Chapter 11

The Papālagi (‘Europeans’) and the Sky. Etymology and divinity, linguistic and anthropological dialogue

1. The antiquity of the expression ‘Papalagi’

Europeans have been labelled ‘Papālangi’ in Western Polynesia (written Papālangi in Tongan, Papālagi in Samoan), apparently since the early contacts. The word is already mentioned in Cook’s narrative. When James Cook was in Tonga in 1777, he noted that this word was used to refer to his expedition as well as to the coming of European boats long before him (this could only have been the Dutch expeditions of the 17th century, the last being Tasman’s expedition more than a century before, in 1643). The Tongans said: (Cook’s transcription) ko e vaka no papalangi ‘the boats of/from the papalangi’ (we shall return to the discussion of the translation). In the Samoan context, the earliest published recording of the word seems to date from a book written in 1837 by the first missionary to Samoa, John Williams. In that text Williams recalled that he heard the word when he arrived for the first time in Samoa in 1830. Before arriving in Samoa, Williams had met in Tonga a Samoan man named Fauea. This man, who had been away from Samoa for some years, was happy to board Williams’s ship. When the party landed in Samoa (Savai’i Island), Fauea addressed his fellows with a speech mentioning the great powers of the ‘papalangis’ (Williams 1841: 282, who adds in a note: ‘Foreigners’). In some cases, Europeans are still dubbed Papālagi in contemporary Pacific languages. Certainly in Samoan this is an absolutely common, everyday word, not in any way a metaphoric ceremonial expression used in special circumstances, nor is it used with either laudatory or derogatory intent.

The word thus predates Cook’s arrival and must have been coined when the inhabitants of the region saw Europeans for the first time: at least when they saw Tasman in 1643 and, perhaps, at the arrival of LeMaire’s expedition in 1616. The latter was the first recorded European encounter, the first experience that Polynesians had of being shot by European muskets and the first occasion when European goods were acquired in the northern islands of the Tongan

1 The sections on the ‘sky-burster’ hypothesis have been published in the Journal of the Polynesian Society, vol. 108, n°4, 1999 (‘Who said that the 17th-18th centuries Papālagi (‘Europeans’) were ‘sky-busters’? A Eurocentric projection onto Polynesia’) and are reproduced here (with minor changes) with kind permission of the Society.
archipelago—islands that were places of regular passage for Tongans and Samoans. If another word had been coined in 1616, why would it have been replaced in 1643? LeMaire’s actions had, even more than Tasman’s, all the ingredients that dramatically forced the Polynesians to attribute a non-human nature to Europeans.

2. The invention of the notion of ‘bursting through’

Let us consider again an example already mentioned in chapter 9: the Mangaia song about Cook’s arrival, recorded by the missionary Gill: ‘No Tangaroa te vaka: kua tere i te aka i te rangi ē …’. I noted there how we should translate those words: ‘It is the boat belonging to/originating from Tangaroa, it has sailed on/from the sky; they are very frightening akua’. The first line says only: ‘it is the boat of Tangaroa’, with the genitive form indicating that the possessor is the origin of the possession (no instead of na). The second line says that this boat tere on the sky (more precisely, that the boat tere ‘on the root (aka) of the sky’?). Tere is given in the Cook Islands Maori Dictionary (Buse et al. 1995) as ‘be under way (as ship), sail along, … travel … run its course’. The line thus says only that ‘this boat has sailed on/from the sky’. These new creatures had travelled in the sky, as ‘frightening akua’ (which probably meant only ‘partial manifestations of the gods’, as we can conclude from the discussion in chapter 9) and they were on a boat ‘of/from Tangaroa’.

But Gill has given a different translation: ‘Tangaroa has sent a ship / Which has burst through the solid blue-vault’ (Gill 1880: 183). It was Gill who, on his own initiative, added that they had ‘burst through’ the sky. Invention can be seen plainly in this case, since there is nothing in the apparent etymologies of the Mangaian words reproduced here which could have given Gill the idea of ‘bursting’.

Was this Gill’s invention or, more plausibly, an already established tradition among missionaries? It is interesting to note that the idea that Europeans came as ‘sky-bursters’ was used by London Missionary Society (LMS) missionaries in the Cook Islands as their own interpretation of local expressions. For it is the same missionary society which arrived in Samoa after having landed in the Cooks, and it was the missionary George Turner, established in Samoa from 1843 and founder of a theological college in 1844, who asserted in his ethnological notes—which would become the authoritative work on ‘early Samoa’—that the Samoan word Papālagi must be understood as ‘sky-bursters’:

