Introduction

Women and gods, barter and gift-giving: an anthropology of historical encounters

This book narrates the first encounters between Samoans and Europeans, adding some Polynesian comparisons from beyond Samoa, to advance a hypothesis about the interpretations made by the Polynesians at the time of the nature of these newcomers to Pacific waters. Bearing on encounters of historical and cultural significance, it discusses the ways we can address the analysis of such events. In order to do so we must go back two centuries and reconstitute as far as possible the point of view of those who—European narratives say—‘were discovered’, but who, in fact, had to discover for themselves these other peoples whom they called Papālagi (in Western Polynesia), Haole (Hawaii), Popa’a (Tahiti) or Pakeha (Aotearoa-New-Zealand). Thus, it is an anthropology of these encounters, a ‘history’ s anthropology or an ‘ethnohistory’ as Greg Dening (1966, 1988) would call it.

The book is the outcome of two different research projects. The first one, larger in scope, relates to the studies of the so-called ‘first contacts’ in Polynesia: the very first contact and the subsequent early encounters between Polynesians and Europeans. This field readily reveals the bias of studies undertaken from a Eurocentric point of view. The Samoan case appears to provide a clear illustration of the benefits that an anthropological orientation can inject into these studies. The second more specialised project was carried out when it became necessary to introduce a study of pre-missionary Samoa to the so-called ‘Mead-Freeman debate’ which bears on the rules and values regulating adolescent sexuality in ‘Samoan culture’. As both research projects made use of the same material they logically converged to become a single book.

This material comprises European narratives written between 1730 and 1850. It so happens that a good part of the crucial narratives have been authored by French voyagers: Bougainville, Lapérouse, Lafond de Lurcy, Dumont d’Urville. Some of these texts are not well-known or are difficult to find; two of them have never been translated into English. The reader will judge if it has been worth bringing them to light and if they allow us to reconstruct something of the other side of the encounters: the Samoan side. This attempt is by way of a humble return, or more precisely a kind of ifoga (see chapter 1, section 4), from a French researcher, in remembrance of the fact that it was French seamen who made the first intrusion on Samoan land by Papālagi (December 1787).
1. First contacts in Polynesia
Methodology and the Samoan case

For the Pacific region, the sources regarding first contacts are essentially accounts written by European travellers. One can quite easily imagine the extent to which these accounts, especially those published in the form of a book which was intended for a large public, foreground interpretations based on prejudices and preconceptions. Their preconceived views blinded the authors themselves, these first voyagers, and prevented them from understanding the whole range of acts and behaviours of the indigenous population. In particular, several contexts were the occasion of gross misunderstandings. Let me immediately evoke the two principal contexts in which these occurred.

In the first context, the local inhabitants brought some objects to the visitors who understood this as a proposition to ‘barter’ goods. The visitors attempted to put a value on the goods presented in order to make a commensurate reply with their own ‘trinkets’ which they had intentionally brought with them to ‘impress the savages’. As soon as the exchange appeared to the Europeans to be unfair, or when the inhabitants dared to climb on board ship and then seized everything they could and jumped into the sea, the encounter became a ‘theft’ committed by savages whose ‘character’ was obviously ‘treacherous’.

The second context of misunderstanding was caused by the inevitably male-dominated view of the voyagers. The crew members were of course male and they always had their eyes on the ‘women’ of the island they were visiting. Their sole interest in the women was as possible sexual partners (with highly differing degrees of appreciation according to the ‘colour of the skin’ of different women as the voyagers saw and classified it). They made no distinction between adult and adolescent females. In particular, they saw in every ‘woman’ the sexual complement of a man, thus reducing all relationships of gender to one level. They were unaware of the fact that, in many societies, and certainly in Samoa, a man and a young woman who came forward in front of the visitors could more often than not be a brother and sister, or a father and daughter, rather than a husband and wife.

