

Chapter 4

A Reconsideration of the Role of Polynesian Women in Early Encounters with Europeans: Supplement to Marshall Sahlins' Voyage around the Islands of History

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Europeans have been losing their way in the Pacific from the beginning when early explorers made up for navigational errors by claiming inhabited islands as new discoveries. Never mind that the islanders had simultaneously discovered the explorers, no doubt with a fair bit of despair and surprise, but since it took years for islanders to learn the tiny scratches that the visitors called writing, the European claims had a head start in the history books.

(Aiavao 1994)

Je n'ai jamais pu concevoir comment et de quel droit une nation policée pouvait s'emparer d'une terre habitée sans consentement de ses habitants.

(Marchand 1961, 253)

Ethnohistorical work on first and subsequent early encounters between Polynesians and Europeans remained focused on particular archipelagoes, which has meant that comparative hypotheses spanning the entire Polynesian region have not emerged. Moreover, it has been conducted mainly in eastern Polynesia (including Aotearoa), thus leaving aside the western part of the region.¹ In this chapter I examine early encounters in Samoa, from western Polynesia, and also reconsider the Tahitian case, from eastern Polynesia, thus building a comparison of the nature of these early encounters across the region.

The focus of the chapter is the apparent sexual offers that women made to the newcomers. If we go back to a number of journals written during the early voyages which have still not been studied in as much detail as they deserve, namely La Pérouse's journal and, for Bougainville's expedition, those of Nassau and Fesche,² we can see that a crucial aspect of these apparent sexual offers –

the “girls’ very young” age and their “weeping” – has been overlooked. We shall see that it was not a matter of women “offering their favours” but a forced presentation and, indeed, that those who were being presented to the French visitors were not “women” but girls.

In order to further ethnohistorical knowledge of the so-called “first contacts” in this part of the Pacific, we must first of all deconstruct the Western hegemonic view of Polynesian society, based on the official narratives of voyages and encounters. This pervasive discourse has meant that for more than two centuries the Polynesian perspective on such experiences – how Polynesians endured relations with Europeans and their own interpretations of the encounters – was occluded. Moreover, the exclusively masculinist vision of these episodes, the collective narrative voice of the captains and naturalists, had effectively silenced the visions and voices of Polynesian women.

This chapter will address this issue through a specific dimension of such encounters. It will attempt to recover and reveal the painful process of coercion that some Polynesian young girls had to endure when meeting Europeans for the first time. Fesche wrote in 1768 that this was an “operation.” It was, in fact, the same “ordeal” that was customary in Samoa when young girls were married to high chiefs (Pritchard 1866). But in their forced presentation to the Europeans the girls were apparently overwhelmed with the fear that the newcomers inspired. It was pain and fear that made the girls weep. This occurred in 1768 in Tahiti, in 1787 in Samoa and, elsewhere as well, even if the evidence is much more scanty, in Aotearoa in 1772, and in Tonga and the Marquesas in 1791.

In a lecture given in Paris in 1981, Sahlins started peeling back the layers of Eurocentrism covering Hawaiian history. He hypothesised that, contrary to what these early voyagers had thought, it was not “sexual hospitality” offered to male travellers. Rather, said Sahlins, it was a transposition of a mythical and social schema: “theogamy” (marriage with the gods) and hypergamy (marrying-up with a chief). The aim was to procreate powerful children and to secure new kinds of powers. Sahlins had found in Diderot’s (1964 [1796]) text, entitled *Supplement to Bougainville’s Voyage*, a first expression of that hypothesis,³ and he thus entitled his lecture “Supplement to Captain Cook’s Voyage,” published later as chapter 1 of his *Islands of History* (Sahlins 1985).⁴

A further dimension to this mythical and social scheme now needs to be examined for other parts of Polynesia. Why, in Samoa and in Tahiti, did the females who were presented to the first European male visitors have to be so young? Why were they weeping? The aim of this chapter is to consider these questions about early sexual encounters through a critical rereading of the journals kept during the Polynesian visits of the European voyages and of the official accounts in light of more recent ethnographic knowledge about Polynesian cosmology. Evidence of the “very young age” of all the “women” presented is

assembled and discussed in this chapter. Overlooked passages in some of the journals clearly show that the girls must have been virgins. The fact that the Samoan and Tahitian girls were very young and were virgins raises the possibility that this was the case everywhere: similar scenes, briefly noted by voyagers, which occurred in Tonga and the Marquesas tend to confirm this. In the last section of the chapter, hypotheses will be considered as to why Polynesian chiefs and elders chose to present their very young and apparently virgin daughters to Europeans. A plausible explanation involves the Polynesian ideology of the process of procreation, shared by men and women, which attributed a more certain intensity to the sacredness of the first child, conceived by a female of high rank where the union was theogamous or hypergamous.

