Chapter 10

Sacred cloth and sacred women. On cloth, gifts and nudity in Tahitian first contacts: a culture of ‘wrapping-in’

For Alfred Gell, in memoriam

1. European misconceptions

The ethnohistory of the early encounters between Samoans and Europeans has shown us the important role played by the offerings of cloth, on both sides on the encounter. This cloth exchange is in no way specific to the Samoan case and was indeed a crucial element of all early Polynesian-European contacts. In order to achieve a certain level of generalisation on this point, I shall now add to this discussion the available data for Tahiti. A study aiming at a pan-Polynesian comparison cannot limit itself to one side of Polynesia and must at least include for comparative purposes a case from the western groups and a case from the central and/or eastern groups.¹

In cross-cultural encounters it is the things one thinks one has recognised that often turn out to be the most misleading. Analysts of encounters between Polynesians and Europeans will be familiar with the issues of ‘power’ and ‘religion’ that are involved here (for Eastern Polynesia, see Baré 1985; Saura 1990, 1993). Further studies have shown that differing conceptions of ‘gender’ also need to be taken into account (for Western Polynesia, see Tcherkézoff 1993; Douaire-Marsaudon 1998; Suali’i-Sauni 2001). As we have seen in Part One, recent debates and studies about Samoa have even added ‘sexuality’ to the list as a major source of misinterpretation when considering historical transformations (see also Anae et al. 2000). It is nonetheless somewhat surprising to discover that one also needs to consider how a material item like cloth can give rise to serious misunderstandings.

From a European perspective, our surprise stems from the fact that we are used to thinking of cloth as being subject to cultural variation only in terms of design or technique. The social functions of cloth seem to remain the same cross-culturally: cloth provides a supple material, it provides protection and,

¹ The following is an enlarged version (particularly section 12) of a text published as chapter 2 of Chloe Colchester (ed.), Clothing the Pacific, Oxford, Berg, 2003, the subject of which is the ethnohistorical role of cloth in the Pacific. I would like to thank the Editor and the Publisher for their permission to use that text as the basis for the present chapter.
furthermore, depending upon its formal properties (the material, the colour, the way it is cut etc.), it provides a marker of social status. Again from a European perspective, cloth and clothing are conceptually opposed to nudity, since being dressed is conceptually opposed to being undressed. A body stripped of its clothing is said to be ‘nude’. This basic opposition gives rise to all kinds of associations that, given our deeply entrenched Judaeo-Christian tendency to see a direct link between nudity and sexuality, serve to oppose the clothed person, who represents obedience to social rules, to the unclothed person, who represents ‘savagery’ and/or the open expression of sexual desire.

Given these rather limited notions, it comes as no surprise to discover that, from early contact to contemporary times, European reports and studies entirely misconstrued the significance that Polynesians accorded (and which in certain circumstances they continue to ascribe) to the social uses and handling of cloth, to its presentation as a ceremonial gift, or to simple acts of dressing and undressing. For by focusing upon the functional aspects of cloth (as a form of protection), Europeans overlooked the fact that certain kinds of cloth could be objects of great value and, as such, sacred gifts. By focusing upon the design and the material of clothing as a sign of social status, Europeans overlooked the fact that dressing and undressing could be social acts whose significance owed little to either the kind of material or the style of clothing involved. Last but not least, the conceptual opposition between dressing and undressing trapped them into seeing nakedness as nudity and undressing as stripping in anticipation of sex.

2. Cloth

Throughout Polynesia, ‘cloth’ was and is, in Western words, ‘barkcloth’ (or ‘tapa’ in the French literature), made from beaten strips of bark, or woven material, made from dried strips of leaves or fibres (mats, called ‘fine mats’ in the literature, and cloaks, sometimes decorated or even covered with tiny feathers). In Eastern Polynesia, the woven items were mostly cloaks, in Western Polynesia mostly fine mats. I shall consider both the Western Polynesian fine mats woven from dried and very fine strips of pandanus leaves and the all-Polynesian barkcloth or ‘tapa’.

The expression ‘fine mats’ used by early visitors to the Pacific is misleading. Although both fine mats and floor mats are made from varieties of pandanus, their uses are different. Fine mats are a kind of ceremonial dress that can be wrapped around the body. In pre-Christian times, fine mats were also wrapped around sacred representations of the gods, such as sacred stones, or were spread on the floor to provide a seat for high chiefs or for the gods.

The French Pacific term ‘tapa’ originally derives from the Eastern Polynesian term kapa, tapa; it rarely occurs in Western Polynesian languages and then it
means only the border of a piece of cloth. But like the word ‘taboo’ (derived from the Polynesian tapu) it became part of the Pacific vocabulary of the Europeans, and was used indiscriminately, irrespective of local usage. Nevertheless, I shall retain it for this chapter because the term ‘barkcloth’, which was used only by English-speaking visitors, is a misleading translation that reduces tapa to ‘cloth’ or ‘clothes’. This fails to convey how, throughout Polynesia, the bark (which was often painted) served to wrap people of rank as well as other ritual objects (see, for Tahiti, Babadzan 1993, 2003) or, in Western Polynesia, was placed on top of a pile of other ceremonial gifts, completing a gift-giving prestation (as in Tikopia, Lau, Samoa, etc.).

Other forms of dress, such as leaves tied around the waist, were never presented as gifts, and although introduced cotton fabrics have come to be used either as a substitute for tapa in many parts of Eastern Polynesia and in Uvea and Futuna (see Küchler 2003), this is not the case in Samoa, where people make a clear-cut distinction between fine mats (‘ie tōga) and imported fabrics and clothes. The variety of patterns in the continuity and discontinuity of indigenous cloth usage in Polynesia is wide. Nowadays, Samoan families only use fine mats as gifts; tapa is almost no longer used. In neighbouring Tonga and Fiji, however, both tapa and fine mats are used in abundance. In Eastern Polynesia, where tapa and feather cloaks were once the primary gift objects used in ritual exchange, their usage ceased in the 19th century (Babadzan ibid., Küchler ibid., Valeri 1985).

In Samoa and elsewhere in Polynesia the only garments to have a purely functional role were leaf skirts. They protected the midriff and served to conceal the lower part of the body. We must remember, in light of what will be discussed later, that the obligation to cover this part of the body pre-dated missionary arrival, as Morrison had witnessed, and was not the result of Christian puritanism. Leaf skirts were used for this purpose because such clothing does not dissolve in water while tapa disintegrates if it gets wet. (We can understand why, as soon as Polynesians discovered materials on the European ships which looked like unpainted tapa, namely white linen, and like painted tapa, namely velvets and silks of all colours, but which did not dissolve when wet, there began an extraordinary demand for European fabrics.) The functional leaf skirt was only worn outdoors, for in Samoa and elsewhere in Polynesia formal dress was/is largely worn inside the house; in common with Polynesian tradition, in Samoa the interior of the house is still largely regarded as a formal public space, not as a place of intimacy (Tcherkézoff 1997a; 2003b: chapter 2). In the past the

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2 Morrison, who stayed in Tahiti in the end of the 1780s, before any missionary influence, had observed that ‘The Single Young Men also had dances wherein they shew many indecent Gestures which would be reproachable among themselves at any other time but at the dance, it being deem’d shameful for either Sex to expose themselves Naked even to each other and they are more remarkable for hiding their Nakedness in Bathing than many Europeans, always supplying the place of Cloaths with leaves at going and coming out of the Water.’ (Morrison 1935: 225 cited in Oliver 1974: I:153).
formal dress that was worn inside was tapa; today it is a length of spotless, vibrantly coloured printed cotton or, for very formal occasions (Church or political meetings), a dark fabric without any printed patterns.

In fact, there are no Polynesian words meaning ‘cloth’, ‘fabric’ or ‘garment’. In Samoan, the notion of ‘fabric’ is denoted by the word ‘ie (from the Samoan term for the kind of pandanus species used for fine mats) followed by a secondary term. The word for ‘clothes’ is ‘ofu, which is also followed by a second, specifying term. This term ‘ofu conveys the idea of wrapping, and it can also be used to describe the wrapping of food, for example. The secondary term will specify whether the clothes are a pair of trousers or a shirt. What tapa and fine mats shared in common, then, was not so much that they were kinds of cloth as that both of these materials were made from plants that were seen as being integral to the group’s identity. Both pandanus and paper mulberry were grown close to the house, rather than further afield in the plantations. The bark of the mulberry was beaten and then printed with designs. In Samoa, fine mats showed—and still show—how lineages became interwoven, while their feather borders were once an indication of the rank of the family. (Now, they all tend to be alike.)