The God of the ‘men who had burst through the heavens’ began to be feared. Of old the Samoans thought the heavens ended at the horizon, and hence the name which they give, to this day, to the white men, viz., pāpālangi, or heaven-bursters (Turner 1986 [1861]: 9).
Turner’s book of 1861, in which the author gathers together papers he published in the local missionary magazine during the late 1840s and 1850s, would be widely read by all missionaries and many others—and W. W. Gill was certainly no exception. We are uncertain whether the LMS missionaries arrived in Samoa bringing with them this tradition that they had invented in the Cooks or, more probably, if the LMS group invented it once they were established in Samoa—because they thought there was a linguistic argument (pā ‘to burst’, lagi ‘sky’) to support it—and spread the idea through Turner’s writings. But, in any case, the meaning of ‘bursting through’ is most certainly a missionary invention, which rapidly became a full-blown European tradition. I suspect it is because of that tradition of interpreting the word Papāla(n)gi that, a century later, Beaglehole added to his edition of Cook’s journals a note of his own, when mentioning the Tongan expression noted by Cook (ko e vaka no papalangi ‘the boats of/from the papalangi’): ‘ships burst from the sky’ (Beaglehole 1955-67, III: 178, note 1), while Cook himself had given a different translation (see below).

What is quite revealing in Turner’s passage is that the idea seemed logical to him because of his view of the Polynesian cosmos, namely, the heavens as a closed hemisphere that rested on the earth: ‘Of old the Samoans thought the heavens ended at the horizon, and hence the name’. Thus, he found it logical that, for the Polynesians, anything extraordinary must have been understood as coming from beyond that heavenly limit. The fact that, in the Europeans’ interpretations, cosmological representations more than linguistic arguments had been the main reason behind the invention of this tradition is confirmed by Gill’s passage where he forcefully applied the idea to a word (tere) in which there is no etymological stem that could mean ‘to burst’.

3. The Samoan contemporary interpretation

Today, when Samoans happen to offer an etymological explanation of the word in response to foreigners’ queries (which is of course rare and limited to teachers and the like), they give the same explanation as Turner, presenting it as self-evident. I offer the hypothesis that this sense of linguistic certainty comes from the fact that the English expression ‘sky-bursters’ has itself, in a way, been frozen in Samoa since the early mission days when English was taught in Samoan mission schools. It seems evident to me that the Samoans who offer this etymology using the traditional (1840s) English expression of ‘sky-bursters’ do not really mean that their ancestors thought that Europeans came from the other side of the sky. More generally, as we have seen in chapter 9, Europeans were said to travel in the sky, to come from the sky/the sun, but not from another world, from another lalolagi in Samoan terms.
4. The cosmological contradiction

Herein lies the problem. ‘Bursting through’ the sky implies an other-side of the sky, thus another world. Such a representation could not have been a pre-contact Polynesian view; nor do we find it during the early contacts. It seems to me that this was the view that Europeans had in their projective reasoning when interpreting Polynesian cosmology. They knew that, in nearly every Polynesian culture they had encountered, cosmogonic myths told of a world where Earth and Sky were joined together until the civilising hero succeeded in separating them, thus creating a space for the Light and hence for human life. Since those beginnings, the Sky was a vault that joined with the Earth only at the horizon, at the edge of the world, which no one could reach. In the European vision of this ‘Polynesian’ universe, the image of the sky vault resting on the earth is ‘the Polynesian universe’, hence only a part of the great universe (as seen by Europeans). What European missionaries neglected in their interpretation is that for the Polynesians the Sky was an absolute limit, the limit of the very universe, and they did not realise that their translation was in fact saying something about their own view of the European arrival through Polynesian images: ‘we (Europeans) came, as they (Polynesians) thought, from another world beyond their sky-vault’. They did not realise that this translation led to the idea of another side of the sky, an idea that is totally absurd for Polynesian pre-contact cosmology.2

As we know, the Polynesian Sky was so utterly conceived as an absolute limit in cosmogonic descriptions that the sun and the light were conceived as filling the space between Sky and Earth. The sun, the moon and the stars are created within the space organised by the ten heavenly levels. In the Tahitian cosmogony recorded in Teuira Henry (1928), once the Sky is propped up, the sun, the moon and the stars appear but are moving around in disorder. Ra’i-tupua leaves the tenth level of the Sky, goes down all of the nine levels and, standing on the first one, only then contemplates the disorder. The text adds that ‘the moon had been created within, the sun had been created within, the stars had been created within’ (‘…le soleil fut créé à l’intérieur…’, Babadzan ed. 1993: 80). This is also why the Sky was thought of as an entity layered in different levels, with the great creator Tangaroa seated at the last level. The limit—precisely because it is the very last conceivable entity—can be dense and filled with many subdivisions. But this does not mean that there is something beyond the limit. On the contrary, if there were something beyond the Sky, the limit would not have been conceived as dense space, subdivided into levels (and in ‘ten’ levels

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2 I mentioned in chapter 9 that, in the Samoan case, this ‘absolute limit’ was of course quite flexible and could at any time include new ‘islands’ as the horizon was broadened through voyaging or knowledge gained from stories told by neighbouring peoples. Still, there was not any idea of two ‘worlds’. There can be only one lalolagi, one ‘[world]-under-the-sky’ (see also Tcherkézoff 2000c).
as told in the Samoan or Tahitian cosmology, which amounts symbolically to an ‘infinity’ of levels).