We shall see that the girls were obviously not eager to play their role in this scheme, enforced by the chiefs. Indeed the girls presented to the Europeans sometimes had to be dragged forcibly and held firmly by adults. Some of the Europeans observed this and wrote about it in their journals. But no mention of their reluctance made its way into the official voyage narratives that were published first in Paris and then in London (Bougainville 1771, 1772; Cook 1773). These accounts immediately established an official, and ultimately unquestioned, view of the encounters with Polynesians: one saturated by images of peace and love, of happiness and plenty.

The new evidence that will be presented here suggests that the Western construct of Polynesian societies as island paradises, where sexual freedom was the norm in adolescence and where young girls and young women were sexually accommodating, must be radically revised. This is a construct largely built, as we shall see, on the male fantasies and Eurocentric misreadings of early French visitors to the region, and then revisited and recycled from the same masculine, Eurocentric perspective in centuries to come.

Western “Knowledge” About Pre-Christian Samoan and Tahitian “Customs” Relating to Adolescence and Marriage

Samoa

The very first Europeans to set foot on Samoan soil were French, the officers and crew of La Pérouse’s expedition. The date was December 1787. “Observations” were made over two days (December 10 and 11) by various officers, and La Pérouse put these together in his journal. Apart from many notes about material culture, the report describing the behaviour of the inhabitants insisted on two aspects. The Samoan men were “ferocious barbarians” because, on the second day, they “massacred” a dozen French men who wanted only to “peacefully barter” some goods and to fill up casks with fresh water. The women, on the other hand, gained the admiring approval of the French visitors. Even after the “massacre,” La Pérouse noted:

Among a fairly large number of women I noticed two or three who were very pretty and who [one] could have thought had served as a model for the charming drawing of the Present Bearer of Cook's third voyage,⁵ their hair was adorned with flowers ... their eyes, their features, their movement spoke of gentleness whereas those of the men depicted ferocity and surprise. In any one sculptor[']s study the latter would have been taken for Hercules and the young women for Diana, or her nymphs (La Pérouse 1995, 412–3).

La Pérouse's bias in favour of the women is explained by the sexual encounters that occurred during the stay and to which the French captain refers in his conclusion on the "customs" of the Samoans:

Whatever navigators who preceded us might say, I am convinced that at least in the Navigators Islands girls are mistresses of their own favours before marriage, their complaisance casts no dishonour on them, and it is more likely that when they marry they are under no obligation to account for their past behaviour. But I have no doubt that they are required to show more restraint when they are married (1995, 420).

After a mere two days of encounters on land – and only a day in which peaceful encounters were possible – La Pérouse, without being able to understand a single word of the local language, had formed an opinion about the Samoan customs governing adolescence and marriage! Of course, he had already certain preconceptions of the ways of the "Indians" in that part of the Pacific through his reading of Bougainville's and Cook's accounts of Tahiti and neighbouring islands.

A careful reading of the succession of events described in La Pérouse's journal (Tcherkézoff 2004a, 28–67) reveals the only scenes that La Pérouse and/or his officers could have seen and participated in. The first occasion was when a Samoan crowd gathered on the shore, and from which the French soldiers tried to keep at a distance while the seamen were filling the casks. The second involved one or two "visits" to a village during which some of the French were taken inside a house, where they were asked to have intercourse with a young girl.

