’ (Clunie, personal communication, February 2003).

\textsuperscript{31} See Dening (1974: 76-7). I am grateful to Fergus Clunie and Marshall Sahlins for drawing this reference to my attention.
tooranga martinsinger’ [papalagi turaga matanisiga], which means ‘the Papalagi are chiefs from the sun’. 32

The world ‘under the sky’

The reference to the sun might suggest that the Polynesians placed the Europeans in the remotest possible realm of their cosmos. 33 But, in the worldview of the Polynesians, the reference to the sun in fact helped to narrow the genealogical distance between them and the Europeans. A major source of intercultural misunderstanding between Europeans and Polynesians arose from the inability of Europeans to conceptualise space in the way that Polynesians did and still do in some contexts: where space is indissolubly linked to time. 34 The very idea which underpinned the European voyages after 1760, the idea of a geographical and cultural other world which had to be discovered, limited Europeans to a frame of vision that was solely spatial. How could it have been otherwise? These men were sailors, whose constant preoccupation from day to day was to determine their position on the ocean as accurately as possible, and they did this using maps and charts, the very navigational tools whose efficacy would be considerably enhanced in this second half of the 18th century.

But the Polynesians did not voyage in the European way, either in their mythical memories or along their trade routes. Their islands were ships that had once arrived in Polynesian waters. This metaphor was obviously linked to the history of their migrations. The elsewhere whence the island-boat came was the place of origin, and therefore the place-time of Polynesian genealogical beginnings. Territories on these islands were hierarchically organised according to the length of the occupation of the land by each clan, so that the social organisation of space was also an historical image of elapsed time. In this geographical-and-chronological view of the world, the island that was most distant in space was always that which could be closest in time to the point of origin when the world of ‘light’ began.

Even the geometry of the cosmos conformed to this view. The world was a flat circle of islands and surrounding sea, overlooked and bounded by the canopy

32 Marshall Sahlins (personal communication, February 2003), with reference to ‘Patterson (1808: 106)’. Geraghty and Tent (2001: 174) also quote this. See ibid. for the bibliographical reference to Patterson 1817.
33 This is how, later, certain European analysts (from missionaries to modern scholars) devised the erroneous idea that 1) Polynesians had deified the Europeans (in the Christian sense) and/or 2) that the Polynesians had believed that the Europeans came from another world (see chapter 11).
34 The problem is a general one and is being felt keenly today when it resurfaces in discussions between Tahitian intellectuals about the ‘right’ way to use terms like mua (‘before, in front of’) and muri (‘after, behind’), and about the fact that the ‘right’ way, because it is authentic (‘traditional’), was, and must continue to be, fundamentally different from the logic underlying Western categories of thought, and, therefore, of the French language. The real problem is overlooked: the fundamental opposition is the Tahitian socio-centric way of evaluating the position of Ego in space and time versus the French universalistic-individualistic one (Tcherkézoff, 1998).
of heaven which formed a sort of bell on the surface of the land and the sea. That is why, in the past as in the present, Samoans describe the ‘whole world’ by the expression ‘what is under the sky’, ‘o le lalolagi. At the end of the horizon, the sky and the land-sea meet. But this most distant point is also the oldest. At the very beginning, before the appearance of man, the sky lay flat upon the earth-sea, leaving no space for life to exist. But a civilising hero-god came and pushed back the sky by bending it, and then there was light. So he who would venture to the end of the horizon would rediscover the conditions that existed at the beginning of the world. In essence, he who is the most distant in space and in the relationship of identity, that is, he who is most different, still might prove to be the most original as well, the closest to the very inception of the world.

So it was that the more the Europeans who arrived appeared other—while being placed in the right category, that of the ‘light’—the more they were seen as being a manifestation of the origin. There were not two possible origins, because there were not two ‘worlds’ (something which the first missionaries did not understand; see chapter 11). The Tahitians or the Hawaiians at the time could not conceive that there was another world and other human beings beyond the space which they habitually travelled over by land or sea and which was bounded by the canopy of heaven.

Nevertheless, this space was very big. For the Tahitians, it included all of Eastern Polynesia and perhaps even a part of Western Polynesia, maybe even as far as Rotuma, as shown on the famous ‘map of Tupaia’ which was dictated to Cook and was able to name so many distant islands. It was the same with the Maori (New Zealand) who remembered that they had come from elsewhere. This left room for various questions: the newcomers ‘are spirits, but perhaps not the spirits of our ancestors’. They are creatures who are undoubtedly under the supervision of the creator of the world, Tangaroa, but they must have come from other islands, far, far away…

Here again the Western critique can sometimes go off the rails. Some would maintain that it is a reductive Western view to credit the Polynesians with a conception of their pre-Christian cosmos that is as closed in on itself as this (Geraghty and Tent 2001: 183, 185). The critics see this as an invention of the missionaries, especially of the missionary J.B. Stair who lived in Samoa in the

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35 For Tahiti, see Babadzan (1993) and the cosmogonic narrative in Tcherkézoff (2003b: chapter 1). For Samoa, see Stair (1897). The same thing was found in Tonga, Fiji and other islands. According to the journal of George T. Sinclair (1838-1842), who was Acting Master aboard the Relief, the Porpoise and the Flying Fish, Fijians thought their islands ‘are in the centre of the world, which is a plain; the sky reaching it on all sides, tho’ the sky they think ther [sic] is an outlet to other countrys [sic]. They think that the white men or Papylangys live beyond the sky and when they first saw them they thought they were spirits, hence their name Papilange or people of the sky’. It may be that his informant was a Tongan, Tupou Toutai, who was in the company of the Fijian chief with whom Sinclair was residing (text, reference and commentaries provided by Sahlins and Clunie).
1840s. On this analysis, proof that it is a Western misconception to represent the Polynesian cosmos as strictly circumscribed by the canopy of heaven would be the fact that the Polynesians would often travel from one archipelago to the other (ibid.). And they certainly did so, but where is the contradiction in that? Polynesian cosmology conceived of a world in the form of a bell: why doubt this idea given the large number of archival sources to support it? But even so, the canopy of heaven over the earth was not and is not static. The canopy can expand as much as one likes to incorporate anything new. The ‘world under the sky’, lalolagi, as Samoans say, is subject to an almost infinite extension because other islands are always able to be imagined. An example was given to me in 1981 by an old Samoan man. Several times he had heard reports, on the national radio of Western Samoa, about the people who were holding Tahiti ‘hostage’ by colonial rule and by conducting their ‘terrifying tests which were polluting the Pacific’. When he learnt that I was French he said to me (in English): ‘Ah yes, you come from that island near Tahiti which looks after it’. France, as the colonial power that governs Tahiti, was thought of as a Pacific island. ‘The sea of islands’—as the Pacific is viewed by Polynesians (Hau’ofa et al., 1993)—can always incorporate new ‘islands’ while remaining the same ‘world’.

7. First conclusion: men/chiefs/gods

The misunderstanding propagated by Obeyesekere and others is very revealing about the typical Eurocentric intellectual conceptualisation of otherness. In the first place it is a kind of displaced paternalism: ‘the Polynesians could not be unintelligent enough to mistake men for gods’. It is also a functionalist interpretation of political behaviour, something which we need to examine more closely.