5. No ‘bursting’ at all: linguistic arguments

Thus, I am highly sceptical that the first part of the word Papālagi comes from the verb pā ‘to burst’, as is so often said in Samoa and about Samoa. Let us note that, at least today, the plural of pā is pāpā and not papā. It seems to have been no different in the 19th century since, in his ethnological work, Turner spells the word “’pāpālangi’ when implying that the first part of this word is from the stem pā. But Pratt’s dictionary (the first version of which was compiled in the same period and to which Turner contributed) spells the entry translated as ‘a foreigner’ as ‘PAPĀLAGI’, with only the second ‘a’ being a long vowel. (It is true that, in the first two editions of Pratt’s dictionary, there had been inconsistencies. However, ‘foreigner’ is the translation given for Papālagi in the last edition (1911) which is generally accurate, and it is also noted thus in Milner’s 1966 dictionary.)

The word pā is applied today to such sounds as the bursting of a tyre, and also to the same things mentioned for the 19th century in Pratt’s dictionary: ‘to explode as a gun, thunder; to burst as an abscess; to break forth into lamentation …’. (The same applies to the Tongan ‘pā’.) The only usage that I found where pā is related to the sky applies indeed to the thunder: ‘Ua pā (mai) le fāītititi’, ‘the thunder has just crashed’. Of course, the sound of cannon and muskets may have been compared by Polynesians to the sound of thunder. The word ‘pā’ spoken in its reduplicated form describes the repetition of the action, but then it is always pāpā. If one wants to explain to a child where the thunder comes from: ‘Ua pāpā (mai) le fāītititi mai le lagi, ‘the thunders always crash from the sky’; the particle mai, ‘from’, before the word ‘sky’ (le lagi) could not have been dropped to compose a word *pāpālagi. Also, is it linguistically admissible that this improbable form *pāpālagi would have evolved into papālagi with the first ‘a’ becoming a short vowel, so short, in fact, that the word is actually pronounced in Samoa as [p:ālagi]?3

Interestingly, John B. Stair (missionary in Samoa, 1838-1845), writing his memoirs in 1897, followed the LMS tradition about ‘sky-bursters’, but apparently expressed some doubts because he raised the possibility of a linguistic link between the word in question and European guns:

These marvellous visitors they called pāpālangi [he spells it like Turner] (sky-bursters), for, said they, these people have either burst through the

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3 One actually gets the impression that the word is [p:ālagi] and becomes papālagi only in formal discourse (and in written Samoan).
clouds with their ship; or else, lifting them up, they have passed beneath, and come to visit us. It is possible the name pāpālangi may have been given to commemorate the noise of ships’ guns, as they first heard the dread sound [Stair adds a note here:] After recently perusing this MS., my friend, the Rev. Samuel Ella, says ‘This is also my idea’ (Stair 1897: 24).

Stair is more accurate than others in his imaginative notion of bursting through, since he supposes it was through the ‘clouds’, which does not contradict the cosmological aspect of the Sky as the limit. Perhaps, he refers to some discussions he had with the Samoans on this point (‘…said they…’). The problem, however, is that lāgi is not ‘clouds’ but ‘sky/Sky’. The other problem is that Stair and Turner spell our word correctly for an interpretation based on the plural form of pā, bursting, but incorrectly if we are to judge from contemporary pronunciation and dictionaries, and even from dictionaries of their own time. Thus the hypothesis of a reference to the burst of guns is unacceptable.

6. Another hypothesis

More promising is the Samoan example of papā-vao [papa-a-vao] ‘edge of forest or bush’; similarly, *papa-a-lagi could have been coined as ‘edge of the sky’. There is also papātua ‘back (of man, animal)’, equivalent to tua, the tough side of a thing as opposed to the smooth side, hence also ‘back’ in numerous contexts.

But this word, with a composition recorded in contemporary Samoan (Milner 1966) only with vao ‘bush’ or tua, might be the polysemic Samoan (and pan-Polynesian) papa that can mean a ‘board, plank’ (such as used for scraping bark-cloth), and (flat) ‘rock’ (the big and flat black volcanic rocks), and ‘make level, flatten’ (as in preparing the lawn in front of the house that is ceremonial and honorific); or perhaps, if it is the same word, a type of ‘coarse floor mat’. For Tongan, presented in this way by Churchward’s dictionary (1959), we find: papa¹: ‘planks’; papa²: ‘floor mat’; papa³: ‘flat hard sandstone forming a layer or bed of the coast’; papa⁴: ‘flat and smooth and hard’ (track, sides of a hole). This semantic field may seem heterogeneous but there is unity if one refers it to the