Limited as his experience of Samoan culture was, La Pérouse's opinion – condensed in these concluding sentences that abruptly summarise the upbringing and the rules of behaviour applying to Samoan girls – became an accepted part of Western anthropological "knowledge" about Polynesia. A century and a half later, in a vast compilation of Polynesian customs, which developed into several treatises – standard works of reference for any student of Polynesia – Williamson (1924, 1933, 1939), who had been instructed by Seligman to gather all the information available on this part of the Pacific, quoted that same sentence (from the 1797 publication of La Pérouse's journal) in order to characterise the absence

of “chastity” in pre-Christian Samoa (Williamson 1939, 156). And then, in the 1980s, when the heated debate initiated by Freeman (1983) focused on Mead’s 1926 fieldwork dealing with Samoan adolescence and her conclusions in *Coming of Age in Samoa* (Mead 1928; Tcherkézoff 2001a, 2001b, 2001c), one of the champions of Mead’s views called on La Pérouse as a witness:

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 ... Lapérouse tells us that girls were, before marriage, mistresses of their own favors, and their complaisance did not dishonor them” (p. 156).

... From these many accounts, there can be little doubt that sexual behavior 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 (Côté 1994, 80–2).

Tahiti

It so happens that, twenty years earlier, in Tahiti very similar scenes had been played out, and these were similarly absorbed into the Western canons about Tahitian customs. On only the second or third day of their Tahitian visit (7 or 8 April 1768), a small group of French officers (we can identify three of them from the journals) told their captain, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, that they had been “offered” sex with a “young girl” in the chiefly household that they had visited. Bougainville recorded this in his journal, and in his book of 1771, famous throughout Europe, he repeated this almost without alteration: “several Frenchmen” had told him what kind of “hospitality” they had enjoyed, “in the custom of this island.” He immediately drew this generalisation: “we are offered all the young girls” (Bougainville 1966 [1771], 194–5; 2002, 63). He later reflected upon this extraordinary society that had clearly remained as it was in Eden, untouched and spared the consequences of the Fall: Tahitian girls were “as was Eve before her sin” (as his companion Fesche expressed it; see my section below “Tahitian Facts: The Scenes of April 7–9”). Notably, Bougainville spoke of “the young girls.”

A close study of the journals written by the members of Bougainville’s expedition (Tcherkézoff 2004b, 114–239) shows how the Frenchmen immediately imagined that this kind of behaviour had always been the local “custom” among Tahitians. The Frenchmen, like many early European visitors to Polynesian

islands, could not imagine that they were perceived as not-entirely-human creatures and even as envoys from the realm of the gods (Tcherkézoff 2004a, 109–53). They thought that they were received merely as voyagers to whom “hospitality” was offered.⁶ The Frenchmen had no conception that the way in which the girls behaved toward them was extraordinary.

They were also blind – and how strange this seems given the scenes they were witnessing – to the fact that the girls were forcibly presented by adults. They were apparently deeply convinced that, among people who had remained in a “state of nature,” females engaging in sexual acts were only following the impulses of their “female nature.”⁷ And that here in this society they were “free” to follow those impulses.

The misconceptions of the voyagers meant that Polynesian societies appeared to scholars of the time to grant more freedom to women, and hence they were labelled more “civilised,” in contrast to “Melanesian” societies where sexual presentations during the first encounters had not been staged. There, the women’s absence led the voyagers to believe that the local women had been forbidden by their fathers and husbands to meet the newcomers and, hence, that they were more dominated by men than in Polynesia. The social position of Melanesian women was therefore thought to be “lower,” and Melanesian societies were labelled more “barbarian” and “backward.” Of course, the European – and exclusively male – assessment as to the “progress” of women was restricted to looking at (and misinterpreting) their roles in relation to men’s roles: division of work tasks, access to “chiefly” positions, and apparent sexual behaviour.⁸

Everything that the French saw during this encounter in Tahiti they understood as being an integral part of the local way of life. They concluded that, during Tahitian adolescence, “girls were free” to follow their desires and thus to “offer their favours.” From then on, up until the present, commentators in Europe and the Western world could write that, “as is well known,” Polynesian females – at least before marriage – were “free to offer their favours” and were quite “willing” to do so. One of a host of examples is Irving Goldman’s *Ancient Polynesian Society* (1970). The book is a classic example of a long and well-researched study, its subject, quite unrelated to sexuality, being social organisation and social hierarchies. It is therefore all the more significant to find in it this sentence, given as a universally accepted fact: “In Polynesia, where pre-marital sexual freedom was everywhere established custom ...” (1970, 564). Such statements, offered *en passant*, can be found throughout the historical and anthropological literature on the Pacific (Tcherkézoff 2004b, 455–510).