In what follows, the term ‘cloth’ will be restricted to the sacred cloths that could serve as a sacred gift or in ritual procedures: tapa and fine mats, but not cotton fabrics or leaf and fibre skirts.

3. Ceremonial gifts of cloth

A number of different cultures, apart from Polynesian ones, have based the acquisition of power and prestige on the act of giving. Anyone who has given a great deal may at any point activate the network of connections made up of all those people who have been on the receiving end of a gift. By giving constantly one accumulates relationships. In Polynesia, two broad categories of gifts were, and indeed remain, prominent: food and (sacred) cloth. Both items are ceremonially prepared and formally presented. Food is presented wrapped in leaves. Cloth is initially presented rolled up and is then spread out in front of the recipients (and then refolded or divided and cut up, as the case may be). It is important to note that cloth and food are presented in tandem; somehow each plays its own and necessary part. The following discussion will focus on the part played by cloth.

It is mandatory to give cloth in Polynesia (and eastern Melanesia). Although the way in which cloth is presented may suggest it is a gift that the giver was in no way obliged to make, everyone present is well aware of the truth, which is clear to the outside observer as well. In contemporary Samoa, if a household does not make any contributions to ceremonies involving the extended family or village (for births, marriages, funerals, the consecration of a house or a church,
the installation of a new family or village leader, etc.) this is taken as a sign of their withdrawal from the family or village circle. The threat is actually an eviction order. Here lies the answer to the apparent enigma of the obligation to give that puzzled Marcel Mauss, the founder of the French school of social and cultural anthropology, and which led him to publish his famous essay, *The Gift* (*Essai sur le don*), in 1925. In this essay Mauss showed that a common feature of these practices was the sacred nature of the objects presented. Here the term sacredness should be interpreted in the Maussian-Durkheimian sense as the object that symbolises the larger group, be it society as a whole or one of its sub-groups. Such objects are opposed (in Maussian terms) to ‘individual’ possessions. Only cloth of this kind was, or is, an object of gift exchange in Polynesia. Fine mats or *tapa* are never owned by an individual (while previously leaf skirts and now printed fabric are); they always represent the identity of a group.

The first example discussed by Mauss in the opening chapter of *The Gift* relates to Samoa. Quoting several missionary sources, Mauss noted that gifts could be of two kinds in Samoa: food and household implements, on the one hand, and ‘emblazoned mats’ (*nattes blasonnées*) on the other hand (mats bearing the history—invisible but proclaimed in the oratory accompanying the gift—and thus comparable to the coat of arms of a noble European family). Quite remarkably Mauss immediately intuited that only the second kind of gifts—the mats—were relevant to what he was looking for as they were the symbol of a group (a family, clan, or similar) and were inherited, whereas the objects in the other category seemed to be attached to an individual. This enabled him to link his Samoan example to other instances in which the objects given had the same character of ‘totality’ as he identified it; that is, in which they symbolised a social unit (as in the case of the Maori sacred gifts, *taonga*, Tapsell 1997).3

Samoan fine mats, *‘ie tōga*, are clearly symbolic of a group (a family name or ‘title’) and never of an individual. Conversely, all of the other ceremonial goods, which are not in circulation for as long, or do not circulate at all (since they are only given once), do not bear the history of a group inscribed on them. These may include pigs, fish, certain tools, or domestic materials. Nowadays, these gifts may include very specific tinned foods, as well as paper money. But an old mat is a known and a renowned object. Even if it is held far from its place of origin, it retains the memory of the family that wove it and gave it away for the first time. It carries with it the genealogy of that family. Nothing of the sort may be said of a pig, a basket of fish or a banknote. Finally, a mat can be used to pay for anything and everything, including the ceremonial gifts required for a marriage (on the bride’s side), a funeral, and other ceremonies. And it can also serve as the gift given to the carpenter for building a house, to the craftsman

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3 For a more extended discussion of the Samoan case as Marcel Mauss had outlined it in *The Gift*, see Tcherkézoff 1997b.
for making a boat. This is as true in Samoa today\(^4\) as it was in the past. In Samoa, no other gift object is such a universal currency.

### 4. Ritual efficiency and rites of wrapping

**Life-giving gift**

As a fine mat carries the idea of the permanence and history of a whole social group, it is not surprising that such mats retain the power to give life. Here again we come back to Mauss who had stressed in *The Gift* that those specific objects of gift exchange were at the same time a ‘property owned’ by the givers’ group and a general ‘talisman’, beneficial to everyone—and certainly to the recipient of the gift—because, being a symbol of a family group, they somehow possess a life-giving power.

Indeed, in Samoa, one can accomplish miracles with mats of this sort. According to the legends, such miracles can be acts of curing, bringing someone back to life, victory at war, and so on. One very tangible miracle can still be observed today: mats provide sanctuary. A person who has committed a murder or a serious insult (the culprit or the chief of the family group to whom the culprit belongs) can save his life by wrapping himself in a mat. To this ritual act are linked numerous legends about the first fine mat that saved the lives of Samoans held prisoner by Tongans (Tcherkézoff 2002). Until the 1950s, a mat or a length of *tapa* could be used to recover the soul, if a person had been lost at sea for example (or, before 1900, had fallen in battle and been beheaded), thus allowing funeral ceremonies to take place. In such cases, a fine mat or a *tapa* was spread out near the sea or at the place of battle. The first insect to crawl on it would be said to represent the will of the soul of the dead man to come to his resting place. Some of the legends also mention bones that, wrapped in *tapa* or mats, have come back to life. Rituals have the same effect (according to accounts from the 1960s). If descendants are bothered too often by the soul of a dead person, they dig up the bones, wash them, and wrap them up again in a *tapa* or a fine mat. In the neighbouring Tokelau culture, early observers found that an altar used to invoke a divinity took the form of an ‘upright stone wrapped in fine mats’ (Huntsman and Hooper 1996: 146). In Hawai’i and Tahiti, *tapa* wrapped around images of the gods played much the same role (Valeri 1985; Babadzan 1993, 2003).

Fine mats and *tapa* were, and are, used in Polynesian ritual as *efficacious* objects, meaning that they may create or reveal—by wrapping-up—the presence of the sacred in a given place. Elsewhere this function may be fulfilled by an

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\(^4\) The ethnographic present that I use for Samoa, in this chapter and elsewhere in this book for contemporary Samoan facts, refers to my enquiries of the early 1980s (see Tcherkézoff 2003b). The years 1987-1995 were years of very rapid change in many contexts, due to a political decision to ‘open’ the country to the global economic system.
animal: pigs in Melanesia; sacred cows in East Africa and India; copper objects on the west coast of North America. In Polynesia it was and is cloth. A good summary of how this operated in Polynesian culture is provided by the custom of the Lau islands (far eastern Fiji) in relation to cloth:

In the Lau islands, the symbolic function of cloth as a conduit between men and the gods is important and more visible than in other Oceanic archipelagos... the investiture of a chief, for example is conceived of as a funerary rite. The man dies to be reborn as a god. In order to achieve this he is symbolically set apart behind a screen of *tapa* for four days, the time it takes for the spirits [gods and ancestors] which inhabit the *tapa* to take possession of him and cause his rebirth as a chief. The cloth that serves to capture the spirits is called ‘the cloth of the earth’... Thus in Fiji *tapa* is a path to be walked upon or a shelter held aloft by two rows of women with their arms raised; it protects the path of access to the status of becoming a chief. This path metaphorically served to convey the breath of the gods and the ancestors which came to meet the living; a roll of white *tapa*, placed in a temple (*bure kalou*) considered to be the spirit house, was the vessel or the receptacle of the spirits. The end of the cloth is left hanging. By taking hold of the end of the cloth, the priest whom visitors had come to consult could become possessed with a specific spirit (Bataille-Benguigui 1997: 181-4).\(^5\)

**Wrapping the Other**

When Europeans appeared on the scene, they unknowingly entered this ‘wrapping-up’ system. In early cross-cultural encounters what Europeans call ‘cloth’ played a prominent and instant role in the interaction between Europeans and Polynesians. Guns and metal tools were also important, as we have already noted, and served to inflict both physical harm and cultural shock. Both sides perpetrated violent acts. When Polynesians attempted to appropriate these guns and tools, Europeans responded by avenging what they perceived to be acts of ‘theft’ and ‘hostility’. Many fights would ensue until, in the 19\(^{th}\) century, guns and tools became common in the islands and objects of trade. By contrast, and despite the considerable misunderstandings involved, cloth became instantly and pacifically an instrument of interaction. Coincidentally, covering the body in layers of cloth was a common sign of status. In the case of the Polynesians, these layers consisted of *tapa* and mats; in the case of the Europeans, the layers were the shirt, waistcoat, jacket and topcoat that distinguished the captain from the officers and the officers from the rest of the crew. This was a point of connection. The Polynesians recognised the captains, and the Europeans recognised the chiefs, whose bodies were sometimes entirely covered with mats.