4 The whole of the following discussion assumes that, whatever the origin of the first part of our word may be, the second part refers to the sky. This assumption, i.e., that the Samoan word Papālagi is to be decomposed as Papā+lāgi, obvious as it might seem, is only a hypothesis. The grounds for the hypothesis are the constant utterances made by Polynesians in first contacts that Europeans had to do with the sky. Also, in the list of Proto-Polynesian morphemic stems (see POLLEX [Biggs and Clark 1999]), there is no other possibility, as no stem such as *palagi is proposed (except one, *palagi, with reflexes recorded throughout Polynesia, but which is semantically totally unrelated to our topic because it designates the ‘surgeon fish’ [Acanthurus sp.]). It implies that any other option than considering the composition of the word as deriving in part from ‘sky’ (lāgi) would involve a theory of borrowing from a non-Polynesian language — an option which must always be left open, if we consider, for example, the recent demonstrations that various Polynesian words are in fact borrowings from the Dutch through early contacts with the Dutch expeditions (Geraghty and Tent 1997a, 1997b).
cosmogony. The world began with flat surfaces, which are (in the Samoan myths): papa‘ele ‘earth’ (cf. ‘ele’ele ‘earth, soil’), papaone ‘sandy’, papatā ‘solid rock’. The unity of the category is revealed (preserved?) in Central-Eastern languages where papa is also all kinds of ‘layer’, ‘base’, ‘stratum’, which can then apply also to the status system, to ‘genealogies’ and to ideal levels of the cosmos.

Can this word, with this idea of ‘cosmogonic surface / level’, apply to the sky? It does not seem that the Samoan cosmogonic myths make use of a ‘papa(a)lagi’ in this way. I do not know about Tonga. But the idea and the word are recorded elsewhere:

The Pukapukan idea of the cosmos, complementing the ideology of the soul, is that the cosmos consists of three major levels, indefinitely extensive flat surfaces. The level of this world of humans comprises te papa wenua and te papa moana, the level of the land and of sea. Above is te papa langi, the level of the sky. The sky meets land or sea at the horizon, which is thought of as the side of the sky, te tawa o te langi. Below the level of this world is the Po, the Underworld, itself made up of three further indefinitely extensive levels, te kapi lunga, te kapi lalo, and te po likuliku (Beaglehole and Beaglehole 1938: 326).

Thus we might propose that the word papālagi meant only ‘(beings) of the sky/belonging to the level of the sky’, as opposed to ‘(beings) belonging to the level of the earth/sea’. Note also, in 19th-century Samoan (Pratt’s dictionary), that papatā, ‘standing rock’, can be applied metaphorically to persons: ‘a courageous man, a hard-working man’. It is possible, then, that the idea of the ‘level of the sky’ became similarly applied to Europeans.

This hypothesis is reinforced by a remark again made by Cook about his talk with the Tongans. First he mentioned that they remembered the earlier coming of European ships (Tasman’s expedition): ‘they informed us that their ancestors had told them that two ships, (‘Towacka no papalangi’) like ours had once been at the island’. He then added the following remark: ‘For what reason I know not, but they call our Ships Towacka no papalangi and us Tangata no papalangi; that is cloth ships and cloth men’ (Beaglehole 1955-67, III: 178). On the same page, in addition to note 1 where Beaglehole proposes the translation ‘ships burst from the sky’, Beaglehole added another note saying that, probably, ‘the Tongans also transferred the word papalangi to the things the foreigners brought’ (p. 178, note 3). We shall see in the last part of this chapter that the transformation could have been just the other way, from things to people.

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5 In a personal communication (February 2003), Fergus Clunie has drawn my attention to the Tongan word ‘PAPAAELANGI’ ‘horizon’ found in Baker’s 1897 dictionary (Baker 1897).

6 Ross Clark notes (personal communication, 1999) that ‘paparangi as a cosmic location is also mentioned for the Tuamotus, by Langdon who cites Stimson, Emory and Montiton as sources’ (Langdon 1975).
Irrespective of the reason that caused Cook to understand that *papalangi* referred to ‘cloth’, what is significant for the present discussion is the expression *tangata no papalangi*. Literally it may be glossed ‘people of the *papalangi*’. Thus, the word *papalangi* designated a location, a place from which those ‘people’ (*tangata*) originate; the gloss would be ‘the (cosmic) place/level (of the) sky’. Moreover, again the genitive form used is *no*, as in Gill’s quotation from Mangaia: the *papalangi* is thus the origin of the relationship of possession. The expression noted by Cook then meant ‘people [*tagata*] originating from [*no*] the cosmic level Sky [*papalangi*]’. In the same manner, the expression *vaka no papalangi* could just have meant ‘the boats from the cosmic place *papalangi*’.