Obeyesekere takes up arguments that had already been put forward by other researchers: Cook was perceived as the chief of his crew and so he was received as a ‘chief’, ari’i. Now, honorifically, Polynesian chiefs were often referred to, and treated, as gods. If Cook was compared to a god, it was only a matter of the Hawaiians using a form of politeness to refer to him. It is only later, during the 19th century, with the European reinterpretation of these early contacts, particularly among missionaries, that the hypothesis of Cook’s deification came about.  

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36 The critique mounted in 1988 by several colleagues from Copenhagen (Bergendorff et al. 1988, and see bibliography in Sahlins 1989) contended that the Hawaiian deification of Cook as ‘Lono’ was just a hypothesis which emanated from Hawaiian students of the American mission in Hawaii in the 1830s (some of whom were to write treatises on ancient Hawaii). Thus it is a ‘Western representation—one made from within a Christian paradigm’. In 1778 Cook was simply assimilated to a general Hawaiian category of a more or less deified chief, a category which would only be split in two (men/gods) later on in the context of the European Christian interpretation of the Hawaiian pantheon. We can see how Obeyesekere took up the same erroneous idea, namely that in order to examine the Hawaiian equation ‘Cook=Lono’ we must keep in mind the absolute distinction between the categories ‘men’ and ‘gods’—and how he then concluded that in Hawaii in 1778 Cook was never viewed as Lono. Both Obeyesekere and
In response to this argument about Cook’s divinity amounting to no more than an honorific term of address, Sahlins, calling on Valerio Valeri, replied that, in pre-1820 Hawaii, a chief was called by the name of a god because he was perceived as a real ‘manifestation’ of the divine among men:

Valeri (1985:143-53) gives another textual example. The very notion of ‘godly blood’ (waiakua) signifies the categorical assimilation of god and chief in Polynesian terms, inasmuch as the ancestor is to his descendant as a general class is to particular instances. Valeri argues that naming a chief after a god again means the same: a chief designated Lono would be a manifestation of Lono (Sahlins 1995: 128-9).

To deny this second version would be to deny that the Polynesians of that time possessed, like any other society, a theory of ritual efficacy. But every society, ‘exotic’ or Western, past or present, prides itself on having a theory of this kind (even if ‘we’, meaning contemporary Westerners, reserve the epithet ‘ritual’ for people other than us and invest our own theory of efficacy in ‘science’): a particular method for handling ritual (or ‘scientific’) objects allows life-giving powers to be made present and domesticated for a brief time, these powers always being represented as exterior to the social group. In each case a category of beings or objects serves to bring about this domestication. In Polynesia it was the ‘chief’. The Polynesian notion of ‘chief’ consisted—and sometimes still consists—of making a man, through ritual, become the receptacle of a portion of these powers.

In Samoa, on the day-to-day level, this seems to happen as simply as through a process of naming. As soon as the rite of investiture for the chief of the extended family (matai) is over, the new office-holder is no longer called by the name by which he has been known since his birth, but by the title-name (the name of the ancestor or of a god) assigned to him, as I have already described. Is this just a simple honorific practice? In that case how would we explain that still today, in Samoa, such a man’s own children, even the very youngest ones, immediately
begin calling him by this new name in the most ordinary interactions of daily life? In Samoa and elsewhere in Polynesia, the terminology of address, even in the most private contexts, uses only proper names. Thus, in the family circle, the way of saying ‘dad’ can be seen to change abruptly: the birth name is replaced by the title-name acquired in the rite of investiture to the headship of the extended family. It is quite unnecessary that these children have some kind of representation of a mystical principle or of an ancestral substance that has entered their father’s body. Firstly, they are too young to fully understand this kind of representation. Secondly, in contemporary Samoa, there is no theory of this kind that holds sway even among adults. However, verbal intercourse shows that it is not a matter of honorific formality but of a whole new identity.\(^\text{37}\)

The critique addressed to Sahlins reveals a naïve assumption: the members of the Polynesian social group have put in place a social contract between themselves—‘we choose you as “chief”’—and have bestowed an ‘honour’ upon the person in question (calling him ‘god’) to make him more visible…but in relation to whom? If the conferring of the name of a god or an ancestor is merely honorific, for whose benefit is this staged? We fall back inevitably upon the kind of explanation in which elites of chief-priests are manipulating the masses. But in contemporary Samoa it takes no more than a few days spent in the company of a group who has just elected its chief to see the absurdity of this model. When the chief of a Samoan family is called ‘an atua on earth’, a ‘god of here-below’—but with all the ambiguities of the word atua (akua) that we have already seen in the Hawaiian, Marquesan, Tahitian and Maori examples—this term of address, while ceremonial, is not on that account just metaphorical. The chiefs, once invested, make the reality of ancestral origins visible. I have emphasised the importance of this notion of ‘visibility’: to make something visible is to unveil it. It is also to make it understood: the word ‘understand’ is formed by reduplicating the word ‘light’ in Samoan or the word ‘image’ in Hawaiian.

At the time of early contact, Polynesian ontology was holistic in the following sense. The individual is always the partial and visible aspect of another encompassing reality (gods, founding ancestor of a title-name); he is an imperfect and incomplete replica like all re-presentations. But Western observers have difficulty in understanding this. For them, this other reality must be analysed as a ‘religious’ or ‘political’ supplement added on to the individual. In short, it comes down to a question of belief and of function. These beliefs are instantly and resolutely confined within the boundaries of a healthy Western Christian rationality where men and God cannot be confused.

\(^{37}\) This does not prevent the same ‘chief’ who has been invested in this way from being stripped of this title-name if he shows himself to be ‘unworthy’ in acts that he may subsequently commit. He will lose the title-name and it will be given to another man according to ritual. The particular individual is not confused with what he represents of the ancestral origins of his group.
Our Western observers ask themselves: ‘human or divine?’ But this question was meaningless in pre-Christian Polynesia and often it still is meaningless. We talk about ‘descending’ from our ancestors, but, for us, the ancestor is like his descendant: he is, was, an individual. But the Polynesian view was completely different: the Polynesians considered that the god is to the chief (and to all men), and the ancestor is to his descendants, what a class is to its elements, according to the formula already quoted from Sahlins. Here again it is the same relationship that needs to be conceived between Lono as concept and his various ‘manifestations’ in ritual, those assembled on the spot (the barkcloth stretched over a wooden frame) and those which have occasionally presented themselves to the Hawaiians, as with James Cook in person:

In any event it is good to keep in mind this Hawaiian principle that gods called ‘Lono’ are so many bodies (kino) or specific refractions of the inclusive Lono when reading the tortuous argument of Bergendorff et al. about why the Hawaiians could not have assimilated Captain Cook to the god Lono (Sahlins 1989: 384-5).  

We shall encounter this ‘principle’ again at the end of this discussion in relation to the treatment of the image-of-Cook by the Tahitians.