Samoan Facts: The Scene Observed by La Pérouse

Internal distinction: Description and interpretation

La Pérouse's narrative gives us some clues about the scenes in which the Samoan girls made the French believe that they were "mistresses of their own favours." In the conclusion to his narrative, La Pérouse adds a passage which, given his typically cautious style, he was clearly hesitant about including in his official journal:⁹

As the story of our voyage can add a few pages to that of mankind I will not omit pictures that might shock in any other kind of book and I shall mention that the very small number of young and pretty island girls I referred to soon attracted the attention of a few Frenchmen who in spite of my orders endeavoured to establish links of intimacy with them; since our Frenchmen's eyes revealed their desires they were soon discovered; some old women negotiated the transaction, an altar was set up in the most prominent hut, all the blinds were lowered, inquisitive spectators were driven off; the victim was placed within the arms of an old man who exhorted her to moderate her sorrow for she was weeping (*qui lexortoit à moderer sa douleur*,¹⁰ *car elle pleuroit*); the matrons sang and howled during the ceremony, and the sacrifice was consummated in the presence of the women and the old man was acting as altar and priest. All the village's women and children were around and outside the house, lightly raising the blinds and seeking the slightest gaps between the mats to enjoy this spectacle. Whatever navigators who preceded us might say, I am convinced that at least in the Navigators Islands girls are mistresses of their own favours before marriage, their complaisance casts no dishonour on them ... (1995, 419–20).

If the last sentence – which unerringly made its way into the twentieth-century literature as we have seen – is a typical example of European over-interpretation and over-generalisation, the preceding lines tell us what La Pérouse actually saw or at least what he had been told by some of his officers.

Ethnographic analysis and extrapolating backward

The "girls" and the "sacrifice": Comparison with Samoan ceremonies of the period 1830–1850

In La Pérouse's entire narrative of his stay in the Samoan archipelago, the only actual description he gives of a sexual act is this "sacrifice" in the "prominent hut." We have seen that this incident concerned only, as he says, "the very small number of young and pretty island girls I referred to." As to these "young girls" and the "sacrifice," the description is self-explanatory. The "victims" were only "girls." Each girl was "weeping." She was presented by the "old

women,” and then “placed within the arms of an old man” (a “chief-orator” or *tulafale* most probably) who spoke with her. She was apparently held by the orator during the “operation,” since this “old man” is said by La Pérouse to have himself been the “altar” on which the “sacrifice” was performed. She was presented in “the most prominent hut,” which seems to indicate a high stone base, which identifies the hut as the house of the main chief. All the blinds were lowered, and the women “sang and howled.”

What La Pérouse describes corresponds to the enactment of a nineteenth-century Samoan marriage ceremony, where the young bride was a virgin and was ceremonially deflowered. Two types of ceremony have been recorded: one (see below) where the bride was presented on the sacred ground of the village, in front of the whole community, and deflowered by an orator (of the groom’s family), and one where she was deflowered in the house, with the blinds lowered (personal notes, 1984), without any clear indication of whether the act was performed by an orator (*tulafale*) or the bridegroom (see discussion in Tcherkézoff 2003a, 350–70). Let me quote some passages from the first detailed descriptions available, dating from the early 1830s (the time of the first missionary visit) and the 1850s.

John Williams’ account of 1830–32 tells us how girls could be “dragged by force” and held by older people while the operation was performed, particularly “if the female objects to submit ...” The bridegroom was seated in front of his group, on the village’s central, sacred ground (*malae*):

The female now prepares herself to meet him which in general is attended with considerable delay. The preparation is mostly attended with furious crying & bitter wailing on the part of the young woman while her friends are engaged in persuading her that what is about to take place will not hurt her. She at length consents & is taken by the hand by her elder brother. ... If she does not consent to go she is dragged by force to him. She is dressed [with] scented oil ... finely wrought mats edged with red feathers ... on arriving immediately in front of her husband she throws off her mat and stands before him perfectly naked. He then ruptures the Hymen of the female with two fingers of his right hand [when everyone sees the blood, the women of the girl’s family] throw off their mats & commence dancing naked. ... If the female objects to submit to the above ceremony which is sometimes the case persons are employed to hold her—some to hold her down others to hold her arms others her legs. She is thus held in the lap of another person while the husband ruptures the Hymen. On some occasions the parties bed immediately after the ceremonies are concluded (Williams 1984, 255–6).