The rather general meaning of ‘people of the (level of the) sky’ fits well with the fact that, when they first encountered Europeans, there were more questions raised for Polynesians than certainties, as we have seen in chapter 9. Europeans were certainly perceived as a kind of ‘celestial’ creature. In Eastern Polynesia, we know that Hawaiians thought that those creatures whose skin reddened when exposed to the sun, and who were constantly looking towards the sun with their optical devices, were somehow related to that part of the universe (see John Ledyard’s comment). But no Polynesian knew for sure if these celestial creatures were images of gods or spirits —but what kind of spirits? (‘spirits, *tupua*, but not [as] our spirits’, said the Maori). In his observations, Gill noted the ‘Solo’ (the chorus) of the song commemorating Cook’s passage: ‘*E pai kua aa teia?* Of what sort are they?’ (1880: 185). This note confirms yet again that all the Polynesian interpretations of the nature of the *Papâlagi* were followed by a question mark.

The configuration of the Polynesian vision of the first Europeans—the certainty of them being ‘not-simply-earthly-hence-celestial-creatures’ and indeterminacy as to the sort of celestial creatures that they might be—favours an etymology where the first part of our word *Papâ-lagi* is not too precise, and definitely does not mean that Europeans were sky-‘bursters’. The implausibility of an etymological ‘sky-bursters’ origin holds whatever might be other findings or propositions about the meaning of *papâ*. The ‘sky-bursters’ idea is another product of the already very long list of Eurocentric projections arising from various attempts to interpret Polynesian concepts.

For the rest, there are still uncertainties. The first possibility is that the word *papâlangi* was indeed coined in Western Polynesia: (i) in the Tongan–Samoan–Futuna–Alofi islands, when the northern inhabitants had the misfortune of an encounter with LeMaire’s expedition (given that Niuatoputapu and Tafahi were just as much “Tongan” as “Samoan”), or when Tasman’s expedition landed in the main part of the Tongan archipelago; or (ii) at the latest, in the Samoan islands in 1722 when Roggeveen passed by. In all of those cases, I do not see a better candidate than the cosmogonic concept *papa*.
But there is the possibility that the word had been coined in the Tuamotus, an archipelago that was visited by LeMaire’s same expedition of 1616 before it reached Western Polynesia, and even ten years earlier by Quiros (1606). Contacts between West and East are indeed plausible, so it is not impossible that a word coined in the Tuamotus (Paumotu language) was brought into Western Polynesia. In that case, the Tahitian Popa’a / Papa’a could also derive from that Paumotuan source. Davies’s dictionary of the mid-19th century has: ‘Papaa, s. a foreigner, formerly applied to the inhabitants of the Paumotu islands before europeans [sic] visited them, but since to all foreigners; in some islands it is papalangy [sic]’. This last remark is crucial for the hypothesis of a Tuamotuan origin, dating possibly from the encounters with the Dutch in 1616 or with the Spaniards in 1606, especially as the Tuamotuan worldview had a ‘Paparangi’ concept of a cosmic location comparable to the Cook Island papalangi cosmic location.

7. European gifts and the unwarranted encounter between the etymology of papālagi and the apotheosis of Captain Cook

Since the publication in 1999 of the analysis presented in the previous sections, Paul Geraghty and Jan Tent have published an extensive study of the etymology of papālagi, with new and promising data. I have mentioned their publications on words used in contemporary Polynesian languages which are borrowings from the Dutch. This has prompted me to leave open the possibility that papāla(n)gi itself could have originated from a foreign language. Now Geraghty and Tent (2001) put forward the hypothesis that indeed our word papāla(n)gi originates from a non-Polynesian language: it could have been borrowed from Malay. But they conclude that, beyond the linguistic discussion, anyone raising the hypothesis of one of the word’s components being ‘sky’ is falling into the type of ‘Western-inspired myth’ which made ‘Beaglehole, Malo, Badger, Scarr and Sahlins’ suppose that Captain Cook had been considered by the Hawaiians as ‘an incarnation of Lono’. This myth is based on the ‘European presumption of superiority’ which made and still makes Europeans think that, in early encounters, they had been ‘considered ‘gods’ or ‘spirits’ by the Polynesians’ (ibid.:185-186, 202-3). I find it surprising that linguists could, even en passant, fall into the trap of the Obeyesekere-type of discourse, if I may coin this expression—a discourse that is a Western-inspired misconception of the pre-Christian Polynesian cosmology, as well as a misreading of Sahlins’s analysis.