8. The questions on the lips of the islanders at the time of the first contacts: ‘perhaps not like our goblins’, ‘perhaps on a boat sent by Tangaroa’

A Hawaiian tradition tells of how the chief of an island was warned of the arrival of the Europeans who had already made a stay at another island: their speech was incomprehensible, their boat was ‘like a temple’, their clothes were stuck on to their skin, smoke came out of their mouths (from their pipes), and so on. When we come across descriptions such as these, we can see how the conclusions drawn by the inhabitants of different islands might have varied. For the Hawaiians the chief of these never-before-encountered people must have been a form of the god Lono. But elsewhere in Polynesia these people were simply taken for a kind of ‘spirit’: aitu in Samoa, as we know, or tupua among the Maori.

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38 See also Sahlins (1985a: 146-51) for a discussion of this aspect in terms of a ‘hierarchy of logical types in the structure of the discourse’. He points out very simply that: ‘the English (or French) distinction between ‘god’ and ‘man’ is not the same as the apparent Hawaiian parallel of akua and kanaka, because kanaka as designating ‘(ordinary) men’ thus stands in definitional contrast as well to ali’i or ‘chief’. In the Hawaiian, ‘chief’ and ‘god’ are transitively alike by opposition to men; nor would the difference of gods and men correspond to that between spirits and mortals, since some mortals (chiefs) are also gods. There is no necessary starting point for any such cultural scheme in “reality”…’ (ibid.: 147).

Aotearoa-New Zealand: beings who are ‘spirits but perhaps not our spirits’

Certain Maori traditions show that the newcomers were seen as *tupua*. Let us be clear that the Maori *tupua* were ‘visible beings of supernatural origin, regarded with a mixture of terror and awe and placated with *karakia* (ritual chants) or offerings’. But the word *atua* was used as well.\(^{40}\) Thus we are still within the same frame of reference as for the Hawaiian, Tahitian, Tongan use of *akua, atua*. I have referred to the curiosity of the Hawaiians who wondered whether the Europeans who observed the sky with their telescopes came from the sun or whether they only visited this star on their voyages. Concerning the use of *atua* by the Maori, Elsdon Best, one of the reliable ethnographers, had noted that the term, of which one tradition says that it was used to refer to Europeans, meant ‘god, demon, supernatural being’. As to the other word used for Europeans, *tupua*, Best gives the meaning: ‘anything extraordinary, especially if it be credited with supernatural powers’ (Sahlins 1995:179).

Quite clearly the image of the European was ambiguous, generating a plethora of questions that the Polynesians put to themselves and to which they could not find answers. The Europeans could not help them either. Since at the linguistic level mutual understanding had scarcely begun, the Polynesians and the Europeans could barely understand one another. And where they did understand one another, the answer that the Europeans gave (the astronomers on Cook’s voyage: ‘we are looking at the sun’) raised still more questions—or confirmed first impressions about the ‘celestial’ nature of these beings.

This level of ambiguity—something that Obeyesekere’s type of critique is incapable of grasping—is set out in a Maori narrative. When the Europeans were considered to be ‘spirits’, *tupua*, by the Maori, the nature of the comparison could be formulated more precisely: the Europeans were ‘*tupua* but perhaps not our *tupua*’. The narrative was recorded in the middle of the 19th century, from the mouth of an old man who, in 1769, happened to be at the spot where Cook’s expedition landed:

> We lived at Whitianga, and a vessel came there, and when our old men saw the ship they said it was an *atua*, a god, and the people on board were *tupua*, strange beings or ‘goblins’. The ship came to anchor, and the boats pulled on shore. As our old men looked at the manner in which they came on shore, the rowers pulling with their backs to the bows of the boat, the old people said, ‘Yes, it is so: these people are goblins; their eyes are at the back of their heads; they pull on shore with their backs to the land to which they are going.’ When these goblins came on shore, we (the children and women) took notice of them, but we ran away from

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\(^{40}\) Salmond cited in *ibid.*: 179; Best cited in *ibid.*
them into the forest, and the warriors alone stayed in the presence of those goblins; but as the goblins stayed some time, and did not do any evil to our braves, we came back one by one, and gazed at them, and we stroked their garments with our hands, and we were pleased with the whiteness of their skins and the blue of the eyes of some of them.

These goblins began to gather oysters, and we gave some kumara, fish, and fernroot to them. These they accepted, and we (the women and the children) began to roast cockles for them; and as we saw that these goblins were eating kumara, fish, and cockles, we were startled, and said ‘Perhaps they are not goblins like the Maori goblins’.  

This text is interesting because it establishes several distinctions: between the gods and spirit-sprites on the one hand, and between the latter and the ancestors properly speaking on the other. The extraordinary ship was described as a ‘something divine’ atua, and the people on the ship as ‘spirits’ or ‘sprites’ tupua. The tupua, as Anne Salmond (1991: 88) makes clear, could take on human form but they did not eat; in any event, they did not eat the cooked food eaten by human beings. And so, the fact of seeing the men from the ship eat sweet potatoes and fish, after giving the Maori to understand by gesturing that they wanted these foods cooked, forced the Maori to attach a large question mark to the formulation: ‘they are undoubtedly tupua, but perhaps not our tupua?’ Finally, Maori terminology distinguishes between these spirit-imps, tupua, and the ancestors properly called tupuna.  

The newcomers were superhuman, undoubtedly, but they were difficult to classify because they could do more than the ancestors proper, with their boat-islands and their thunder-cannons, but they could not do as much as the gods who had created the world, who had invented thunder and lightning and who had fished the islands up from the bottom of the ocean with their huge fishhooks. When the Polynesians said of the Europeans that they were atua or tupua, we need to remember that this always involved a questioning of their status as well. These same words when used normally already seemed to imply some measure of uncertainty. What is divine, atua, is everything which seems to be driven by a divine power, a power delegated by a god; atua does not just designate the god himself. In any case, even at the level of the invisible and the

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41 The narrative was published by White in 1888 (see White 1989: vol. 5) and is cited by Salmond (1991: 87-8) whose text I am following here. The author, Horeta Te Taniwha, was a young child who happened to be on the beach that day in November 1769 when Captain Cook’s ship landed on the coast of New Zealand and stayed for twelve days. He lived long enough to be able to pass on his memories seventy years later.

42 I am grateful to Marshall Sahlins who drew my attention to this difference which I had overlooked in an early version of this text (personal communication, November 1997). Williams’s dictionary (1971) does indeed make a distinction between tupua (‘1. goblin, demon, object of terror; 2. one versed in magic arts; 3. foreigner; 4. strange sickness; 5. strange; 6. steal, kidnap’—we can see the common thread in these different instances of tupua) and tupuna (‘ancestor, grand-parent’).
mythical, the great gods were constantly splitting themselves into countless partial forms as, for example, in Samoan mythology where there is Tagaloa-the-Creator, who sends Tagaloa-the-Messenger and other Tagaloas to carry out his business on earth, and so on.