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\(^5\) Translated by Chloe Colchester.
and *tapa*, whereas their followers were only lightly dressed, and were often bare-chested as a sign of respect for their chief who was heavily dressed (we will discuss the logic behind this contrast below).

Of course, the Europeans did not realise that they had come to a civilisation where the established practice for initiating contact between strangers was to make a presentation of cloth to wrap around the body of the visitor. For instance, in past and contemporary Samoan practice, when a traveller arrives from another village, territory or island, he must offer his ‘services’ (*tautua*) and present food, or, today, food and money. He presents himself as someone who is ready to serve the local chief. In return he is presented with a fine mat (and money), or elsewhere (as in Tonga) with a gift of *tapa*. Such reciprocity works on two levels. For his part the host indicates that he considers the incoming stranger is ‘superior’ (*malo*) by presenting him with his most precious valuables. But the act of presenting cloth is also a means of *enveloping and thereby incorporating the stranger*. For, as a stranger, the new arrival must be incorporated, and whatever sacred powers he possesses must be domesticated and contained: the ‘untouchable’, *tapu*, must be made ‘touchable’, *noa*.

**Obscurity and light, concealing and revealing**

As other studies have indicated (Sahlins 1985a, 1985b; Valeri 1985; Babadzan 1993; Gell 1993: 125-40), Polynesian ritual played upon the duality of the exterior world (*Po*) that was wild, nocturnal, but vital, since it was the primordial world and as such the source of life; and the interior, domestic and diurnal world of light (*Ao*). Yet the existence of this diurnal world depended upon the degree to which one had domesticated the sources of light and life. It seems to me that the primary attribute of Polynesian cloth was precisely that it enabled people to capture, contain and release the sacred through procedures of re-covering and uncovering.

These actions served to obscure the source of life and at the same time they revealed its effects. One cannot stare at the sun—just as in the past one could not stare at a sacred chief—for fear of burning one’s eyes. I have discussed the importance of the hierarchy of light and visibility in the Hawaiian case (chapter 9). But there had to be a means for this source of light to be made manifest on earth. This is why cloth was/is so often conceived of by Polynesians as being ‘white’ and ‘luminous’ (in Samoa, fine mats can be called ceremonially *mea sina* which literally means ‘luminous-white things’).

Thus, in Polynesia, cloth enabled the invisible bodies of the gods to be made manifest. In some other contexts, it revealed women’s wombs, and it provided an analogue for skin. In different regions of the Pacific different permutations of this common symbolic system are accentuated. Bearing in mind that *tapa* is made from bark, we can recall how, in the Tahitian cosmogony, the appearance
of the skin of the first Man—which is what gave shape to what was initially a formless blob—is determined by the various types of barks chosen by the Creator Ta’aroa. This is why the simple act of wrapping cloth round a stone or an idol or a person transformed them into a manifestation of the gods, rendering them efficacious for ritual or status-oriented acts. This is also why cloth safeguarded life in Samoa: if a culprit was wrapped in fine mats he became untouchable, and if a person was lost at sea, fine mats could be used to bury him or her by proxy. The association between cloth and skin, and acts of dressing and undressing were features of a common symbolic complex.

Here I should emphasise that from the Polynesian point of view the skin covers and obscures the principle of vitality that is carried in the blood. This principle of vitality is invisible by definition. Blood flowing in the body (the Samoan word is toto) can never be seen. For, when a wound or women’s menstruation makes blood visible, it acquires a different name (palapala). Thus, the vital principle (in Samoa: agaga, mauli) is both invisible by definition and present by definition. Wrapped cloth as a cultural skin, covering the natural one, is itself evidence of this dual and contradictory concept. In some way the use of cloth as an envelope or covering demonstrates that within the body there is indeed, luminous although invisible, a life principle of sacred origin. The act of covering transforms this ideational potentiality into a symbolic social fact.

Once an object or a person is wrapped up in a cloth which is itself defined as a path for the gods (as we saw in the Fijian-Lauan case, see above Bataille-Benguigui), it now becomes certain that sacredness is held there, and it is quite logical that this sacredness remain unseen since it is covered.

No doubt this is why, in Polynesia, these cloths were and are always presented either rolled up or wrapped around the body. The gift-givers arrive with the cloth wound around them, or with a mat rolled up under one arm. The cloth is

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6 ‘O Shapeless nothing! … Then Ta’aroa caused skins to grow on the child, to give him qualities, to make him a great god… the bark of the hutan to make the child hardy; the bark of the atae for a rough skin… the bark of the coconut tree for a porous skin for the child; the parau bark for a skin full of fissures… bark of the maru for a thick skin, the apapae for a thin skin, the toi bark for a shining skin… All these skins were placed on the child… (Henry 1928: 365-6, cited by Gell 1993: 127)

7 The association between blood and the life-giving principle has been noted at a Polynesian comparative level by Gell (1993: passim) and is quite clear in the Samoan case (Tcherkézoff 2003b: 372 ff; see p. 376, for various comparative references for Tonga and Central and Eastern Polynesia).

8 This transformation—which is indeed accomplished according to the logic that underpins the efficacy of all rituals—could be compared to the role of the secret in initiations. In most cases the content of the secret which is revealed to the initiates is meaningless. The main point is the consensus that ‘there is a secret’, which makes possible the subsequent transformation of the initiate from an uninitiated into an initiated person.

9 This discussion can be enlarged on the linguistic level with the hypothesis that a proto-Polynesian word meaning ‘to cover’ is the etymological root of toga/taonga/etc., words denoting the sacred gift in the Samoan, Maori and similar contexts. From the same word would have come expressions denoting cooking in the earth oven (by covering the food placed in the earth oven): cooking food is also a cosmological transformation of Po→Ao.
spread out and displayed but, above all, the cloth is used to envelop the receiver in turn. The receiver is enveloped, or else the cloth is spread out at his feet or unfurled over the pile of other gifts such as food or tools. Cloth gifts of this kind still occur today throughout Western Polynesia, including the Lau islands in eastern Fiji (Douaire-Marsaudon 1997, Hooper 1982). In the past, the recipient of a gift might have been a god, materialised as a stick or a standing stone, or a chief, or indeed any visitor. The god, the foreign chief, the visitor would have been conceived of by the local people as occupying the dominant position. In rites of welcome, gifts of cloth serve to take into account this superiority and to establish a relationship that is not based on violence but on respect. In other words, these rites facilitate the transformation of an external form of sacredness that is dangerous to touch (tapu, sa, ra’a, mo’a), and render it ‘touchable’ (noa).

5. Some misunderstandings concerning nudity and Polynesian women’s sexual appetites

The Polynesians’ attempts to integrate new arrivals through such presentations of cloth gave rise to various misunderstandings. The Europeans saw these rites as an act of exposure, as a display of nudity and as an open invitation for sex. But, in Polynesian custom, the most respectful way to present cloth was to wind it around the body of a young girl/woman who had yet to bear a child. She would have been initially presented wrapped in a great length of tapa and/or mats, and to present the offering she would have divested herself of these wrappings until she stood ‘naked’. Whether they responded with disapproval or delight, the European visitors were astounded.

In nearly all the accounts of first contact the use of this term ‘naked’ is highly ambiguous. Was the girl really stark naked? Would she not have kept on the waistband of tapa, her maro? Maximo Rodriguez, a Spanish voyager, visited Tahiti in 1774, soon after Cook’s second visit. He provides an eyewitness account of the festival staged before the chiefs prior to a battle against another district:

Some women decked in quantities of native cloth presented themselves before the Chiefs in order to strip themselves and make an offering of the cloth to the said Chiefs, being left with only a maro on to cover their nakedness. They call this festival a taurua, and after it they prepare for a paraparau, which is like a tertulia or well ordered conversazione of which the main topic is the wars these natives engage in against those of Morea (cited in Oliver 1974, III: 1237).