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7 This section was written in January 2003 and published as a ‘shorter communication’ in the Journal of the Polynesian Society (vol. 112, n°1, 2003, pp. 65-73); it is reprinted here with minor modifications, with kind permission of the Society.
More on the etymology of ‘papāla(n)gi’

The origin would be the Malay word *barang*, ‘thing, object, goods, article, commodity, luggage’, adopted by Tongans who would have heard it from Tasman’s crew in 1643 (Geraghty and Tent 2001). The word is well attested to in 17th century Malay. There were, most probably, Malay-speaking crew members on Tasman’s ships. In those years the Dutch sailors themselves had adopted a number of local Malay words in their everyday language. Thus it is highly probable that, in 1643, the Tongans heard from the Dutch that the gifts handed over to them (cloth, beads, iron tools, etc.) were ‘*barang*’. The phonological transformation to *pala(n)gi, vala(n)gi* in the West-Polynesia-and-Fiji region is regular (*ibid.*: 190-9). One unsolved problem rests with the reduplication of pa-, but there are several possible explanations (*ibid.*: 199-200). One may also raise the question: did the story of our word *papāla(n)gi* begin with Tasman and not with LeMaire (or even the Spaniards in the Tuamotus, since we cannot exclude the possibility that the word was coined by Polynesians themselves)? While it is correct that the Tongans whom Cook met seemed to have mentioned only Tasman’s passage, it is reasonable to assume that the impacts of events at sea during LeMaire’s passage (the killings and the handing over of various ‘trinkets’) would have induced the inhabitants to coin a word for the creatures they encountered. Could the ‘*barang* hypothesis’ be applied retrospectively to the 1616 events?

Irrespective of the Tasman/LeMaire question, the strongest argument for the ‘*barang* hypothesis’ is the existence of several passages, in early and late European journals and in early word-lists, that indicate without a doubt that our word *papāla(n)gi* was used locally to refer to a variety of European goods (*ibid.*: 192-4):

—‘European cloth’ (explicitly distinguished from local cloth): Tonga (four recordings by Cook’s companions in 1773 for *pālāngho, palangee, babba’langa, papalangee*, one by Malaspina in 1793 for *papa’a-langui, one by Labillardière, 1793, for *papalanguui* and Samoa (19th-century missionaries’ dictionary for āpāpāla’ai, āpapalagi); there is also this rather odd translation offered by Cook in 1777: ‘that two ships, (‘Towacka no papalangie’) like ours had once been at the island. For what reason I know not, but they call our Ships Towacka no papalangie and us Tangata no papalangie; that is cloth ships and cloth men’ (Beaglehole 1955-67, III: 178). Whether Cook was right or wrong in his translation of that phrase (see below), it is clear that he knew of a Tongan word *papalangie* referring to ‘cloth’. It is possible that the Fijian word vāvālagi should also be included as an example for the gloss of ‘European cloth’ (the case rests on an interpretation of a poetic text related to an event of 1800) (Geraghty and Tent 2001: 195-7).
—‘European manufactures, goods’ (including cloth): Tonga (Mariner, Dumont d’Urville): *papalagi, papa langui.

—‘broken glass’: Tuvalu; ‘beads’: Rotuma, for (respectively) pāpalagi and papalagi (from dictionaries).

—‘iron’: Marquesas: three references, from 1773 to 1840 for *papa’annēē, pappa ane, papa-ani; metal: Nukuoro/Kapingamarangi and Mokil for (respectively) baalanga and pahrang (ibid.: 193-4). From the Marquesan case, the authors are able to suggest that this word spread in Eastern Polynesia in a truncated form and resulted in all the papā, papa’a, papa’a and popa’a forms that are used to designate the ‘Europeans’ (ibid.: 200).

By the early nineteenth century everywhere in Western Polynesia and Fiji papālagi(n)gi is recorded as referring also or only to Europeans as persons and to the place of origin of Europeans (ibid.: 171-5). It is not difficult to agree with the authors that, by that time, the meaning of the word had expanded from ‘European goods (given in first contacts)’ to Europeans themselves and to their world. It is important to note, however, that this extension had already taken place by the time of Cook’s voyages. The translation given by Cook as ‘cloth ships’ and ‘cloth men’ is not accurate. Although it is presented by Geraghty and Tent in the opening of their analysis, certainly to attract the reader’s attention to an etymology based on ‘cloth’ (ibid.: 172), it cannot account for what Cook heard as *Towacka no papalangie and *Tangata no papalangie. As I have said, the presence of ‘no’ obliges us to understand that the Tongans were talking of the boats and the people ‘originating from the Papalangie’. Whatever they imagined this Papalangie to be, it could not have been just ‘cloth’. They could not have meant ‘the people originating from the cloth’. Rather, the meaning had to be something like ‘the boats of the people of the place of these [wonderful] goods’ and, in the second case, ‘the people of the place of these goods’. Considering this argument, it is remarkable that Mariner tells us that in Tonga the word papalagi, as he heard it in the years 1806 to 1808, meant ‘White people, Europeans’ (and, in one occurrence, the ‘place of origin of the Europeans’) as well as ‘European manufactures such as cloth, linen, etc.’); the same remark is made by Dumont d’Urville in 1827 (Geraghty and Tent 2001: 171, 173, 193).

The importance of the gifts in first contacts

The discussion based on linguistics must rest at this point. The ‘barang etymology hypothesis’ is very appealing, not only for the linguistic reasons that the authors presented in detail and that I have summarised here, but also for anthropological reasons.