In the Cook Islands and in Tonga: envoys from the gods ‘on the boat of Tangaroa’

Let us move from New Zealand to the archipelago of the Cook Islands whose inhabitants first heard about Captain Cook from the Tahitians. When, in 1823, the missionary John Williams arrived in Rarotonga where he was the first European to disembark, he recorded a narrative, that of a meeting between the inhabitants of Aitutaki (an island in the north of the Cook archipelago) and two Tahitians whose canoe was brought there by head winds. The Tahitians told the inhabitants of Aitutaki about the visit of Captain Cook; they told them about the deathly power of the guns, but also about the extraordinary properties of the axes and the nails given to them by these beings whom they named Tuti (from the word ‘Cook’). The men of Aitutaki would then have made their prayers to the creator Tangaroa: ‘O great Tangaroa, send your large ship to our land, let us see the Cookes … to give us nails and iron and axes …’ (Thomson, 1915: 40-1, n. 2). The ‘Tuti’ were on a boat of Tangaroa the creator of the world, but they were not confused with this creator. They were the representatives, in unknown form, of the god that the Polynesians knew. This was exactly the same as when Cook’s crew had been described by the Maori as sprites, tupua, who had embarked on a divine-boat, atua.

Even when Cook and those who were with him were called ‘divine’, atua, with all the nuances already elicited for this term, they were still envoys of Tangaroa. Another example taken from the same archipelago shows this. The missionary William Wyatt Gill was posted at another of the Cook Islands, Mangaia, from 1851. In 1777 Captain Cook had anchored off Mangaia; he had not landed but he had exchanged several objects with an inhabitant who was brave enough to paddle up to the English ship and go on board. Eighty years later Gill recorded a song describing Cook’s visit, which told of the ‘big boat’, and mentioned the Tahitian ‘Mai’ who was on board and who was such a useful interpreter to Cook. The refrain is pertinent to this discussion: ‘It is the boat belonging to/originating from Tangaroa, it has sailed on/from the sky; they are very frightening akua’ (No Tangaroa te vaka: kua tere i te aka i te rangi ē! E atua matakōoki).43 Certain important points need to be made about these terms:

43 The lines preceding those quoted mention the paleness of the visitors’ faces, the strange language that they seemed to speak and the possibility that they came from a ‘very distant island’. The above translation is mine and differs from Gill’s (1880:183, 185). Gill translates the first line as: ‘Tangaroa has sent a ship, Which has burst through the solid blue-vault’. We shall return to this missionary idea of ‘bursting through the sky’ in chapter 11.
Tangaroa is the great creator god; te is ‘the’, vaka, ‘canoe’; no means ‘of’ with an important nuance. Buse’s dictionary (1995) glosses this ‘no’ as: ‘belonging to, of (where the possession is, or is conventionally treated as, inherent, inalienable, non-agentive)’. What we have here is one of the two kinds of relationship of ownership as distinguished from each other in most Polynesian languages: non-agentive to agentive, a relationship of belonging to a whole as compared to a relationship where there is only a simple distinction between the possessor and the possessed, or, more concretely, the relationship to the chief, to the land, to the house, to the ancestors, in contrast with, for example, the relationship to a purchased object. In the latter case ‘of’ is expressed as nā. Thus, the presence of ‘no’ shows us that the relationship of the Europeans to Tangaroa was like that of an individual to his chief, to his ancestors, to his clan and to his ancestral origins.

In some parts of Tonga too, where the great creator was the god Hikuleo, it was said that the Europeans were on a boat from the god Tangaroa, the younger brother of Hikuleo. One of the first Wesleyan missionaries to land there, in 1797, wrote later:

Tangaloa resides in the sky. He sends forth the thunder and lightning; and when a thunder-storm occurs, it is supposed that he is killing a Chief. Tangaloa is a god of the carpenters, whose business is the most honourable employment in the Friendly Islands. He is supposed to be the god of all the foreigners, whom he has taught to construct such beautiful vessels. Captain Cook and others were supposed to have come from the sky, sent by Tangaloa. The Heathen will sometimes use this plea for not worshipping the God of the foreigners: ‘You serve Tangaloa, the saucy younger brother; we serve Hikuleo, the elder: why should we leave the elder to serve the younger brother?’...

In 1777 Cook anchored off Atiu, another island of the archipelago which today bears the name of the English navigator. Lieutenant Gore went ashore in a rowing-boat. During the 1850s Gill recorded there a number of recollections from elderly men whose fathers had witnessed Cook’s arrival:

On Lieutenant Gore’s landing, the chiefs asked him, amongst other things, ‘Are you one of the glorious sons of Tetumu? Are you a son of the Great Root or Cause, whose children are half divine, half human?’ According to their mythology, Tetumu was the father of gods and men, and the maker of all things … On that memorable day the strangers were the guests of Tiaputa, who ordered the dances and other amusements in honour of the occasion. The kava-drinking, the nectar of the Polynesian gods, and the feasting were extravagant. Forty pigs, mostly small, were

cooked and presented to their visitors, who were led to the marae, where a sort of worship was paid to them as the favoured children of Tetumu (Gill 1880: 187).

‘Are you a spirit?’ (Fiji)

These were the questions on the lips of the inhabitants, but questions that were already inflected: ‘Are you the envoys of the great creator god? Are you his children?’

The case of Fiji can also be cited, as reported by Sahlins in another of his studies. There, too, there were questions:

For decades after Savage [one of the early beach-combers], White men who were able to repair Fijian muskets were asked if they were not ‘spirits’ (kalou). Perhaps most pertinent was Naulivou’s questioning of William Cary to this effect, when Cary had fixed the Bau chief’s firearms: ‘Are you a spirit?’ I told him no, that I was flesh and blood the same as himself. ‘Well’, he said, ‘if you are the same as me, what makes you so white?’

Of the Fijians in those days it might be said that nothing foreign was merely human to them. The vulagi, the stranger, was a kind of divine guest, as Hocart observed; the notion could be glossed as ‘heavenly god’ or ‘heavenly ancestor’. For the notion of spirit (kalou) itself had a spatial dimension: a being from the beyond, outside the bounds. (Sahlins 1994:75)

‘Nothing foreign was merely human to them’: for the era preceding the beginnings of globalisation in the modern world, this formula expresses the attitude of the Polynesians and all the peoples of the Pacific, and no doubt of the inhabitants of every continent on earth as well, each time that they were confronted with beings who were different enough to make their identification problematic.


For the Polynesians, then, this problematic identification gave rise to a host of questions and some very ambiguous answers. The incidents that have most caught the attention of Europeans in these early contacts in Polynesia—the presentation of young girls to the visitors—are clear evidence of this.

Once the European interpretation of these sexual encounters is deconstructed in a number of cases, as in the Samoan case examined in Part One and in the Tahitian case examined elsewhere (Tcherkézoff in press-1), we can definitively discount the hypothesis of sexual hospitality offered to the voyagers as well as that of a local custom of adolescent sexual freedom. Furthermore, the description of certain facts (ritual decorum, girls dragged by force, their young age and so
that were present in these early sexual contacts demands that we look for an interpretation based in ritual. The only conceivable line of research is, following Sahlins’s suggestion for Hawaii (1985a: chapter 1), to make a connection between the myths about the impregnation of women and the presentation of women to the ancestor-gods in the dances linked to the cycles of fertility, but with the addition of an unexpected element which seems always, or at least very often, to be at work: young age and virginity (see chapter 3 above). But if the hypothesis leads to the conclusion that the Polynesians carried this mythical structure over to the scene of these early contacts with Europeans, it is still the case that they did their very utmost (this is fully described in the narratives) to persuade their European male visitors to perform—not symbolically but for real—a sexual act on the girls presented to them. This clearly implies that the Polynesians saw in their visitors (i) a form of power attractive enough to them that they tried everything in order to harness it (a form of power, therefore, that went beyond local resources), and, at the same time, (ii) beings of flesh and blood capable of sexually penetrating a woman and giving her their sperm.