Here the ‘naked’ girl retained her maro. Certain passages from Bougainville also indicate that, in the European accounts, the expression ‘quite naked’ can in fact refer to a girl dressed in a ‘waistband, maro’:

The inhabitants of Tahiti are often seen quite naked, having no other clothes than a sash, which covers their natural parts. However, the chief
people among them generally wrap themselves in a great piece of cloth, which hangs down to their knees. This is likewise the only dress of the women; and they know how to place it so artfully, as to make this simple dress susceptible of coquetry. (Bougainville 1772b: 250)

So we can see how a Polynesian dressed normally (i.e. wearing a maro) can turn into someone whose alleged complete nakedness indicates the first stirrings of sexual desire. In several other eyewitness accounts the observers do not even bother to specify whether the private parts are exposed or not. Descriptions of ‘nakedness’ therefore have to be treated with some caution. Europeans saw the maro as a form of underwear, and so in their view the person lacked clothing, was already undressed. Moreover, we know that European men regarded bare-chested women as being in effect naked, and sexually provocative.

Travellers who passed by Tahiti after 1767 (the date of initial contact) reinforced this view when they misunderstood the handling of the upper garment worn by the Tahitians. In that part of Polynesia the inhabitants frequently wore a kind of poncho or tiputa. It was made from a rectangular piece of tapa, with a hole made for the head, and it hung down to the hips. This piece of clothing did not have any ritual significance but simply provided protection from the cold, as many of the inhabitants were living in the mountainous interior at the time. But at ceremonies of welcome both men and women would remove the poncho as a gesture of respect. For the most part the European visitors had no understanding of the social meaning of this gesture, particularly when it came to the women. When they saw the women revealing their breasts in front of them they thought it was the prelude to a sexual encounter. Generally speaking, when Europeans saw dancers performing in a maro or a loincloth, they perceived them to be ‘naked’, and once they saw them as naked, they inevitably perceived them to be ‘lascivious’.

The European male-centred view of the time reinforced this chain of cumulative misinterpretations. Bougainville wrote several commentaries on the ‘nature of the fair sex’, which, he suggested, was such as to lead all women on earth to ‘desire mostly’ the pleasures of sex, even if their education induced European women constantly to deny it (les femmes paraissent ne pas vouloir ce qu'elles désirent le plus). Hence the French admired a people—the Tahitians—who had apparently kept intact the original concordance between natural desire and collective behaviour, since ‘they are not embarrassed to make love in public and frequently, while we hide ourselves to perform such natural actions’ (Nous nous cachons pour faire une œuvre aussi naturelle: il la font en public et souvent).10

10 Such was the French interpretation after they had seen that a ‘whole crowd’ assisted at the sexual presentation of young girls to the Frenchmen. They misconstrued the presence of this assembly—composed of people who were chanting prayers and held a green bough as an offering—as a ‘natural’ Tahitian taste for watching love-making.
Bougainville’s companion, the Prince of Nassau, noted in his journal that when the Tahitian girls undressed in front of the French, this was nothing to be surprised at. They were simply following a quite natural inclination to discard whatever was an obstacle to pleasure, namely clothes. Indeed, he called all female clothing ‘a refined obstacle to pleasure’ (*une parure importune pour le plaisir*).\(^{11}\) These few examples show us that all the members of Bougainville’s expedition perceived explicitly sexual connotations in the attitude of Tahitian females who disrobed in their presence.

6. On ‘shaking the hips in a rotary motion’: the dualism of the body

‘Shaking the hips’

Furthermore, when the visitors saw these ‘naked’ bodies shake their hips while performing various dances, they believed the Tahitians to be possessed with irrepressible sexual desire. In fact, Polynesian dances are often composed of rapid, staccato movements of the hips. Such movements lifted the dancers’ loincloths, adding to the visitors’ impression that they were witnessing an act of exposure (these dancers, male and female, would have typically occupied the front row of the assembled dancers). They did not realise that the female dancers in the front row had to be virgins or at least girls who had never borne a child.\(^{12}\) Sometimes the finale required these girls to strip off (with all the ambiguity that this implies: stark naked or still wearing a *maro*?) and present cloth offerings to their guests. To the European mind these various observations of ‘nudity and shaking the hips’ led to an inescapable conclusion: the dance’s evocation of sexual activity was at best a fertility rite, or at worst intended to provoke both the spectators’ and the dancers’ lust, ‘as it might be expected’, wrote Hawkesworth, of a people whose customs glorified sexual activity (my words which summarise the stereotypical European account of Tahitian culture that developed after the visits of Wallis, Bougainville and Cook, 1767-69).\(^{13}\)

The interpretation of Tahitian culture as one built on a generalised cult of sexuality was based upon the erroneous belief that ‘unmarried women’ were living a life of ‘free love’. This belief was in turn based on impressions recorded by European voyagers on those few occasions when, in the very first moments of contact, chiefs had ordered a number of teenage girls to come forth ‘naked’.


\(^{12}\) Noted by Cook, Forster, Hamilton, etc. (see references in Tcherkézoff in press-1).

\(^{13}\) ‘It cannot be supposed that, among these people, chastity is held in much estimation. It might be expected that sisters and daughters would be offered to strangers’ (Hawkesworth, 1773, II: 206-7). Hawkesworth was appointed by the Admiralty to write the official account of Cook’s voyage; his rendering of both Cook’s and Banks’s notes reveals his tendency to make sexual allusions and condemn (what he thought were) Tahitian morals.
and had made clear signs to the newcomers that they expected them to have sex with the girls. After 1775 the idea of a Tahitian sex cult became widely established in salons throughout Europe, but the mass of documentary evidence attesting to this cannot be considered here. Let us simply say that Europeans justified their interpretation by claiming that all young Tahitians were educated in a cultural setting that was based on a cult of sexuality.

Blinkered by these preconceptions, Europeans could scarcely make anything other than a sexual interpretation of the way the girls moved their hips in the dance festivals. But this conclusion involved another error because it overlooked the fact that all Polynesian choreography was—and indeed remains—based upon a dualist conception of the body.

In their descriptions of Polynesian dances, all the 18th-century travellers noted the particular movement of the hips—a rapid oscillation from left to right—with wonder. J.R. Forster, the naturalist who accompanied Cook on his second voyage, tells us that, in the dances, ‘they shake their hips in a rotatory motion, both when they are standing and when they are leaning prostrate on their knees and elbows, with a velocity which excited our astonishment’ (cited in Oliver 1974, I: 332-3). The velocity ‘excited our astonishment’, since Europeans never shook this part of their body. For them, the hips were only meant to tremble during (lawful) intercourse. What other function could this part of the body have? What else could women shaking their hips possibly symbolise? Forster continues: ‘The exercise of the common dramatic dances is very violent, the motion of the hands elegant, that of the feet not to be seen, that of the hips somewhat strange, and according to our notions indelicate’ (ibid.). Forster’s admission of cultural relativism—‘according to our notions’—was highly unusual for the time. But his remark on the ‘indelicate’ motion underlines the fact that the movement of the hips was perceived by all European visitors as being not merely indelicate, but quite licentious and an overt invitation to wanton behaviour.14

The dual body

There could not have been any greater misunderstanding! For as it happens, a dualistic conception of the body is characteristic of Polynesian dance. While the upper part of the body tells the story, the lower part of the body only marks the beat to the accompaniment of the tambourine players, and other percussionists, and a small group of flute players and/or singers who supply the story’s melody. All of this is consistent with the dual organisation of domestic and ceremonial space, with its implicit reference to a pre-Christian Sky/Earth cosmology, and indeed can be substantiated by any detailed observation of

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14 In order to imagine these early visitors’ amazement and mistaken interpretations, it is worth recalling the introduction of the twist and the hula-hoop to Europe in the 1960s. Both dances just involved keeping the rhythm with frenetic hip movements. But the older generation were shocked: they could not help themselves reading more into it.
current dance practice, such as the performances at Pacific Art Festivals, for example. Two leading authorities on Polynesian art confirm this:

Missionaries considered Polynesian dancing lascivious, when in fact the hip motions to which they objected so strongly were often little more than a time-keeping element … In Polynesian dance … small steps, and the hip movements that derive from them, keep the rhythm; it is the arms that give meaning to the performance. Polynesians considered the European form of dancing, in which bodies of men and women actually touched in public, as lascivious (Kaeppler 1997: 112).

And Sandra Silve, who teaches traditional Hawaiian hula in Paris, has recently remarked:

Certain movements in Hawaiian dance are like the sign language used by people who are hearing-impaired. Each gesture corresponds to the expression of a word. The dancers’ primary concern was to relate history and they concentrated on the movements of their arms and chest; the movement of the feet and of the lower part of the body, particularly the shaking of the hips, supplied the basic rhythm (Silve 1997:18).\textsuperscript{15}

Thus we can see that the movement of the dancers’ hips had nothing to do with sexual provocativeness. It had no figurative aspect whatsoever, it did not refer to anything.