A complete misunderstanding about rules of ‘nakedness’, where European taboos of the time were projected indiscriminately onto the inhabitants, together with the close association between nakedness and sexuality that prevailed in European ideology, meant that the indigenous population was generally qualified as ‘lascivious, lewd’ and the females seen as engaging in ‘wanton behaviour’ (since in every presentation of women they were more or less ‘naked’). The European visitors were unaware that, on the contrary, such behaviours took their meaning as part of very formal dances where the fact of presenting oneself in the finale without clothing was a mark of ‘respect’ (see chapter 10) towards
visitors who were compared to sacred chiefs and seen as envoys of the divine world (chapter 9). Moreover, as we shall see in a number of cases, the very specific occasions on which the indigenous adults proposed to the visitors that they take a woman (in fact an adolescent girl) in order to have sexual relations with her were reduced by our visitors simply to a question of sexual hospitality, when in fact it was certainly a matter of a sacred proposition of marriage. This followed a pattern in which a family offered one of its daughters to a high chief with a view to obtaining progeny and, through this, a tie of kinship to this illustrious lineage.

The project of arriving at a detailed history of the genesis and hardening of European prejudices, with regard to the colour of the skin, to the exchange of goods, and to sexuality among Pacific peoples, necessitates a wide re-evaluation of European ideology which is currently in progress. At the same time, it is necessary to rewrite or, often, to commence writing (where nothing has been done up until now) the history of the first contacts case by case and, as far as possible, to do so from the point of view of the indigenous peoples. Marshall Sahlins has already begun doing this for Hawaii, Anne Salmond and her team for Aotearoa-New-Zealand, Greg Dening for the Marquesas, Tahiti and Hawaii, and Jean-François Baré for Tahiti, while Nicholas Thomas has added numerous comparative remarks and has also worked on first contacts in the Marquesas Island(s). But, until now, only two articles had appeared in relation to Western Polynesia (Linnekin 1991, Grijp 1994). So the present study, which is centred on the first contacts made in Samoa, opens the door to research in this field.

How can one write or rewrite this history when our sources are biased accounts related by voyagers? My approach will be to combine the results of two different types of analysis which I shall term (i) the internal analysis (dealing with original documents such as sea captains’ journals) and (ii) the ethnographic analysis (integrating ethnographic data derived from a later period).

The internal analysis offered here is an examination of voyagers’ original accounts—a procedure that requires examining both published and unpublished materials such as logs and journals. More often than not, even published materials have yet to be scrutinised: some journals have been published in specialised editions which have remained largely unknown (or at least have not yet been carefully studied from this perspective), as is the case for the expeditions of Bougainville or Lapérouse. The internal analysis, then, consists of separating out that which, in an account of historical events and encounters, is a description and that which is already an interpretation. One could argue that a neutral

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description does not exist, that every description is already, *de facto*, an interpretation. This is only partially true. While this is certainly the case for any work—a book or journal—considered in its entirety, it does not necessarily hold true for a page—sometimes only a sentence—where one may find a few lines that simply describe a scene preceding an interpretative passage which contains an explanation of what took place. We shall see that this kind of distinction is possible regarding the material relating to Samoa, especially in the case of documents from Lapérouse’s expedition. This has also proved possible regarding the material relating to Bougainville’s visit to Tahiti in a study recently completed (Tcherkézoff in press-1).

The second type of analysis makes use of subsequent ethnographic work, both from the 19th century and from the contemporary period, in order to suggest possible reasons for the various actions carried out by the Polynesians during their 18th-century encounters with Europeans. This reinterpretation obviously yields results that are very different from the interpretation of Polynesian behaviour made by these first Europeans. The voyagers usually only stayed for a few days, less often for a few weeks, and they did not speak the language of the inhabitants. But it is their accounts of these short sojourns which have underpinned the European tradition of interpreting ‘Polynesian customs’. This interpretative tradition took root in so-called science in Europe as early as 1775 with the regrettable consequence that it continues to inform/deform the anthropological interpretation even of data collected recently. Shortly after these early encounters, some of the first long-staying residents (beachcombers, then the first missionaries) left accounts that were now based on an intimate knowledge of the language and on observations made over periods that sometimes lasted for several years (Campbell 1998). Furthermore, in certain contexts, the continuity of the cosmological scheme and of some of the vocabulary is quite noticeable, persisting from the time of the early dispersal of first Polynesians, as proved from comparison of data collected from far-flung Polynesian regions (Kirch and Green 2001). Hence, in some cases, the recent work of professional ethnographers may be put to direct use to interpret ancient facts, once these latter have been extracted via the method of internal analysis from the original over-interpreted narratives of the voyagers.