There is a perfect example of this with the misadventure of Bougainville’s cook in April 1768 on the expedition’s arrival at Tahiti. Even before a landing had been made, but after the French crew had seen the local ‘Venus’ board the ship and, once disrobed by her companions, ‘appear as did Venus revealing herself to the Phrygian shepherd’, Bougainville’s cook, driven to go ashore, took off in a boat to go and meet a ‘Venus’ for himself. (There were other young girls in canoes surrounding the ship or on the shore.) But as soon as he got there and found himself, as we might imagine, surrounded by a crowd of Tahitians, he was handled in a way he did not expect: he was promptly and forcibly undressed, and everyone felt ‘all the parts of his body’ (and therefore, as we may assume, the genitals as well). Once that was done, the young girl (whom, it seems, the cook had encountered on disembarking or after seeing her in a canoe close to the ship) was presented to him and he was energetically made to understand what was expected of him. The poor cook, absolutely terrified, could not do anything at all and showed by the signs he was making that he wanted to return to the ship. On his return he said to Bougainville that whatever punishment his captain might come up with to punish him for his escape, it would be less frightening than what he had just lived through (Bougainville [1771] 1968: 186-7).

Then when the first officers went ashore, the Tahitians took them into a chief’s house and presented them with a young girl. Bougainville drew on this incident in his famous phrase about the sexual hospitality offered in ‘every

45 See above concerning Lapérouse’s visit to Samoa; the same elements are also found in Fesche’s journal of Bougainville’s visit to Tahiti.
46 All the recorded Polynesian representations of procreation recognised the role of the sperm (Tcherkézoff 2003b: 375-6).
house’, but Fesche’s journal shows that the girl was brought there by the women, that she was crying and that she was a virgin.

10. Polynesia-America: the same ‘question’
If we now turn parenthetically to a comparable situation, namely that of America, we see that there, too, how to conceptualise the first Europeans was a matter for constant questioning on the part of the inhabitants.

In Polynesia, there are legends suggesting that the arrival of celestial beings was expected. In Samoa, the chief who greeted the first missionary is also the subject of a legend. The legend tells that a goddess (Nafanua) reigned on earth, carried off victories, established a measure of order, and then, just before she disappeared, announced to this man that he would soon be a great chief and that his ‘kingdom would come from the sky’ (Ma’ia’i 1960: 46-8). I have already suggested the hypothesis that these legends could have arisen earlier at the time when the inhabitants were trying to comprehend the appearance of the first Europeans in the region (the contacts in Tonga and/or Fiji). Of course these legends could have been in existence at a still earlier period, in relation to the pan-Polynesian Sky/Earth cosmology, but they received a sort of confirmation at the time of contact. Then a kind of semantic intensification occurred in the late 18th and early 19th century with the arrival of more visitors and the missionaries who spoke of ‘luminous’ and ‘celestial’ powers. In fact, by placing the missionaries under his protection, the Samoan chief in question, Malietoa Vaiinupo, assured the rapid spread of his control over part of the country. In America, too, the Europeans were incorporated into ‘the myth of the civilising god who, after his beneficent reign, disappeared mysteriously promising men that he would one day return’ (Wachtel [1971:42] 1977:14).

Whether or not these myths or legends were produced after the event (something that we cannot know as, clearly, the recording of these myths by observers always occurs after first contact), they nonetheless reveal a recurring pattern of thought. But it would be quite naïve to believe that, in Polynesia as in America, this process of matching the newcomers to pre-existing supernatural entities in myth and legend was seen as a statement of empirical fact. If the correspondence between spirits-gods and Europeans was mythically articulated in this way, where supernatural facts were always included in the myths—facts set apart from everyday reality even in the pre-Christian thought of the local inhabitants—it is because the reason for this articulation was to formulate a question concerning this correspondence—‘are these our gods visiting us?’—and not to make an affirmation.

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47 This is the time when, probably, the word ‘Papālagi’ was re-analysed by Western Polynesians with the meaning of ‘people from the sky’ (see chapter 11).
Previous studies about the Polynesian perception of the Europeans have not sufficiently stressed this aspect. The Polynesian formulation was a comparison (with the gods-ancestors-spirits) that was always accompanied by a question. For, indeed, the Polynesians were not blind to the many differences between the Europeans and the superhuman beings as they usually imagined them. At the same time, the space-time logic that I have talked about did not allow them to imagine an ‘ancestrality’ that could have given rise to another kind of humanity. The remoteness from which the Europeans had come was as such an origin and there could not be two distinct origins since, we may suppose, in Polynesia at that time it was not possible to hold a plural vision of humanity.

The American story told by Nathan Wachtel shows similarly how it was ‘questions’ and not an affirmation that guided the ‘the vision of the vanquished’:

The intrusion of the Europeans into a society which had lived in isolation for centuries, was an interruption in the normal course of events. So we must not be astonished that Moctezuma saw Cortés as the god Quetzalcoalt returning to his people. On the contrary, we must realize that he was trying to rationalize this extraordinary event. Moctezuma was using the mental equipment of his society, the only one at his disposal. He was turning to traditional mythology in order to integrate into his vision of the world something quite beyond any of his previous experiences. This was also the way the Guatemalan Indians and Huascar’s partisans reasoned the matter. Yet Atahuallpa, the Mayas of Yucatan and the Cholula Indians reacted differently. Why?

Not all of the Indians took the Spaniards for gods, but all when confronted with their unexpected appearance asked themselves the question: ‘Are they gods or men?’ All the societies we are concerned with have one thing in common: the invasion of their world by the unknown. All their documents, Aztec, Mayan, Inca, describe the strange attributes (beards, horses) and powers (writing, thunderbolts) of the Spaniards. The whole of Indian mythology implied the possibility that the white men might be gods and everywhere this was a source of doubt and anguish. The answer to the question ‘men or gods?’ could be yes or no, depending on the particular circumstances of local history.