As this discussion has revealed a dualistic conception of the body, it is important to consider whether the duality of the body played a role in acts of dressing and undressing. Indeed, there seem to have been quite different rules concerning the upper and the lower parts of the body.

7. Concerning the undressing of the upper part of the body in indigenous contexts

Polynesians attributed specific meaning to the undressing of the torso. Let us consider Tahiti between 1767 and 1789. We have already noted that the act of enveloping the other’s body was a means of signalling the other’s superiority that would be typically made to honour a visitor or a chief at formal occasions. Thus, if wrapping up the other was to acknowledge their superiority, we can expect that when an inferior presented himself before his superior, he could use the act of undressing as a sign of humility—at least for the upper part of the body. Cook, Banks and Parkinson noted something of the sort in 1773, though they never advanced a systematic explanation of this practice. Yet it is important to recognise that, during the period of contact, the registering of hierarchical relations in spatial terms was marked throughout Polynesia. For example, when

\textsuperscript{15} Translated (from the interview in French) by Chloe Colchester.
Samoan fishermen passed in front of the house of a high chief they had to abase themselves, even if this involved lowering themselves from their canoe and swimming beside it. Even today, it is impossible to stand when one’s superior is seated. So if one is obliged to leave a gathering one does so in a crouching position, while sustaining a deep bow. And if one carries a parasol for protection against the sun, it must either be lowered or closed when passing in front of a superior.¹⁶

Descriptions of these practices occur in the eyewitness accounts of the early contacts made between Europeans and Polynesians. During Cook’s initial visit to Tahiti in 1769, Parkinson, the official draughtsman of the expedition, noted in his journal:

> Our tent was nearly filled with people; and soon after, Amoa, who is chief of several districts on the other side of the island, also came to us, and brought with him a hog. As soon as he appeared, the natives uncloathed themselves to the waist... On the 6th of July, in the evening, a young woman came to the entrance of the fort, whom we found to be a daughter of Oamo. The natives complimented her on her arrival, by uncovering their shoulders (Parkinson 1784: 32, 35).

This observation is confirmed by Cook (Beaglehole ed. 1955: I, 104). The rules of undressing were next noted by Forster in 1773. The case astonished him for it involved a father uncovering himself in front of his son. But the son had been installed in his father’s place as paramount chief (cited by Oliver 1974, III: 1184). In September 1789, Morrison noted:

> On the 27th, having appointed that We should meet at Opparee, and make our presents to the Young King, We marchd in a body under Arms to Opparee, taking with us the Toobouai Images and several other presents of red Feathers, Friendly Island and Toobouai Cloth [tapa], Matting and

¹⁶ This range of attitudes of humility among Samoan and other Pacific peoples has been raised in various discussions. Derek Freeman wanted to make of them a typical example of ethological determinism in human and primate social behaviour (see Tcherkézoff 2001a: 209-11). From an altogether different point of view—but one whose implications are no different, namely the expelling of the notion of culture—Alban Bensa (2000: 74) considers such attitudes as purely ‘ephemeral’, individual initiatives emerging from a 'situation d'interlocution', at best a ‘fashion’ lasting rarely ‘more than a generation’, and rejects all attempt to detect in these attitudes anything ‘cultural’. His example is the ‘ethnological observation’ that there is a Kanak obligation to sit down when a superior enters a house, contrasted with the European obligation of standing up (see the discussion in Tcherkézoff 2003b: 516-18). But as the Samoan examples make clear, these gestures of lowering were neither just the unconscious application of a universal phylogenetic code of dominance among living beings, nor an insignificant and ephemeral fashion, but were part of a specific Polynesian cultural system involving the conceptions of the cosmos and of the body. These cultural values are still prevalent. This has been noted throughout Polynesia and over centuries, up until the present. In addition to the facts for present-day Samoa mentioned here, we can look to the example of the Queen of Tonga, Sālote, at the parade for Queen Elizabeth’s coronation in 1953. Queen Sālote rode in an open carriage in honour of Queen Elizabeth, even though it was raining (Adrienne Kaeppler, personal communication, January 2003).
War Weapons Iron work &c…. when we March’d to his House in procession each attended by a friend to remove the Taheite Cloth [tapa] which we had on, all of Whom Striped as they entered the Sacred Ground, the men to the Waist, and the Weomen uncovering their Shoulders and tucking their cloths up under their arm, and our Taheite Cloaths were removed (Morrison 1935: 77-8).

These accounts reveal that the act of unclothing the upper part of the body was an established gesture of respect. Conversely, it is logical that rank was made manifest by the number of layers of tapa that were wrapped around the body in ceremonial contexts. While noting that the way Tahitians wore tapa was varied, Parkinson detected a constant feature, namely that ‘persons of distinction among them wrap a number of pieces of cloth about them’ (Parkinson 1784: 338). Banks observed that

The rich seem to shew their greatest pride in wearing a large quantity of cloth … The poorer sort have only a small allowance of cloth … It was not [an] uncommon thing for the richest of the men to come and see us with a large quantity of cloth rolled round their loins, … sufficient to have clothed a dozen people (Journal of Banks, Beaglehole ed. 1962, I: 338).17

A corollary to this is the observation that the dancers were laden with tapa, far more than was strictly necessary either for reasons of modesty or for a festive occasion. During the same visit Banks noted this about the female dancers: ‘On their hips rested a quantity of cloth pleated very full which reached almost up to their arms and fell down below into long peticoats [sic] reaching below their feet’ (cited in Oliver 1974, I: 338). Another account by Max Radiguet, a young French officer writing in the Marquesas, relates that the mass of tapa wound around the young dancing girls in the clearing seemed to trap their bodies in a ‘block of marble’ (cited in Scemla, 1994: 838-46).18 Parkinson’s drawings from Cook’s first voyage, together with Webber’s drawings from the third, are eloquent: the mass of tapa enlarges the bodies of the dancers almost four or five times.19

8. Concerning the exposure of the lower body in indigenous contexts

Leaving to one side the occasions where priests stripped themselves naked before assuming different garb as they entered the interior of the temple, or the instances where young women disrobed to make a public gift of tapa cloth (which we

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17 Cited by Oliver (2002: 64).
18 The whole narrative is in Tcherkézoff (in press-1).
19 The drawings are reproduced in Oliver (1974, I: 333), Colchester (ed. 2003: 64-5) and in many other books describing European voyages in the Pacific (see also the iconographic pages in this volume).
shall return to), one might assume that the act of baring one’s buttocks and private parts in an ostentatious manner was intended to be provocative. For we must recall Morrison’s remarks (see note 2) regarding the care that people took to cover this part of their bodies in ordinary contexts, such as fishing in the lagoon (Morrison 1935: 225 cited in Oliver 1974, I: 153).

Contemporary observation from Samoa would appear to confirm this. Gestures of self-exposure are recognised, they have a specific name and, whether a man or a woman is involved, they are regarded as provocative. If somebody exposes themself in a non-ceremonial context it will cause a row. Only adult men or old women do it during festivities, making the crowd roar with laughter. It is a form of clowning that emerges when two teams are standing face to face. The local team of dancers may do it to provoke a response from the visiting team of dancers. Such rituals of clowning, of marking the inversion of respect, were also noted in 18th-century Tahiti, though in one particular case it was the representation of a god that was being dishonoured (Oliver 1974, III: 1307-8).

But again we should be wary of any quick assimilation to European conceptions of sexually offensive behaviour. The provocation was not intended to be gross since Polynesians did not equate sex and evil (in the sense of sin and filth). If I may generalise from the more recent Samoan contexts, I would say that it was intended to convey an impression of domination, even physical force; in other words, it was an assertion of masculine authority, though in certain instances married women may convey this too. This would also apply when the provocation was more scatological than sexual. Baring the buttocks is indeed a Samoan form of asserting domination. ‘Eat shit!’ was/is a popular insult in Samoa and could be interpreted in the light of Tikopian or Bellonan ritual formulas, where the priest attested to his humility and inferiority in front of the god by saying and repeating several times ‘I eat your excrement’ (Firth 1967: 210, 226; Monberg 1991: 268-70).

9. Concerning the undressing of the upper part of the body in early encounters and its subsequent adaptations

Let us go back to the quotation from Morrison,

On the 27th, having appointed that We should meet at Opparee, and make our presents to the Young King, We marchd in a body under Arms to Oparee … Having made known our business to Areepaeaa—who told us that we must not approach the Young King as he was yet Sacred, unless we Strip’d the Clothing off from our Head & Shoulders, which

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20 There are certainly no pre-missionary indications of any such ideology.
21 I am referring here to the fact that the evocation of the sexual act establishes a context of ‘strong/weak, victorious/defeated’ (malo/vaivai), a distinction which is explicitly associated with the context of war and (nowadays) sporting competition (Tcherkézoff 2003b: chap. 5, 7).
we refused telling him that it was not Customary to remove any part of our Dress except our hats and if we were under arms it was not our Country manner to remove our hat even to the King. However that we might not seem to be deficient in point of Good Manners each was provided with a piece of Taheite Cloth to put over their Shoulders and take off in the Young Kings presence (Morrison 1935: 77-8).