All the previous chapters which analysed the scene of first contacts in Polynesia have shown us the extent to which, on each side of the encounter, the interpretation of the nature of the Other rested on the interpretation of the
gifts offered by this Other. The interpretation of the nature of the objects given and the interpretation of the reasons and the manner of giving them were critical to any conclusion or understanding that was reached regarding the people involved. The three main categories of European objects that produced a rich variety of Polynesian interpretations during the first encounters were of course cloth, glass beads and iron tools—i.e. the three specific (early or evolved) meanings of our word *papāla(n)gi* noted by Geraghty and Tent. That the whole linguistic story may have begun around the gifts of cloth on Tongan shores is indeed a particularly welcome example of what we have seen in the previous chapter on the role of cloth in first contacts in Polynesia.

Still, the ‘barang etymology’ is only a hypothesis. The only certitude is that (i) if the origin is a Polynesian one, it is *papa+lagi* with a reference to the ‘sky’, and (ii) if the origin is foreign, the ‘barang hypothesis’ is a very appealing possibility.

More generally, Geraghty and Tent’s analysis is another strong illustration of the benefits of the multidisciplinary method that is required for all ethnohistorical Polynesian studies (Kirch and Green 2001), at least when the anthropological discussion takes into account the two sides of the encounter, just as the linguistic approach must do. But, at some point, our two analysts of the etymology of *papāla(n)gi* have forgotten this imperative.

**On Europeans as ‘gods’: the unwarranted link**

Geraghty and Tent’s data as well as data provided in dictionaries show that, if indeed the origin is the word *barang*, the early meaning of ‘European cloth or goods’ had been forgotten by Polynesian speakers of the early 19th century, perhaps even as early as the late 18th century or even earlier. The Samoan and other occurrences of *papālagi* in documents of the early (and later) 19th century never refer to meanings such as ‘cloth’ or ‘goods’, and we know that in Samoa other words were used to refer to European goods and to European and indigenous cloth (ʻ*oloa*, ʻ*ie, ʻ*ie toga*, etc.). We cannot know if the double meaning of both ‘European people’ and ‘European goods’, noted for Tongan usage by

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8 Kirch and Green call for a ‘triangular’ method (anthropology, archeology, linguistics). When archeology cannot help, as in the case of the ‘first contacts’, at least anthropology and linguistics must always be side by side in Polynesian studies.

9 See the special issue of the Journal of the Polynesian Society on Samoan mats, vol. 108, n°2, 2000, which includes studies on the Tongan (A. Kaeppler, P. Herda) and Samoan cases (P. Schoeffel); and Tcherkézoff 1997b, 2002. The case of the Samoan word āpapālagi as ‘foreign cloth’ (in the Samoan → English part of the dictionary) and ‘foreign cloth’ as ‘āpapalagi’ (in the English → Samoan part) is mysterious. Lists were compiled in the 1840s. Although these two entries stayed on during the various revisions of the LMS dictionary (from 1878 to 1911—these revisions added many words but rarely deleted entries from former printings), the word is not indicated in Krämer’s descriptions. In any event, its form (with the initial *a*) and the fact that it did not designate the Europeans as people (who were *papālagi*) both indicate that, when noted by the missionaries in the 1840s, it was already a different word, in the Samoan linguistic consciousness, than *papālagi* (see Pratt 1862-1911).
Mariner and Dumont d’Urville, was still explicit and transparent for Tongan speakers or whether the two European observers had simply noted two meanings for what they heard as the same phonological unit. It is clear, however, that by 1840 in Samoa the double meaning for a single word of this sort did not exist (Turner who wrote many pages on gifts of cloth and who commented on the ‘sky-bursters’ would have noted this strange coincidence). This implies that by that time, a word *papālagi*, ‘Europeans’, was used without any known etymology (if the origin were the 17th-century *barang*, there was no memory of it) and there was room, therefore, for an *indigenous* folk etymology of the word *papālagi* as ‘the people [or the side, or the people of the side] of the sky’, based on *papa+lagi*.

Geraghty and Tent do not raise the issue in this way. After having noted the very early meanings of ‘cloth, goods’ and the later meaning of ‘Europeans’, and after commenting that such a semantic extension is easily understandable, they remark that in European writings from the 1790s (e.g., George Vason in Tonga) onwards up until the present, it was first proposed and then assumed (by early voyagers and residents, later by missionaries and scholars, some of them linguists) that the etymology of *papālagi(n)gi* is something like ‘people of the sky’; or in adjective form ‘pertaining to people of the sky’. Indeed, all these writers proposed etymologies of this kind. In the Samoan case, it was ‘sky-bursters’. The idea of ‘bursting’ proved to be entirely Eurocentric. Geraghty and Tent now assume that the notion of ‘sky’ is also a purely European invention and what is more, that it can only be so. They suggest that the first such invention could have been made by Vason in 1797 in Tonga (Geraghty and Tent 2001: 173).