This interpretation is confirmed by a remarkable episode. As they approached Cuzco, Pizarro’s soldiers captured some Indian messengers. These men, on their way from Callcuchima, one of Atahualpa’s generals, to another general, Quizquiz, were bearers of an important item of news concerning the nature of the invaders: ‘Callcuchima had sent them to inform Quizquiz that they [the Spaniards] were mortals’. (Wachtel 1977: 23-4).
The power of their cannons certainly gave a divine aspect to the newcomers, but they were white and bearded, which was strange. An attempt was made to give them offerings in the usual way: foods dripping blood (after human sacrifices) but, strangely, these visiting gods were revolted by such offerings. So then there was doubt. At times, the inhabitants attacked the newcomers using sorcery, at times they offered them signs of victory. Gods, chiefs, sorcerers, warriors, the newcomers were all of these at once (Wachtel [1971: 44-5] 1977: 14-16). Some groups made an alliance with the Europeans to fight against other groups.48

On both the American continent and in Oceania the spiralling cycle of fighting and the exchange of objects clearly led to a constant modification of their understanding of the newcomers by the local populations. Very rapidly Inca messengers were sent to allied groups to tell them that these strangers seemed to be mortal after all. The Polynesians for their part understood with great alacrity that the terrifying weapons of these ‘spirits who are not our spirits’ could be acquired and used, and even turned against them.49

11. Exchanges of images: image of Lono, image of Cook (Tahiti)

Behind the affirmation ‘the Europeans were taken for gods’ which seems to cause certain scholars some concern, we can now see more precisely what happened: Cook was assimilated to the image of Lono. The whole semantic field of the words atua, aitu and so on, and the mythical realities of such things as island-boats and a curved space-time, all point strongly in this direction. There is also another indirect proof: there was no difference in the way the Polynesians treated the flesh-and-blood Captain Cook and Captain Cook’s image.

In Hawaii the god Lono was represented in ritual by an image (the white barkcloth carried on a wooden frame) which was made by the priests. After the ritual, the image returned to being a simple piece of material, just as the wooden statues used in other rituals became profane again after they had been used. All of this ritual apparatus was put back again in the cupboard in the temple. If the following year the materials had deteriorated, an image would be rebuilt. When the Europeans arrived, their boats, their sails, their objects and they themselves

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48 In the same way as, three centuries later, the Samoan chief Malietoa Vaiinupo used these new powers (and the guns that he thereby acquired) for his wars against other districts.
49 Throughout Polynesia, the attitude of the chiefs was for each of them to acquire as many white adventurers (deserters etc.) as possible, if need be by kidnapping them on the shore (I have mentioned the case of Jackson at Ta‘ū in 1840), so that the Europeans could teach them how to handle weapons and serve as intermediaries in the trade with whaling ships, who sold them guns (and much else besides) in exchange for fresh supplies of food. In America, the same thing has been noted, even if it was much less general because it occurred in the period of armed struggle which did not last for very long: three years after the arrival of the Spaniards, an Inca chief was using harquebuses and had the gunpowder made by European prisoners (Wachtel 1971: 258). In Samoa a trading economy based on guns lasted from 1830 to 1890.
were considered to be images of this kind. The priests manipulated Captain Cook so as to establish this particular quality: an image of Lono. There was one difference though. This time, a particular image of Lono was sent by the gods, perhaps by Lono, made by them and by him, and not by men—since Cook’s appearance was a European event and not a device set up by the Hawaiian priests. And this explains the ambivalence surrounding the way in which this image was treated. The usual kind of image can be thrown away, broken, or destroyed when one is no longer in the appropriate phase of the ritual. This is what happened when Cook was murdered having returned to the island out of time (Cook’s arrival corresponded to the ritual cycle of Lono, and his departure did too; but, because of damage to his ship a short time after he had left Hawaii, Cook made an about turn and returned to the same island). But because this image was a divine, not a human, creation, because it ‘was atua’, the expectation was that it would return of its own accord. So, after his murder, the Hawaiians asked other members of the expedition when Cook would return (Sahlins 1989: 377ff; 1995: 85).

That is not the end of the story. The Polynesians thought it logical that fabricated images should reproduce this image sent by the gods. That is why the image of Cook—image of Lono was itself used in the ritual. This actually happened in Tahiti. A picture of Cook, painted by John Webber during Cook’s visit to Tahiti in 1777, was left with the local chiefs as a memento. Thirteen years later, the Tahitians, who had learnt of Cook’s death, used his portrait as a representation of a sacred power so that offerings could be made to it.

James Morrison and some of the other mutineers from the Bounty, among those who had decided to stay in Tahiti, were present at a heiva festival. Morrison noted in his journal:

February 1790. – On the 1st of February our attention was drawn from our Work by a Heiva which according to Custom was performed in our Neighbourhood before the Chief of the District, to see which all the inhabitants of the District were Assembled.

Everything being ready Captain Cooks picture was brought (by an Old Man who has the Charge of it) and placed in front, and the Cloth with which it was covered being removed … The Master of the Ceremonies then made the Oodoo (or usual offering) making a long speech to the picture, acknowledging Captain Cook to be Chief of Maatavye and placing a Young Plantain tree with a sucking pig tied to it before the Picture.

The Speech running to this purpose – ‘Hail, all hail Cook, Chief of Air Earth & Water, we acknowledge you Chief from the Beach to the Mountains, over Men, Trees and Cattle over the Birds of the Air and Fishes of the Sea &c. &c.’
After which they proceeded to perform their dance, which was done by two young woemn Neatly and elegantly dressd in fine Cloth, and two Men, the whole was conducted with much regularity and exactness, beating drums & playing flutes to which they kept true time for near four Hours.

On a signal being given the Woemen Slip’d off their Dresses and retired, and the whole of the Cloth and Matting which was spread to perform on, was rolld up to the Picture and the old man took possession of it for the use of Captain Cook (Morrison 1935: 85-6).

The practice of giving mats and barkcloth at the end of a dance is well attested to in the narratives of the first voyagers and later on (see next chapter). This offering was typically made to the representatives of the gods: the Arioi during their dance (given the particular character of this Tahitian brotherhood whose role is to make the gods present on earth in certain rituals: they tear off the barkcloth worn by the women), the local and visiting chiefs and, when they began to appear on the scene, the European guests. Cook and Banks were themselves made this offering, with this same ceremonial, when they came to Tahiti, as we shall see in the next chapter. And we have just seen that the offering was made to Captain Cook a second time in Tahiti, in 1790, when the deceased navigator was made present in the form of this image-of-Cook.

12. Political appropriation: Europeans as adopted cousins (Napoleon, the ‘Kamehameha’ of Europe)

From the very beginning of this work of conceptualisation that the Polynesians were obliged to make in their regard, the Europeans were placed at the outer (but original) limits of the world: they were envoys of the gods, ‘spirits’ but in a new form, ‘celestial’ beings but ones not known up until then and for whom it was necessary to coin new terms (like Papālagi, see chapter 11). But the Polynesians also called the captains ‘chief’, ari’i. The Tahitian invocation made to the Image-of-Cook (‘Chief of Air…, Chief from the Beach to the Mountains…’)