These combined analyses, the internal and the ethnographic, will thus constitute my methodology in the quest to arrive at an anthropology or ethnohistory of the early encounters between Samoans and Europeans.

**Polynesian methodological comparisons**

To this study of first contacts in Samoa, which forms Part One of this book, three shorter studies are added for comparative purposes in Part Two. The first of
these takes up the whole question raised by the ‘Sahlins-Obeyesekere debate’ over the Hawaiian and pan-Polynesian interpretation of the nature of the first Europeans, and discusses the past Polynesian conception of chiefs and gods, with comparative examples from the Cook Islands, Tahiti and elsewhere. Polynesians had seen Europeans neither as ‘humans’ nor as ‘gods’ in the Western Judeo-Christian sense, but as material manifestations of spiritual beings sent by the gods-as-principles-of-sacredness, and who, just as these gods could do at will, took on whatever human appearances and attributes they chose. The central point is that, ontologically, Polynesian gods were an invisible principle that could take temporary visible forms (‘images’, ata) of all kinds, each of which was only a partial realisation of the underlying, substantive principle. Now it is the case that Europeans have been treated by Polynesians as if they were such images, temporary visible forms of the particular divine principle. Sahlins has rightly insisted on this point, but it has been missed by his critics who have thought, quite wrongly, that he had simply attributed to the Hawaiians a conception expressed by the bare equation: Cook=Lono=a god (in the Western sense).

Most of the early and recent Western misconceptions about the Polynesian interpretation of Europeans at the time of contact, and much of the recent misreading—among anthropologists (see below chapter 9) and linguists (chapter 11)—of Sahlins’s texts about Captain Cook, rest on a lack of understanding of the past Polynesian system of representing by ‘images’, ata, the world of ‘godly’, atua, entities. Material images of a ‘god’, atua, are themselves said to be ‘atua’, but they remain partial and temporary manifestations of the atua-as-a-principle. The clarification of this point is crucial to the precise formulation of the hypothesis about the Polynesian interpretation of the nature of the first Europeans who appeared in the Pacific in the 16th to the 18th centuries.

The second study presented in Part Two (chapter 10) considers the specific role of gifts of cloth (barkcloth, fine mats, etc.) in first contact situations, particularly in Tahiti. Europeans had no conception at all that what they saw merely as ‘cloth’ could, to the Polynesians, be the most ritually efficient and sacred object, specifically designed to attract and make visible the godly forces. They therefore entirely misunderstood the relation between this central role of cloth in ritual and acts of dressing/undressing in dances and formal presentations. When the Polynesians who were undressing themselves were females, the European visitors could only imagine that they were witnessing outbursts of ‘lascivious, lewd and wanton’ behaviour. In fact, the relation between sacred cloth and the body of the (young) female was of a very different kind. Much of the misunderstanding about clothing and nudity directly resulted in implanting or reinforcing the false idea that Polynesian cultures actively promoted sexual liberty.
Finally, the third study in Part Two (chapter 11) brings us back to Samoa. It discusses how Europeans—the missionaries initially—misinterpreted the etymology of the Samoan word Papālagi used to denote the Europeans. The point at issue is the European view—but one attributed to the Polynesians—of the European visitors as ‘sky-bursters’, the missionaries claiming that this was the etymology of the word Papālagi. Here, as would happen again later with Gananath Obeyesekere’s interpretation, a particular Eurocentric ideology based on Christian theological concepts produced a schema that was then projected onto a falsely constructed ‘Polynesian’ worldview, resulting in a gross ethnocentric misinterpretation. It is deeply ironic that it is in fact quite possible that the word Papālagi referred initially to ‘cloth’ and was coined in the context of the first exchanges of cloth, during the earliest encounters (between Tongans and the Dutch), as a recent study by two linguists has suggested (Geraghty and Tent 2001). And this etymological hypothesis refers us back to the theme of the preceding chapter: gifts of cloth, by both parties, played a central role in European/Polynesian first contacts.