Given this assumption, they then question why Europeans invented such ‘spurious etymologies implying that the Polynesians and Fijians viewed Europeans as gods’. Leaving to ‘historians’ to find out why such etymologies have become ‘so overwhelmingly popular in the literature of the past two centuries’ (*ibid.*: 203), they still attempt an answer to why the etymology was proposed in the first place. They claim that the obvious reason is ‘the European presumption of superiority’ (which made Europeans think that the indigenous population had seen them as gods) and add that ‘a case in point is Captain James Cook’. Suddenly departing the linguistic ground, Geraghty and Tent raise the Sahlins-Obeyesekere debate, refer to the claim that ‘Cook being an incarnation of Lono is a Western inspired-myth’ and open a discussion on the prevailing ‘misunderstanding’ which makes numerous scholars, among them ‘Beaglehole, Malo… and Sahlins’, assume that ‘early European visitors were deified’ (*ibid.*: 185-9).

In developing this argument, the authors commit two errors. First, they repeat the very same misinterpretation of Marshall Sahlins’s position that was made by Obeyesekere and others. We know now from chapter 9 the biases and ambiguities that have accumulated around this idea of ‘deification’ and the
mistranslations of *atua*. It is regrettable that Geraghty and Tent found the need to refer to the critiques of Sahlins by Obeyesekere (1992) and Bergendorff (*et al.* 1988) in order to dismiss any discussion of etymologies of *papālagi* as people of ‘the sky’. It is all the more curious that they themselves offer the same critique I made with regard to the word *atua*, when they discuss the example of the Fijian word *kalou* (Geraghty and Tent 2001: 186). Europeans of the time as well as some contemporary scholars did indeed misunderstand the meaning of *atua*, *kalou*, etc. This does not mean that one should disregard the fact that indigenous people did apply these terms to Europeans or that one should not try to understand what they meant by doing so.

The second error Geraghty and Tent commit is that by ascribing the ‘sky’ etymologies to a Western-inspired myth of first contacts with Polynesians, they dispossess the Polynesians of their own (possible) interpretation of the word *papālagi*, once the first meaning had been forgotten or obscured through the process of semantic expansion (from ‘European goods’ to ‘Europeans’). It may very well be that Vason was the first to see the morpheme *lagi* with the meaning ‘sky’ in the word, or it may not. It is certainly true that the idea of ‘bursting through (the sky)’ was invented by LMS missionaries. But would that invention have been adopted by Samoans so easily if the Samoans themselves had not heard in the component *lagi* the meaning ‘sky’? Geraghty and Tent are neglecting the Polynesian and Fijian ideas that were expressed repeatedly during first contacts, namely that the Europeans, whatever their nature, travelled by ‘boats of/originating from Tagaroa’ and that they had passed ‘near the sun’.10 When residents such as Vason or Mariner, who were linguistically well integrated into the local population, assumed the presence of a reference to the ‘sky’ in the word *papālagi* when used by indigenous speakers, as the missionaries did in Samoa (even if the latter added the mistaken meaning of ‘bursting through’), it is highly probable that they had discussed this point with their local friends. This, in turn, implies that their interlocutors did not contradict them on this point.

I think we can maintain the hypothesis that an indigenous (and not only European) folk etymology of the word *papāla(n)gi* as somehow referring to the ‘sky’ may have been operating since the early 19th century and probably earlier. We can leave open the discussion as to how much this indigenous interpretation appeared within a dialogue held locally with the first European visitors and residents, and later the first missionaries, all of whom had indeed, as Christians, a ‘sky’-oriented cosmology and who, from the late 19th century onwards, became prone, erroneously, to attribute to the inhabitants a view of the ‘divinity’ of the first Europeans. The critical point is, however, that *the two sides of this dialogue*

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10 Although Geraghty and Tent (2001: 174) do mention the Fijian example of 1808 about ‘peppa langa tooranga martinasinger’ [*papalagi turaga matanisiga*] which means ‘the Papalagi are chiefs from the sun’ (see above chapter 9).
did not mean the same thing at all when talking of ‘lagi’ and ‘Sky’ and of ‘atua’ and ‘God’. Not only their views of the cosmos, but their entire conception of time and space were very different (Tcherkézoff 1998b).

In sum, the discussion of the ethno-historical-linguistic uses of papālagi should not be linked to the biased Bergendorff-Obeyesekere discussion of the ‘divinity of Captain Cook’. In the same way that the Polynesians applied the word atua to Europeans they may very well have reinterpreted papālagi on the basis of the component –lagi, with or without the influence of external teachers; or they may have coined the word from the start, using the two morphemes papa+lagi (since the ‘barang hypothesis’, attractive as it is, is still only a hypothesis). Raising the possibility that they could have done so by no means amounts to adopting the position which Obeyesekere sees as ‘the Western myth of the Europeans’ “divinity”’ (and one where Sahlins never happened to stand).