Thus, these final sentences of Williams’ account likely describe the procedure that was used for the “marriages” with the French in 1787.¹¹ We can see that

this marriage ceremony took the form of that described later by Williams, one in which “the female objects to submit.” If Samoan girls routinely expressed fear and hesitation in a marriage with a Samoan husband, we can easily imagine the terror of those girls who were brought to be married to such unknown and awesome creatures.

La Pérouse’s reference to the “matrons singing and howling” almost certainly corresponds to what William T. Pritchard (son of a pastor and briefly “consul”) observed in the 1850s: at the crucial moment the girl stood naked, greeted by the cheers of the crowd, “which were acknowledged only by her tears”:

All her mats were taken off by the old duennas;¹² who then slowly paraded her, naked and trembling, before the silent gaze of the multitude, then she was seated, with her legs crossed, on a snow-white mat spread on the ground, in the centre of the square, or *malae*. There the chief approached her and silently seated himself also cross-legged, close to and directly facing her. Then was the critical moment. Though perhaps more than a thousand spectators looked on, of all ages and both sexes, not a word[,] not a sound was heard. Then, placing his left hand on the girl’s right shoulder, the chief inserted the two forefingers of his right hand into the *vulva*, while the two old duennas held her round the waist from behind. In a moment, the chief’s arm was held up, the two fingers only extended, when her anxious tribe watched eagerly for the drops of blood to trickle down the sight of which was the signal for vehement cheers ...

Once more, the old duennas loud in songs that told of rivers flowing fast water no banks could restrain, seas no reefs could check – figurative allusions to the virgin blood of the chaste bride – once more those stern old duennas led their trembling and bashful girl, still naked as before, to the gaze of the cheering and excited multitude, to exhibit the blood that trickled down her thighs. Cheers of applause greeted her, which were acknowledged only by the tears which silently stole down her cheeks.¹³

“The blinds lowered”: Comparison with ethnography of the 1930s to 1980s

La Pérouse’s remark that “all the blinds were lowered” is also very important. As far as I know from my discussions with Samoans in the 1980s, there were only two cases where an activity would be conducted inside a house with all the blinds lowered. One was a defloration ceremony (some of the old people remembered such ceremonies from the 1930s). The other was a “meeting with the spirits” (*fono ma aitu*), when chiefs of the village faced with making an important and difficult decision, and needing some superhuman inspiration,

met at night and silently. In all other cases, even when there is a storm, Samoans have told me that some of the blinds – or at least one – should remain up because, if all are lowered, “it becomes very dangerous.” It seemed to me, from their tone and the way they suddenly changed to speaking in a hushed voice, that having all of the blinds lowered enabled the “spirits” (*aitu*) to enter the house. This, therefore, posed a great danger to the people staying there. (Even as late as 1982, in several places I was told that spirits can steal the soul of a sleeping person, particularly the soul of a baby).

Although paradoxical, it should be understood that a Samoan house that is closed and has all its blinds down is in fact open to the spirits’ movement, because the social “sacred ring” of posts is then not operative. The “sacred ring,” which gives the house its significance in terms of genealogical and territorial history, is the circle of posts supporting the roof. When there is a formal meeting, each chief leans against one of the posts of the circle, sitting cross-legged. Chiefs of lesser rank sit in between posts and are called precisely that: “in-between-posts chiefs.” When the blinds are up, the “space between the posts” (*va* – the word is also used in the general sense of “social relation”) is significant. Each man must then choose his point of entry into the house and his sitting position according to his rank in relation to the ranks of those already seated. From these elements we can hypothesise that, when *all of the blinds* are down, the social circle – which is the “sacred circle” defining every Samoan social context of belonging to a group (Tcherkézoff 2003a: ch. 2, 2005a) – is no longer active, no longer socially efficacious. The house reverts back to the “Night” (*Po*) side of the world, where the sources of life are located, but are hidden, and must be seized from the gods and the spirits. This communication with the “Night” side was necessary when a difficult decision needed to be made (by the council, the “meeting with the spirits”) – *and it was also necessary for a marriage*, at least if we take into consideration the hypothesis that, at the moment of defloration, a superhuman principle had to come into contact with the bride (see below, “Conclusion (II)”).¹⁴