The first exchanges of cloth and other goods produced a reciprocal illusion about the nature of the Other. For the Europeans, Polynesians were ‘treacherous partners in barter’; for the Polynesians, Europeans were linked to the spiritual world of ‘atua’ things and entities. Indeed, this book could have borrowed its title from a paper written years ago by the late French anthropologist Daniel de Coppet: ‘First barter, double illusion’. De Coppet’s article (1973) described the 16th-century arrival of the Spaniards in the Solomon Islands, the first barter, and called for an anthropology of ceremonial exchanges in past and present Melanesian social organisations to be developed. May this book also pay homage to his memory.

2. The origin of Western misconceptions about Samoan adolescent sexuality

My second reason for writing this book is quite different. The anthropological field of Samoan studies has gone through a rather agitated period during the last twenty years in the wake of the so-called ‘Mead-Freeman’ debate. Numerous arguments and counter-arguments have been exchanged about the validity of Margaret Mead’s assertion, published in her first book Coming of Age in Samoa (1928), that the Samoan ethos of the 1920s implicitly favoured sexual freedom in pre-marital sexual relations (Mead 1928; Freeman 1983, 1999; Tcherkézoff 2001a). The debate has had some beneficial consequences, and some much less so. Among the latter, there was a quite unfortunate side effect: a Western misconception about the historical transformations in the fa’aSāmoa (‘Samoan
customary’) social regulations concerning sexuality. In particular, an unexpected extension of the debate touched upon reconstructing pre-Christian Samoa: it immediately fell back into the two-centuries old Western cliché about unrestrained ‘traditional Polynesian sexuality’.

Derek Freeman’s criticisms in addressing Mead’s book—factually well-grounded when addressing specific contexts of Samoan social life—were advanced within an unacceptable framework of quasi-sociobiology, anti-culturalism and methodological individualism (Tcherkézoff 2001b, 2001c). Freeman, writing in 1983, had no hesitation in condemning the entire disciplinary field of social and cultural anthropology, from Durkheim and Boas through to post-modernism, and, predictably, most of the professional anthropological community were outraged and replied with every possible argument that they could muster. But the numerous reviews highly critical of Freeman’s book that appeared through the 1980s and 1990s neglected to clarify one issue: a salutary opposition to Freeman’s model did not require a defence of Mead’s ethnographical account of Samoa. Mead’s account appears flawed by many instances of misinterpretation when it is set against more detailed ethnography relating to the Samoan representations of gender and sexuality (Tcherkézoff 2003b: 277-442).

Among the authors who opposed Freeman’s thesis, several tried to adopt an historical approach. Eleanor Leacock (1987) and Lowell Holmes (1987) particularly, in brief accounts, and James Côté (1994, 1997) in more extended works, claimed that Mead’s statements about the ‘extensive tolerance’ and ‘great promiscuity’ of ‘pre-marital sex relations’ in Samoa in 19265 are validated, at least partly, from what is known of the distant past. According to these authors, it is well established, from early missionaries’ observations, that pre-Christian Polynesian cultures largely admitted ‘free sexuality’—and sometimes ‘institutionalised’ it—for the adolescents and even, in some contexts, for all the adults. This terminology is applied to the Samoan case by Côté (1994: 76-7), a psychologist and sociologist whose knowledge of Samoa is solely derived from the writings of missionaries and early ethnographers (John Williams’s journal of 1830-32 and all the post-1850 literature). Leacock also based her remarks on these writings. Holmes had done fieldwork in Samoa long before this debate, but he mainly studied the chiefs’ system and not the Samoan representations of gender and sexuality. Other authors have referred to this 19th-century literature as well (Shankman 1996, 2001, n.d.; Mageo 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001). In some cases we see that the point of view is more balanced. A thorough examination of these sources would require a more detailed discussion than I am able to undertake here (Tcherkézoff 2003b: 307n., 391n.).