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50 Morrison notes that, in 1790, the Tahitians still often talked about Cook. In relation to the cows and goats brought by Cook, they remembered that Captain Cook had brought them; he also notes that they took more care of his portrait than of anything else. This portrait was painted by Webber in 1777 (Cook’s third voyage) and given to Tu, chief of Matavai. After Cook’s departure, Tahiti had no more visits for eleven years. Then in 1788 a ship arrived from Australia, with Lieutenant Watts, a member of the crew on Cook’s last voyage, on board. As soon as the boat had anchored, the Tahitians announced the arrival of the chief Tu. Watts, as well as Captain Sever, went ashore. They were received by Tu. Standing next to the king was a man bearing the portrait of Captain Cook. The Tahitians seem to have treated it with the utmost care because it was like new. Watts would learn that chief Tu always kept this portrait at his side (Watts’s journal, cited by Scemla 1994: 330). Oliver (1974: 1358 n. 2) takes this passage from Morrison’s narrative but does not comment on it except to say that even as early as Wallis’s voyage (1767), the flag planted by the latter had become, with some ornaments added to it, the central element of the Tahitian regalia used for the enthronement of the principal chief. This passage from Morrison has not escaped the notice of Sahlins either, but he only quotes the prayer, in a discussion concerning the divine character of the Polynesian chiefs (1995: 128 n. 6).
has just reminded us of this. That in no way negated their primary characteristic as ‘super-human’, *atua*, since the local chiefs were by definition images of the gods (they were men imbued with a principle which is—or which is ‘the life’ of—the founding ancestor of the title in question, himself a child or image of the creator gods). But the Western social hierarchy came to be compared with, and integrated into, Polynesian society. That was how it became comprehensible. The sequence could have been the following: ‘King George’ (the English captains, from 1760 to 1820, in stating the name of their king put the Tahitian word ‘chief’, *ari‘i*, in front of it, and this was memorised by the Polynesian chiefs), then the captains as ‘chief-priests’, the officers who were similar to the ‘orators’, and finally the sailors who were like the ‘young men who are non-chiefs’, *taurearea*. This hierarchy became an issue at the local level over who, among the local chiefs, would have the closest possible relationship with the captain and who, among the highest chiefs, would call himself ‘brother or cousin of King George’ (Baré 1985: 169-72).

But the chiefs did not call themselves ‘cousins’ in order to be adopted by these white-skinned-superior-divine beings—something that did not enter into the Polynesians’ thinking at all. Rather they used the term ‘cousin’ so that these Europeans could be adoptable and adopted. This was the conceptual framework in which the round of sexual presentations of young girls took place: to adopt the newcomer by making him a son-in-law. It was the same thing when ‘King George’ was invoked *by the local god-chiefs* in their prayers, as Vancouver noted when he in turn arrived in Hawaii in 1792. And it was the same, too, when the portrait of Cook, manipulated by Tahitian priests in the service of a local chief, began to attract offerings of cloth, following on from a pattern already established when a flag left by Wallis in 1767 became a coveted sign of the supreme chieftainship in Tahiti. Did this signify timorous devotion to the Europeans who were taken for all-powerful magicians? Not at all. *It was a straightforward attempt at political appropriation by the Polynesians of the productive link that they imagined was operating between the gods and the gods’ new-found representatives.*

It was the same again not many years later when the Tongan chiefs, hearing about that other great European chief, namely Napoleon Bonaparte, made him one of theirs, as they told the missionary Lorimer Fison in the middle of the 19th century. This narrative has not been missed by Sahlins and I summarise here from his précis of the account given to Fison by a Tongan informant (1994: 78-9).

Napoleon’s mother, explained the Tongan, was a very tall American woman who fell pregnant during a call at Tonga when the first American whalers began putting into port in this archipelago. The woman returned to America and gave birth to a child. Some years later, a number of Frenchmen went to America to seek help against their English enemies because their priest had foretold that they would find there a child who would lead them to victory. After different
incidents they found the child. He had been motionless and silent from birth. But when the French explained the purpose of their visit he got up and spoke, revealing for the first time his height which was such that it went beyond that of any human being. Sahlins makes a comment in passing about the height of the king of Tonga:

So was King George Tupou, it might be noted, while the sudden metamorphosis from an abnormal passivity to Herculean action is a common Polynesian theme, a device for revealing the superhuman qualities of the hero. The rousing of the warrior from the stable condition of the autonomous sacred chief is also iconic of the reversal of hierarchy under discussion here. (1994:79)

The Tongan, having related the warrior exploits of Napoleon, finished by saying that, if the French freely admitted that the ‘royal clan of Napoleon’ came from an island, they were lying about the location of this island: it was not where they came from but in the Tongan archipelago (ibid.).

This mythical appropriation is exemplary. It is certainly true that the discourse remains at the level of metaphor, but the same logic is being applied. In speaking of Kamehameha, the great king of Hawaii at the time of contact and the author of unification by conquest, Western visitors said that he was the Napoleon of the Pacific. But, as Sahlins points out with more than a hint of irony, from a Polynesian viewpoint it was Napoleon who was the Kamehameha of Europe (ibid.).

It is this, perhaps, that certain Westerners find hardest to understand or admit. The Polynesians, seeing the first voyagers, then the missionaries, then the colonisers, all coming amongst them, have assimilated this alterity all the more effectively by not allowing themselves to drift into accepting the values that the various Europeans wanted to inculcate in them by persuasion or by force. These resistances have clearly set in train a host of internal changes—and the adoption of these European cousin-kings is one of them. A little later, in some cases, there was purely and simply military destruction and massive despoiling of their land. But in any event, the image that the Polynesians have kept of these past encounters, and that which they have formed of recent encounters or those that are ongoing, comes down to a form of ‘adoption’. A selective adoption of certain Europeans, certain objects from the West, certain values; but certainly not a complete replacement nor one that has been imposed on them. What we have here is an integration of some of these outside elements

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51 The major exception being Western Polynesia where still today between eighty and ninety per cent of the territory of each independent country has remained under customary rule of the extended families: the land is inalienable as the only recognised ‘owner’ is the founding ancestor.
in the form of a hierarchical gradation, something quite different from any alternative structure oscillating between assimilation and exclusion.\textsuperscript{52}

13. Epilogue: what is the situation today? Exchanges of names and gazes that meet

Assimilation that is very strong but at the same time is kept at a distance is a well-known phenomenon. After the early voyages of the English, the Tahitian, Hawaiian or Tongan chiefs considered themselves to be ‘cousins of King George’, without on that account forgetting who their ancestors were (Baré 1985: 171-2). George III reigned for the whole of this period, from the 1760s to 1820, his exceptional longevity contributing to this assimilation. The Tahitians and other Polynesians heard Wallis in 1767, Cook from 1769 to 1777, Vancouver in 1791, the first missionaries in 1797, and still others after that forever invoking this same king (clearly using the word ‘chief, \textit{ari’i}). There is thus no cause for surprise at what Vancouver heard in 1791: the spirit of his king was invoked together with the gods Oro and Ta’aroa; and in Hawaii several chiefs had chosen the name George for one of their children (\textit{ibid.}).

Fictional images, but ones whose settings were relatively faithful to the Polynesian scene (American films of the 1960s set in Hawaii), and especially documentaries (about the present king of Tonga, often filmed by the BBC when he was one of the most obese men in the world – he has recently been dieting) have shown the extent to which the protocol of the royal court of England was followed to the letter in Polynesia, military regalia, ceremonial swords and ermine robes included. This was true of the Hawaii of the 19th century; it is still true of the Tongan court. More generally, Polynesians today, at least those in the western part where English has remained the first foreign language to be learnt, still exhibit a passionate interest in the lives of the members of the English royal family. Let me give a recent example.