Morrison refused to take off his shirt because he wanted to maintain respect for English manners, which prohibited one from removing one’s shirt on formal occasions while prescribing the removal of the hat. Nevertheless, as he notes, English manners of the time decreed that one kept on one’s hat if bearing arms. Therefore, since the English carried muskets, they could not take off their shirts and they could not even doff their hats in the king’s presence. According to this code of conduct, it would have shown a lack of patriotism to do so in the Pacific. This presented a conundrum, but a compromise was soon reached, though Morrison does not tell us whether this was in response to a suggestion from the Tahitians or the Englishmen’s own initiative. The crew would wear a length of tapa over their shirts and in this way they could show their respect to the new king by removing it in his presence while keeping on their shirts and hats—thus ingeniously satisfying both codes of dress:

we March’d to his House in procession each attended by a friend to remove the Taheite Cloth which we had on, all of Whom Stripd as they entered the Sacred Ground, the men to the Waist, and the Women uncovering their Shoulders and tucking their cloths up under their arm, and our Taheite Cloaths were removed (ibid.).

Such ancient dress prescriptions and proscriptions have persisted, although they have been adapted in response to changing circumstances. For the missionary view was of course consistent with European notions of dress. To be dressed in a loincloth (maro) or a grass skirt made of leaves was to be regarded as naked, licentious, even evil. The missionaries begged men to be decently dressed in a shirt for church services just as they forced women to wear dresses which extended from the neck to the floor. For if European etiquette demanded that men remove their hats, torsos had to be covered in the presence of God. So how did Polynesians manage to reconcile this with their own code of dress?

In contemporary Samoa, after a church service there may be a gathering (fono) of the chiefs and village elders. When in the house men wear nothing but a lavalava (a Samoan sarong made from an island print), whereas to change for church, men put on a white shirt and sometimes a jacket and a sarong made of material in a single colour. When they go on to the fono they remove their shirt and jacket and sit bare-chested, out of respect to the founding ancestors whose
names they bear, or else the lesser chiefs remove their shirts as a sign of respect while the paramount chief retains his.22

10. The whole body in early encounters: male gifts of cloth

Such demonstrations of respect were also made to Europeans. In their initial encounters, Polynesians wanted to achieve the cosmological incorporation of the new arrivals. Acts of unclothing were a prelude to the act of enveloping the new arrivals in cloth. Sources indicate that on various occasions Polynesian chiefs wrapped the ships’ captains in tapa they had removed from their own bodies. The distinction between upper and lower part of the body was probably not pertinent here. The cloth, given in enormous quantities, enwrapped the whole body. A Tahitian chief gave, in succession, his upper and lower garment, his poncho (tiputa) and his sarong (pareu). The female dancers were literally covered with cloth before presenting it as we have seen in the remarks made by Banks and Radiguet: ‘a great quantity rested on their hips’, ‘a block of marble’.

However another distinction seems to have been made: the gender of the donor was important. For though the chief divested himself of cloth, it appears he was not stripped naked. Unfortunately, the descriptions are vague, as it is evident that the European visitors were more interested in female nudity. Yet when women presented cloth, some accounts do specify that the lower half of the body was uncovered too. It thus seems that an additional dimension was operative when the giver was female, at least in some of those cases.

Let us first examine the case of the male donor. In 1768, the first Tahitian (it later emerged that his name was ‘Aotourou’ (probably Ahutoru) to climb aboard Bougainville’s ship presented a plantain bough to the tallest officer he could see. Then, according to Vivès, the ship’s surgeon,

He wanted to swap his three ponchos [tiputa] or white cloths [i.e. tapa] that enveloped him [ses trois ponches ou nappes blanches] for a European shirt. Mr Lafontaine, one of our officers of about the same height, dressed him in a shirt, trousers, jacket and hat. He indicated his thanks and embraced him. He came back to Lafontaine, caressed him and embraced him and wrapped him in the loincloths [pagnes] he had been wearing. In return Mr Lafontaine gave him a shirt, trousers and a jacket which we had much difficulty to put on him, so large were his shoulders.23

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22 Those who are tattooed remove their shirt; the others sometimes keep their shirt on to hide their shame at not being tattooed. In that case they show respect by undoing the buttons of their shirt and exposing their chest (the tattooing runs from the base of the back to the thighs). A chief is ashamed not to have a tattoo. Although for some time tattooing has been a personal and individual choice, men who want to become the chief (matai) of their family still frequently choose to be tattooed.

In 1841, the first captain to stay on the atoll of Fakaofo (part of the Tokelau archipelago next to Samoa), whose inhabitants had already experienced violent encounters with Europeans at sea and gunfire on their shores, was enveloped by a chief who seemed overcome by fear: ‘The King … pointed at the sun, howled, hugged me again, and again, moaned, howled, pointed to the sun, put a mat around my waist, and secured it with a cord of human hair’ (Huntsman and Hooper 1996:143,146).

11. Female gifts of cloth in early encounters

In 1789 some of the crew of the *Bounty*, commanded by Captain Bligh, mutinied after their stay in Tahiti (1788-1789). The ship was on its way back to England when the mutineers forced it to return to Tahiti. Thus it was that Morrison returned to Tahiti and lived there for more than a year, and compiled his famous journal. Once Bligh had returned to England, a punitive exhibition was mounted under the command of Captain Edwards (see Part One). Hamilton, the ship’s surgeon, relates the story of their arrival in Tahiti:

The king, the two queens and retinue, came on board to pay us a formal visit, preceded by a band of music. The ladies each had about sixty or seventy yards of Otaheitee cloth wrapt round them and were so bulky and unwieldy with it, they were obliged to be hoisted on board like horn cattle (Thompson ed. 1915: 107).

If the narrator was not exaggerating about the ‘sixty or seventy yards’ of ‘Otaheitee cloth’ (i.e. *tapa*), it is not surprising to read that the women had to be heaved aboard with ropes like bales from one of the wharves on the Thames. The followers brought with them food of many different kinds ‘as a present for the captain’. Hamilton continues: ‘As soon as they were on board, the Captain debarassoit [sic, i.e. relieved] the ladies, by rolling their linen round his middle; an indispensable ceremony here in receiving a present of cloth’ (*ibid.*).

Previous visitors had also remarked upon this important ceremony. The following episode is described in Cook’s Journal, as well as that of the naturalist Joseph Banks. It is a well-known episode as it has often—but erroneously—been listed among the instances of sexually provocative Tahitian female gestures. But a third source, most important as it gives us the key element for understanding the scene, is never quoted: the narrative of the draughtsman, Sydney Parkinson. Let us summarise the data from the three journals to see the way in which the ceremony actually began. It was 12 May 1769. That morning a double-hulled canoe approached the small fortified encampment that Cook had ordered to be built on the beach. Once again Banks was aboard the longboat anchored near the shore, busy ‘bartering with the Indians’. The Tahitians with whom he was conducting the exchange indicated that he should go to meet the group of people who had just arrived. Banks disembarked from the longboat. The group had
already disembarked and was ten yards away. These people formed a line, having halted their approach, and signalled to Banks to do likewise. One man stepped out from the group and passed along the line formed by it, carrying branches. He approached Banks with a small bunch of parakeet feathers and two boughs, one of which was a young plantain (‘with some plantain and malape-leaves’, says Parkinson). Tupaia, a Tahitian who had become an assistant for the English, ‘acted as my representative’, Banks noted: he received the boughs and placed them in Banks’s longboat. He repeated this action six times. With each gift, the gift-giver said a few words ‘that we could not understand’.

According to Cook and Banks, when this was finished another man approached, holding a great bundle of cloth (tapa) in his arms. He unfurled it and started to spread three pieces upon the ground. A woman from the group (Cook speaks of a ‘young woman’) stood at the fore:

[Banks: The woman] stepd upon [the cloths] and quickly unveiling all her charms gave me a most convenient opportunity of admiring them, by turning herself gradually round (Beaglehole 1962: 275).

[Cook: The young woman] Step’d upon the Cloth and with as much Innocency as one could possibly conceve, expose’d herself entirely naked from the waist downwards, in this manner she turn’d her Self once or twice round, I am not certain which, then step’d of [sic] the Cloth and drop’d down her clothes (Beaglehole 1955: 93).