5 I quote from Mead’s reports written in the field, in early 1926, which formed the basis of the generalisations that she would make a year later in the introductory and concluding chapters of her book on Samoa published in 1928; see references in Tcherkézoff (2001b: note 22).
But, generally speaking, too much attention has in the past been given to the opinions expressed by the 19th-century observers, and not enough attention to the ethnographic data found in these sources. A detailed study of the relevant data shows that, in spite of the opinions, interpretations and final remarks proffered by these observers, all the ceremonies and local regulations described in this literature point overwhelmingly towards a strict enforcement of pre-marital virginity, including in families of low rank, for the whole period from Williams’s arrival in 1830 up until the 1930s (Tcherkézoff 2003b: 345-442). As for the opinions and decisive judgements that we find in this literature, we know how much the missionaries and early ‘consuls’ were themselves biased by certitudes which they derived from their reading of the early voyagers’ accounts. As I have undertaken an analysis of the post-1830/1850 literature on Samoa elsewhere (ibid.), my aim here will be to clarify the issues raised by the 18th- and early 19th-century writings which are the source of all subsequent misinterpretations.

Since Côté’s 1994 book aimed primarily at providing a general overview of the whole Mead-Freeman debate, it was widely circulated and welcomed by a number of supportive reviewers. Besides presenting the various opponents and their arguments about the validity of Mead’s conclusions for the 20th century, Côté devotes no less than three chapters (4 to 6), totalling fifty pages, to a historical analysis of Samoan sexual rules and practices in which he upholds the claim of a free-sex pre-Christian Samoa, presenting it to a relatively large audience. For Côté, the contemporary Samoan attitude of valuing pre-marital virginity for all women can only be the result of missionary influence, because free sexuality undoubtedly prevailed in earlier times. (The only exception that Côté and other supporters of Mead’s analysis recognised, as Mead also did, was the case of the ‘taupou, the daughters of high chiefs’, whose virginity was severely guarded). Côté writes:

From these many accounts [by the missionaries who constantly referred to Samoan ‘promiscuity’], there can be little doubt that sexual behaviour in Samoa before it was Christianized was more casual for virtually everyone, including young females. The denial of this by Freeman and some contemporary Samoans can be understood in terms of the concerted efforts of missionaries and the local pastors to create, and then maintain, a hegemony of Victorian sexual values and practices (1994: 82).

But Côté goes further and also raises the issue of the early voyagers’ writings. He quotes Robert Williamson (1939: 156) who, at the beginning of the 20th century, on Seligman’s instructions, wrote vast treatises on Polynesia based entirely on the literature—as Côté does now on a smaller scale (unfortunately these treatises by Williamson [1924, 1933] are still considered to be a great scholarly achievement and a reliable source):
Finally, Williamson (1939/1975) carried out an extensive review of all of the early accounts of Polynesian cultures … With respect to premarital sex in general, he said that in Samoa:

‘According to Turner and Brown [early missionaries], chastity … was more a name than a reality … D’Urville says that girls were entirely free to dispose of their persons till married, and Lapérouse tells us that girls were, before marriage, mistresses of their own favours, and their complaisance did not dishonour them’ (p. 156) (Côté 1994: 80; my emphasis).

Through Williamson, Côté is thus calling on, in addition to the missionaries’ writings, early voyagers’ accounts of the ‘South Seas’, namely those of Dumont d’Urville and Lapérouse.