Samoans are in the habit of naming their children after a relative (uncle, aunt, grandparents etc.).\textsuperscript{53} Samoans who have emigrated to New Zealand do this just as much as those who have remained in Samoa. In New Zealand, where the Queen of England is still the constitutional Head of State, shock at the news of the car accident which took the life of Princess Diana and her close companion Dodi Al Fayed on 31 August 1997 was as great as it was in London. For two weeks the tragedy was all that was talked about on television. The Samoans, whose relationship to England is very strong and of long standing, dating as it does from the work of evangelisation undertaken by the London Missionary Society in 1830, were very shocked. Those who had emigrated to New Zealand and who

\textsuperscript{52} For the Samoan case, see Tcherkézoff (1997a: Part 2).
\textsuperscript{53} Often the linguistic composition of this first name where the child is named after a relative seems to refer to a founding event, but this event is unknown. Today, the creation of a new first name by naming a child after an event, instead of after a relative, is quite rare.
saw these images every night on television were especially affected. Soon after the fatal accident, on 8 September 1997, a young Samoan mother from Auckland gave birth to a daughter. She already had a boy named Lui (after a cousin of her father’s), another named Selega (after her sister’s husband), and a third named Siva (after her eldest brother). But in the case of the daughter, born during this time when all anyone talked about was the death of Diana and Dodi, the parents did not hesitate for a moment. The princely couple had to be honoured in the choice of a name. The girl was named ‘Dodiana’, to bear witness to the fact that the lives of Dodi and Diana had been claimed in a double tragedy, the couple thereby becoming a single being for the purpose of conferring a name.\footnote{Information confirmed by the mother (personal communication, October 1997; my thanks to Ruta E.)}

A new name, ‘Dodiana’, has in this way been added to the stock of Samoan names. Like all names it will be re-used in another generation. From now on, this English historical event (the accident) has become the element of a Samoan mythical structure (through the naming process whereby the names of ‘relatives’ are reused). Equally, the mythical structure (English royalty as Polynesian tutelary figure) has become a Samoan event, even if it is only an anecdote: a birth in a family who has emigrated to the suburbs of Auckland, New Zealand. But this modern mythical structure is already the result of an early combination of myth and history when the English captains of the 18th century were ancestralised \textit{cum grano salis}, when their King George became the ‘cousin’ of the local kings and when these kings called their eldest son Siaosi (‘George’).\footnote{Siaosi is the Samoan transliteration of ‘George’; other Polynesian transliterations differ slightly.}

It is quite true that naming a child after an event is a universal practice. But something quite specific applies here: the feeling that anything which touches the English royal family is a story which the Polynesians feel close to. And this has been the case since the appearance on their beaches first of Cook and then of the London missionaries, with the veneration which resulted for ‘cousin George’.

The Polynesians made ‘cousins’ of these first Europeans who represented the best of themselves. In fact these ‘cousins’ bore witness to the ancestral origins, they were sent by the gods, they had come from the outer limits where one goes back in the space and time of a world of which they, the Polynesians, ‘the children of the earth’, are the recognised inheritors. At the same moment in time, the Europeans for their part also believed that they had discovered on these islands bearers of a common origin, in the human, and not divine, sense this time: ‘natural’ man, the Noble Savage and the dweller in the Garden of Eden, practising a ‘sexual freedom’ which was forbidden everywhere else after the Fall.
Since then, the encounter between Polynesians and Westerners, when it takes place among the Polynesians, takes a form which, I believe, exists nowhere else. Each group sees in the other a mythic value that it tries to appropriate. But for one of these two groups—the Polynesians—appropriation is hierarchical: it is a question of knowing the level on which the powers that one is aiming to integrate should be placed. For the other group—the Westerners—it is an assimilation, or rather a projection of what one constructs in imaginary terms as a desired Same: the cult of a sexuality disencumbered of all social constraints.

The Polynesians, as we have seen, have assimilated Western first names, but not just any names. First of all there were those of the great ‘chiefs’, beginning with George after the king; and then Napoleon as well, a name that is more common today in the Pacific than in Europe;\textsuperscript{56} then of course biblical names; and today as in the past, those that are linked to the British royal family, not only George or Elizabeth, but also, recently, for the reasons that I have explained, Diana, or even in one case, ‘Dodiana’. Westerners, too, call their children by Polynesian names. But it is a different thing for them. These are people who have gone to live ‘in the islands’ and they are drawn to the resonance of certain names or those which somehow evoke the dream that they have followed by going there. Having noted the frequency of requests by Western families (‘Popa’a’) living in Tahiti to adopt a Polynesian child, Bruno Saura adds:

Failing to adopt a baby, a number of Popa’a living in French Polynesia content themselves with giving their own children a Tahitian name.… This practice says much about the regard in which Westerners hold the Tahitians: ‘Are there many colonial countries…’, wonders Michel Panoff in Tahiti Métisse, ‘where the coloniser systematically baptises his children with names borrowed from the colonised and which are strictly preserved in their original linguistic form?…’ … (Saura 1998: 46)

Saura nevertheless tempers what we might deduce from this: ‘We might still wonder if the parents’ who came as civil servants, police, administrators and teachers ‘are not shifting on to their children’s generation the possibility of bringing about an integration that they are not genuinely seeking for themselves’ (ibid.: 47).

The Polynesians, having discovered the Europeans and thought that they had seen representatives of the creator gods (and having seen and heard about their chiefs—the captains and kings) are continually assimilating to their own powerful lineages the authority that they attribute to men of power from the West. But the Europeans, believing that Bougainville, one day in the year 1768, had discovered for them the ‘garden of Eden’ in the form of a ‘new Cythera’,

\textsuperscript{56} A Samoan ‘Napoleon’ (well known in the academic milieu that was interested in Mead’s investigation into adolescence) is the teacher who was Mead’s special male informant (Tcherkézoff 2001a: chapter 8).
are continually wanting to identify themselves with these imaginary ‘Polynesians’, in an attempt to go back in time to regain Paradise.

The European approach is a turning back to the past—and to a past that never existed. It often leads to disappointment. The Polynesian approach, however, signifies a turning to the future and has allowed the Polynesian technocrats and rulers of the contemporary nations, States or Territories, to move with great ease in the world of international politics. In relation to the size of the countries in question and in relation to the short span of their post-colonial history, it comes as something of a surprise to see the relaxed assurance of their foreign ambassadors or their ministers abroad. But this sense of surprise goes away as soon as we realise that, in their self-image, the renown of their chiefs has been talked about in the ‘world’ (the ‘world-under-the-sky’, lalolagi) for centuries if not for millennia—even if the Papalagi-Popa’a took some time to get sent by Tangaroa in order to tell them about their ‘cousin George’, and even if, for us Westerners, this ‘world’ was only a part of the Pacific and a small part of the ‘whole world’.

It is not difficult to foresee a more lasting future for this Polynesian way of apprehending the Other. It brings more satisfaction to those who practise it since it allows them, much more so than in the Western approach, to believe that the results obtained correspond quite closely to the hopes that they have expressed in their quest for power and authority.