Both Banks and Cook indicate that this was repeated for each set of pieces of tapa of which there were nine in all. The woman ‘once more displayed her naked beauties’. Banks adds that, after she had stepped upon the final lot of tapa, she ‘immediately approached me’, and the man following behind her gathered up the pieces of tapa and she ‘immediately gave me to understand that this present was destined for me’. Cook indicates that the woman embraced Banks. In this case it does seem that the female giver was ‘entirely naked from the waist downwards’, thus without even a maro. Parkinson provides confirmation, saying that she ‘exposed herself quite naked’.

But Parkinson also adds a crucial observation: the whole thing started with the pieces of tapa that the young woman was wearing:

A woman passed along the next [after the man who had presented the feathers, the bough and the leaves], having a great many clothes upon her, which she took off, and, spreading them upon the ground, turned round, and exposed herself quite naked; more garments being handed to her, by the company, she spread them also upon the ground and then exposed herself as before; then the people gathered up all her clothes, took leave, and retired (Parkinson 1984 [1784]: 27).
The woman stepped forward having first wound tapa around herself (‘upon her’), then she disrobed completely; next other lengths of tapa were given to her that she spread on the ground.

Apparently, Banks had not described the very beginning of this episode because he was still in the longboat, whereas Parkinson was already at the front row of the space where the performance was being enacted. The spreading of the lengths of tapa over the ground, even if, once this had happened a second time, the tapa had not been wound around the woman, was only the continuation of the first act. As such we might suppose that this first part of the ritual performance in which the woman arrives wrapped in pieces of tapa, then spreads them out and gives them to the man whom she wants to honour and incorporate, was the model for what followed and which was the only part of the performance that had been observed by Banks.

We should also bear in mind that the opening of the ceremony consisted of a gift of maro ura (as we know from Banks: ‘a small bunch of parakeet feathers’) and of ‘plantain’ boughs, as was the case during the sexual presentation of young girls to the French the previous year (according to the most detailed journal, that of Fesche).24 We should take note that, in this ceremony of gifts of cloth to Cook and to Banks, and in the ceremony of the gifts of cloth later offered to the portrait of Cook (see chapter 9 and below), the tapa that were presented were those that enveloped the bodies of the female dancers and/or were those over which they and the other male dancers had danced. But the dance floor was the seat of the gods (as shown by many ethnographic examples from Western Polynesia). In all of this, we should also perceive the concept of wrapping-up-in (‘wrapping-in’ if we were to follow Gell’s [1993] terminology). It was applied to the Europeans who were the images of the gods and who, as such, had to be wrapped up in cloth.

Parkinson’s precision could also explain what may seem strange in Cook’s formulation: naked ‘from the waist downwards’ and ‘dropped down her clothes’ after stepping and turning on the pieces of cloth spread on the ground. One

24 We might also ask whether there is a relationship between this type of gift and the demonstration that was made, in the same place, one or two days later, when the Tahitian woman whom the English called ‘Queen Obarea’ apparently wanted to get two young people to have intercourse in front of the English. This scene (‘Point Venus scene’) became famous throughout Europe through the intermediary of Hawkesworth, and then of Voltaire (Rennie 1998). Voltaire elaborated at length about what had been described, very briefly, by Cook, and contributed to persuading Europeans of the predilection for ‘lovemaking-in-public’ among the Tahitians (Tcherkézoff in press-1). In fact, the girl gave the impression that she was ‘following instructions’. Moreover, according to another witness, the two young people were so terrified that they were unable to perform the sexual act that the Tahitian dignitaries seemed to expect of them—and which they apparently wished to be demonstrated to the English, perhaps to give them a better understanding of what they had to do when young girls were presented to them (see the discussion of these hypotheses in ibid.). The possible correlation between the two events reinforces the conclusion I suggest below, namely that there was certainly a general relationship between the gift of cloth and the presentation of a young girl—to the gods, to the chiefs and to the first Europeans.
might think that the young woman lifted up her poncho and then dropped it again at the end, which would then raise the question of a deliberate stripping of only the lower part of the body. But, more probably, Cook (whose style of writing, in his notes, is always very hesitant), wanted to remark that even the part usually not shown (‘from the waist downwards’) was ‘entirely naked’; and the ‘dropping of clothes’ would refer to the various stages when the woman took off the tapa wound around her and/or dropped (that is: spread on the floor) the additional pieces of tapa that were handed to her by her company.

A little later, Bligh’s ship, the Bounty, returned to Tahiti, albeit in the hands of the mutineers. In 1790 Morrison witnessed a ceremonial dance (heiva) performed before Captain Cook’s portrait (which had been painted by Webber and presented to the Tahitians in 1777). I have already mentioned this event in the previous chapter in order to illustrate the ritual power of ‘images’. But Morrison also gives us some details about acts of undressing:

On the 1st of February [1790] our attention was drawn from our Work by a Heiva … Evry thing 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, evry person present paid the Homage of striping off their Upper Garments, the Men bareing their bodys to the Waist, Poeno not excepted, and the Weomen uncovering their Shoulders. 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 tyed to it before the Picture …

After which they proceeded to perform their dance, which was done by two young weomen 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 Weomen 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 posession of it for the use of Captain Cook (Morrison 1935: 85-6).

Morrison’s narrative is interesting because he distinguishes the moment when, as the Image-of-Cook became visible, all the assistants uncovered only their shoulders and chest as a gesture of respect in front of a superior, from the moment when the women finished their dance and removed ‘[all] their dresses’ to present it to the Image-of-Cook.

It is important to realise that the presentation of offerings of cloth by naked female dancers was not a recent innovation that had just emerged during the
period of contact. One cannot assume that it was occasioned by European demand. There is nothing to suggest that the new arrivals requested *tapa*, for they did not know what to do with it. During the very first encounter, in 1767, Wallis did not even want to take the *tapa* that the Tahitians had left for him on the beach (the initial encounter took place at a distance). Banks quickly rid himself of these unending gifts. In any case there are enough sources, such as Rodriguez and, later, Wilson, which indicate that the practice was already well-established between Polynesians. I have already drawn attention to the observation made by Rodriguez soon after Cook’s second visit: ‘Some women decked in quantities of native cloth presented themselves before the Chiefs in order to strip themselves and make an offering of the cloth to the said Chiefs’ (cited in Oliver 1974, III: 1237). Twenty years later, this practice is still observable. Wilson, the captain of the first ship of missionaries to arrive at Tahiti (1797), mentioned the *heiva* dances:

Any number of women may perform at once; but as the dress is very expensive, seldom more than two or four dance; and when this is done before the chief, the dresses are presented to him after the *heiva* is finished; and these contain thirty or forty yards of cloth, from one to four yards wide (Wilson 1799, cited in Oliver 1974, I: 338).

Wilson conveys how the young girls could be laden with *tapa* during the dance. Thirty yards is equivalent to some twenty-seven metres of a cloth that could be more than three metres wide. Hamilton therefore scarcely exaggerated—or not at all—when he mentioned, six years before, the fifty metres worn by these women who had to be hoisted on board like packages. Between the two decades, Bligh’s account (1788) provides additional confirmation of this (Oliver 1974: 956). For the same period Morrison insists on the fact that, at the feasts organised at each ‘visit’ between local groups (a very common practice, he says), the gifts of food (pigs, tubers) had always to be accompanied by gifts of cloth (Oliver 1974: 345).

It is equally interesting to note with Morrison that the presence of the local chief, or ‘Poeno’ (probably Poino), can be enough to create the point of intersection for the circulation of the gifts of cloth. The chief was therefore an attractor of gifts in the same way as the Image-of-Cook—which is a further confirmation of what I have suggested in the previous chapter about the gods, the chiefs and the Europeans. Morrison relates:

Several Baskets of Provisions Consisting of Fish, Plantains, Bread-fruit, Tarro & Cocoa Nuts were brought and presented to us, and at Poenos request we fired the Musquettoon which we Charged with Slugs & firing into a large Apple tree brought down several of the Fruit at which they expressd much wonder and departed well pleased.
On the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Came another Heiva, which Poeno brought to the Square; this was Conducted in the same manner, and attended by the Inhabitants as before, but Captain Cooks picture was not present, Poeno receiving the Cloth and Matting which he devided amongst us, the Whole Amounting to near one Hundred Fathoms.…

On the 6\textsuperscript{th} we received a Vist from Eddea [Itia] who was come down to visit her Son the Young King at Oparre. She brought presents of Cloth for each as did also her Sister Teano (wife to Vayheedoa [Vehiatua], Chief of Tyarrabboo [Taiarapu]) who accompanied her - She Staid at the Square some days, and the Vacant space near the Square was made use of for Dancing Wrestling and throwing the Javlin; and the young Men & Weomen frequented this place for their amusement afterwards when the weather permitted, so that we were entertaind with a dance almost evry evening while we remaind here without going from home to see it (Morrison 1935: 86-7).