The presence of the “women” and “very young girls”

At dawn on 11 December 1787, de Langle, one of La Pérouse’s officers, and about sixty men landed with their longboats at a village in a cove on the north coast. This is where the so-called “massacre” took place. La Pérouse stayed on board his ship, and later obtained the account of the survivors who managed to get back to the ships. His journal cites only the narrative of one of the officers who was with de Langle, a certain Vaujuas. Vaujuas reported that in the cove the same arrangements had been made as during the previous day’s watering expedition at which La Pérouse had been present:

We peacefully rolled out, filled and reloaded the water casks, the natives allowing themselves to be fairly well contained by the armed soldiers,

there were among them a certain number of women and very young girls [*femmes et filles très jeunes*] who made advances to us in the most indecent fashion, of which several people took advantage (La Pérouse 1995, 407).

The journal does not tell us how, exactly, the men “took advantage.” But, soon after, stones began to fly and the attack was launched.

These are Vaujuas’ only lines on the topic of sexual encounters. If we relate these lines to La Pérouse’s description of the “sacrifice,” we must conclude that the French only “took advantage” of the “advances” made by the young “girls.” We must therefore put forward the hypothesis that the “advances” made by the “women” were in fact only sexual gestures inviting the French to “take advantage” of the girls – we shall see that such was the case in Tahiti. If the Samoan women were really “offering” their own favours, there is no reason why the French would not have accepted them as well. And there is no reason why La Pérouse would not have mentioned it in his concluding pages and would have decided to mention only – with some hesitation – the sexual act with the young “girls.” Let us now move to Tahiti and the events of almost twenty years before.

Tahitian Facts: The Scenes of April 7–9 (According to Nassau and Fesche)

Nassau, April 7, 1768

When we compare the French journals and examine the dates of daily entries we find that the first “offering of girls” reported to Bougainville by his men occurred on April 7, the first full day the French spent on land. (On the previous day, Bougainville and a group of officers had made a brief first landing; see below). The Prince of Nassau, who had been with Chevalier d’Oraison, tells us that they were “keen to call on their chief”:

When I arrived at his home, they served us fruit, then the women offered me a young girl. The Indians surrounded me and each was eager to share with his eyes in the pleasure I was about to enjoy. The young girl was very pretty but European preconceptions require more mystery. An Indian used very singular means to further excite my desires. Happy nation that does not yet know the odious names of shame and scandal (Nassau 2002, 283).

We can note that a presentation, understood by the French as an “offering” (of a sexual gift), was made as soon as the French came on land. The adults were so keen for Nassau, as the apparent leader of the group, to be able to act his part that they tried to get him “excited” in a “very singular” way (of which we are told nothing more). Was this merely a matter of sexual “hospitality” staged by

the dominant males of the place for their visitors – with women fully participating (they were bringing in the girl)? The French assumed that it was, but they were blind to the exercise of masculine power, since for them these scenes only showed how in Tahitian society “women” were generally “free” to “follow their natural drives” (see quotations in Tcherkézoff 2004b, 169–72, 202–7, 223–39). But, even given the gendered complexities of the “offer,” a gift of sexual hospitality would surely not have involved rushing upon the new arrivals in this manner and trying to force them into accepting their offers. (See, too, the discussion below about the “signs” that the Tahitian adults made to the French to ensure that they understood what was expected of them).

All this was in vain. Nassau was struck by performance anxiety when he realised that he had to perform in a “public festival.” He had at first agreed to play his part and would have done so “had not,” as Fesche puts it, “the presence of the surrounding 50 Indians, through the effect of our prejudices, put the brake on his fierce desires” (2002, 257).