Côté seems unaware of how much these early French voyagers’ views of Polynesian women, whether Tahitian, Marquesan or Samoan, conformed to a preconceived template from the time that Bougainville’s myth of the ‘New Cythera’ took hold. The misconception started after the French ‘discovery’ of Tahiti in 1768 and became ‘common knowledge about the South Seas’ as early as 1775 in all European capitals (Tcherkézoff in press 1). It still played a major role a hundred and fifty years later in the choices made by various publishers for the designs of the book cover of the successive editions of Mead’s work on Samoan adolescence (Tiffany 2001). Some of the strongest evidence for a generalised bias is the recurrence of a rhetorical dualism throughout those accounts, from the 1770s until the 1950s. On the one hand, the Polynesian women are always ‘as beautiful as Venus’, ‘of a very fair skin, almost white’, and described (after 1769) as customarily raised only to master the ‘art of love’. On the other hand, the Melanesian women are said to be ‘ugly’ and are described only as hard workers at the service of men (see Jolly 1992, 1997a, 1997b, n.d.). This rhetoric had long been at work in European narratives as part of the broader stereotype that devalued all peoples of ‘dark skin’ and that invented the ‘white Polynesians’ long before the word ‘Melanesia’ was coined by Dumont d’Urville to discriminate the ‘black race in Oceania’ from the ‘coppery race’. Such rhetorical dualism can be traced as far back as 1595 (Tcherkézoff 2003a).

Côté is right: Lapérouse and Dumont d’Urville did write that ‘girls were entirely free … till married’, and Williamson drew his conclusions from the two French voyagers’ accounts. But the only statement that really needs to be made is that these two French accounts of 1787 and 1838 constitute the origin of the Western misconception of Samoan adolescent sexuality. With them begins the Western myth which will continue with the missionaries, then with E.S.C. Handy and Mead, up until the contemporary proponents of Coming of Age in Samoa. But the genesis of the Western myth about Samoan adolescence was already itself the result of previous misinterpretations published after the ‘discovery’ of Tahiti (1767–68) and Hawaii (1777).
Besides the problem of his lack of awareness of the hegemonic Western myth about a sexually liberated Polynesia—a myth which has biased all French observations in Polynesia from 1769 to the 1850s—Côté’s allusive reference to Lapérouse’s and Dumont d’Urville’s generalising conclusions about sexual freedom is certainly not sufficiently grounded in empirical fact to permit a valid conclusion to be drawn from the voyagers’ narratives. We need to look more closely at the available literature. Instead of being satisfied with quoting some brief conclusions arrived at by two early observers, we must look in detail at the facts actually described that led these two observers to form these conclusions; and we must also look exhaustively at the writings of all the other early observers, from the earliest contact with Samoan people in 1722 until the late 1830s, after which the missionaries were firmly established and the arrival of commercial boats was a common occurrence in Apia harbour. On what actual observations did the two French navigators base their conclusions? And what were the conclusions of the other travellers who navigated the Samoan waters before and after these French captains?

The game of short quotations taken out of context can be a never-ending source of conflict. What should we do with this other conclusion arrived at by another French captain? Gabriel Lafond de Lurcy stayed in Samoa, mainly in Apia, in 1831 (before any missionary influence could be established) and wrote few years later:

The [Samoan] women were the joyous children of nature described with such charm by Bougainville and Lapérouse. All seemed to suggest that they would be found with little virtue, but my task as a historian forces me to add that the only favours they accorded our seductive lovelaces on board were inconsequential frustrations (Lafond de Lurcy 1845, quoted in Richards 1992: 38).

Instead of bandying about short quotations taken only from the conclusions of the travellers, let us try to find out what these travellers had actually been able to see when they arrived in Samoan waters. The passages mentioning a female presence must not be taken in isolation from the rest: the first encounters at sea, the first exchanges of gifts, the first misunderstandings, the first acts of violence… Detailed study of the context of Lapérouse’s and Dumont d’Urville’s stays in Samoa will show precisely how this European misconception of Samoan sexuality arose.

As the Samoan case illustrates what happened on many other Polynesian islands, this study of the early European visits to Samoa is also part of the larger work of unveiling the origins of the Western myth of unrestrained Polynesian sexuality and how the myth was constructed. And the study of the Samoan discovery of Europeans and of the ceremonial and violent acts which the Samoans devised for this encounter is a part of the wider comparative study
of the pan-Polynesian discovery of Europeans, a study which aims to elucidate the various offerings—including the sexual offerings—and acts of violence that were enacted by the Polynesians in these first contacts with Europeans.