12. Conclusion

It seems that this method of making an offering was peculiar to young women or rather to young girls. Cook specifically mentions ‘young girls’ in his notes on dances. Such offerings were made at the end of a dance and, according to both the sources relating to Cook’s voyages as well as missionary sources on Samoa, the females in the front row were ‘virgins’ (Tcherkézoff 2003b: 384) or ‘without any connection with men’ (Tcherkézoff in press-1).

It is possible that the young women offering cloth remained clothed in a maro, which means that they were only ‘naked’ from the European point of view. In that case, all these accounts simply document the respectful presentation of cloth before a superior (chief or European guest), as a means of enveloping and incorporating this superior. Then again, it is possible that these accounts describe how the young girls’ or women’s bodies were deliberately stripped naked, and if so we should regard these cases as being linked to the more specifically sexual displays which are recorded as having occurred in the first instances of contact. We are then left with the same three interpretations that I advanced for the similar scene reported by the ex-surgeon Stevens who narrated to Williams his landing in Samoa: ‘the females gathered around him in great numbers, and some took their mats off before him, exposing their persons as much as possible to his view’ (see above chapter 6, section 8).

These interpretations are centred around the main hypothesis about the sacredness of unmarried females, and their role in Polynesian fertility rites and the capturing of the life-giving powers of external forces (the gods) through the containment—that is the wrapping-up—of their ‘images’ (chiefs, first Europeans). In this vein, one additional fact should be mentioned for the Tahitian case.

Sacred cloth and sacred women.
The episode is told by Forster senior. A chief from Raiatea often came to visit Cook’s ship. One day when he was there he saw two of his sisters coming towards the ship in a canoe. He asked Forster to turn to the younger one and say ‘Veheina-poowa’ (vahine + ?). As soon as Forster had uttered this word, the elder sister immediately lifted up the garments of the younger, showing that she had the marks of puberty. When she had done this two or three times, she refused to go through the same ceremony again.

Forster then relates that after asking some questions about what had taken place, he grasped that there had been some teasing involved. A very common form of criticism would be to tell a girl that she is not yet pubescent. He also indicates in the following lines that, as soon as the signs of ‘puberty’ were visible (without being more precise), the girl was tattooed.

The young women are obliged to undergo a very painful operation, viz., to have large arched stripes punctured on their buttock; these curious marks are reputed honourable, and it is thought a mark of pre-eminence to be capable of bearing children.

And he added that, if a man tries to criticise a pubescent girl for not yet being so, then the girl will not hesitate to show by such explicit means that this is not the case.

It is clearly regrettable that, in their accounts about dancing and the giving of tapa, observers like Cook and Banks did not concern themselves with the question of tattooing, which they treated separately in the summaries they made about customs. However, Banks and, later, Morrison make it quite clear that tattooing of the girls did take place. Banks: ‘This morning I saw the operation of Tattowing the buttocks performed upon a girl of about 12 years old’. Morrison suggests that it was the general rule, and that as long as the tattooing remained unfinished (which could take months, with long intervals in between because of the intense pain) the girl remained a child: ‘till which time they never Conceive themselves Company for Weoman—being only Counted as Children till they have their Tattowing done’.

We therefore have a significant piece of evidence to add to the argument: for a girl, the fact of revealing the lower part of the body can be entirely linked to the symbolism of childbearing and have nothing to do with the expression of

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25 Pua as a metaphor for a young girl who is ‘coming into bloom’, flowering (a state of maturity that is still only at the flowering stage)?
27 Taken from Banks’s journal edited by J.C. Beaglehole, cited by Oliver (1974: 432).
28 Morrison’s Journal cited by Oliver, ibid.
desire. This episode should be kept in mind when one reads the various accounts of the presentation of ‘disrobed’ young Polynesian girls during first contacts. This information from Forster, Banks and Morrison is in keeping with the general hypotheses developed in chapter 3: the presentation of young girls to the Europeans was linked to the value placed on the ability to bear a child.

Relying on Morrison and on other sources such as Teuira Henry, Oliver attempts a generalisation in relation to these presentations of cloth:

Particular interest attaches to Morrison’s statement concerning the necessity to accompany food (‘which Nature produces’) with gifts of objects (‘procured by the Assistance of labour or the Art of Man’). Of all these products of ‘the Art of Man’ bark cloth was perhaps the most usual one given to visitors, and it was presented either in single pieces or a long roll. The most ceremonious method of presentation was that whereby a long roll was presented wound round one of the donor’s people (usually a young woman): after placing the free end in the guest’s hands the bark-cloth-laden agent of the donor then turned round and round until the strip was completely unrolled, leaving her completely nude. It may be imagined how charmed were the European visitors—at least the nonclerical ones—by this display of liberality and finesse (Oliver 1974: 348).

But, in this last sentence, Oliver infers the presence of an element of sexual attraction which is undoubtedly misplaced and which occurs to him under the influence of the Western myth about Polynesian sexuality. Indeed, we should not think that the idea was only to charm the recipient and to arouse his sexual desire. In my interpretation, the fact of choosing young women for this type of gift was not determined by attributing sexual desire to men with an appetite for young women, but was a reference to the possibility of procreation. The

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29 Gell (1993: 139-40) has also noted Forster’s remark, but, although he is careful to avoid revisiting our Western myth, still misinterprets its significance by focusing only on tattooing. He refers to this scene to provide an explanation of the episode of 12 May 1769, namely the ceremonial presentation of cloth in which a young woman stepped upon the lengths of tapa and undressed. The young woman would, he suggests, have undressed herself to show Banks the marks of puberty (even though the journals are silent on the subject). In doing so, she would have removed the taboo from her gift of cloth and rendered it acceptable by Banks as an opening for a secular bartering of goods relationship, a relation between ‘exchange partners’, the partners being in this case Banks (and the other Englishmen) and the woman (and her party). But, as the whole of my discussion here illustrates, the link between the stripping of females and the gift of cloth related to a wider sociological and cosmological scheme and could by no means be limited to the encounters with the Europeans. And it cannot be reduced to a display of the marks of puberty (which has never been mentioned in these contexts of gift-giving). Besides, Gell’s hypothesis of desacralising the gift, for the scene in question, wrongly assumes that the tattooing of the buttocks to mark the appearance of puberty signified the desacralising of the tapu state of any girl. It seems to me, following Morrison, that it was only the beginning of the process of transition from tapu to noa, a process that—for girls—came to an end only with marriage-and-the-first-child.

‘young woman’ was there as a pubescent girl, but one who had not yet borne a child.

These female displays were not evidence of any ‘sexual hospitality’ offered to male voyagers in search of rest and pleasure, but rather, evidence of the attempt to capture through impregnation, real or metaphorical, apparently super-human powers. To capture these powers is to incorporate these new arrivals. In Polynesian civilisation, to incorporate was and, in some cases, still is to envelop. My hypothesis is that it was intended that both cloth and the young girls’/women’s bodies be used to envelop the new arrivals.

This incorporation was achieved through wrapping up the body of the new arrival in the sacred cloth, in order to domesticate his dangerous sacredness, but also through wrapping up the body of the new arrival with the body of a young girl (through a sexual act intended to bring procreation). Sexual attraction, if there were any such dimension, was only meant to arouse the desire of the visiting male so that he could perform what was expected of him, and not to defer to any cult of sexual pleasure and to please the male visitor by offering him sexual hospitality. Both the cloth and the young girls were a very specific kind of ‘wrapping’ material which contained a super-human principle of life. Both were a channel for godly forces and signs of life. Gods could follow ‘the path of the cloth’ to come down on earth, as in the Lau Islands, or they could follow the channel of the young female’s body and come down on earth in the guise of a child. And that is why children were considered a priori to be tapu; at birth, they still belonged to the godly world. Conferring on them a state of noa (‘touchable’, a state of humanity) involved a long process of desacralisation rites; for a female, the last step was marriage, and marriage meant the production of a child who would himself be tapu.

Perhaps the hypothesis already made for the Samoan case should indeed be generalised: young girls/women were the most effective means of incorporating what came from afar. As such they became the main ‘tool’ of the chiefs’ policy when the Papâlagi-Popa’a appeared on Polynesian shores.