Nassau reported that in the chief’s house which he visited, the “young girl” was “offered,” and that this offer was made by “the women.” He does not say that the women offered their own favours. Nassau also tells us that there was a crowd who “surrounded” him and the girl. This led the French to believe, as they noted in their journals and as Bougainville noted in his official voyage account, that “Tahitian custom” required, or at least allowed, the performance of the sexual act to occur “publicly” and even made of it a “public festival.” The French would continue to interpret any event involving their own presence in terms of the imagined *everyday* practices of Tahitian life. They did not for a moment suppose that all of this might be quite exceptional or, at least, occasioned specifically by families ceremonially giving their young daughters in marriage to powerful strangers imagined as akin to high chiefs.

Fesche on April 7

Together in the chief’s house with Nassau and Chevalier d’Oraison was the young adventurer Fesche, who had volunteered to join Bougainville’s voyage of circumnavigation. Even if it is likely that his narrative was polished in editing by de Saint-Germain, a professional writer who was also a member of the expedition, the events Fesche describes are too specific and out of tune with the European male imagination of the time to have been merely the product of a fantasy invented by de Saint-Germain (Taillemite 1968, 7; Tcherkézoff 2004b, 134–5).

Fesche begins with a summary of the first day:

The very day after we anchored, Mr de Bougainville went ashore accompanied by several officers; they were received by the chief who

accompanied them everywhere with a thousand demonstrations of friendship.

Fesche describes the meal, makes no mention of any presentation of females, and describes the “theft” of a pistol. He then goes on to relate the events of the next day:

The next day we went ashore, the chief brought back the pistol lost on the previous day and received gifts in exchange.

I shall outline facts that will appear to many to be falsehoods, but those who know me can be sure that what I shall report as having seen is absolutely correct ...

There were three of us, we go off with the intent of taking a walk escorted by a group of islanders, we arrive at a hut where we are welcomed by the master of the house, he firstly shows us his possessions, making us understand that he was waiting for his wives who were due to arrive shortly. We go together, he shows us the tree the bark of which is used to make the loin cloths they wear as their clothing and tells us the names of all that country's fruits. After some time spent strolling, we returned to his home where we found his wife and young girl aged 12 or 13. We are made to sit, they bring us coconuts and bananas, we are invited to eat, we conform to their wishes. We then see each one of them pick up a green branch¹⁵ and sit in a circle around us, one of those present took a flute from which he drew pleasant soft sounds and they brought a mat that they laid out on the open space and on which the young girl sat down.

All the Indians' gestures made us clearly understand what this was about, however this practice being so contrary to those established for us and wanting to be sure of it, one of us [Nassau¹⁶] goes up to the offered victim, makes her the gift of an artificial pearl that he attaches to her ear, and ventures a kiss, which was well returned. A bold hand led by love slips down to two new-born apples [*deux pommes naissantes*] rivals of each other and worthy like those of Helen to serve as models for cups that would be incomparable for their beauty and the attraction of their shape. The hand soon slipped and by a fortunate effect of chance, fell on charms still hidden by one of their cloths, it was promptly removed by the girl herself whom we saw then dressed as Eve was before her sin. She did more, she stretched out on the mat, struck the chest of the aggressor, making him understand that she was giving herself to him and drew aside those two obstacles that defend the entrance to that temple where so many men make a daily sacrifice.

The summons was very appealing and the athlete caressing her was too skilled in the art of fencing not to take her right away had not the presence of the surrounding 50 Indians, through the effect of our prejudices, put the brake on his fierce desires, but however great the ardour that drives you, it is very difficult to overcome so quickly the ideas with which you have been brought up. The corruption of our morals has made us discover evil in an act where these people rightly find nothing but good. It is only someone who is doing or thinks he is doing evil who fears the light. We hide in order to carry out such a natural action, they do it in public and often. Several Frenchmen, less susceptible to delicacy, found it easier, that same day, to shrug off these prejudices.

After some time spent in that hut, our eyes finally weary of looking and touching, we withdrew, the residents quite displeased at seeing us so reluctant to share the spoils and even telling us so. We walked to the place that had been chosen to set up a camp and a hospital (Fesche 2002, 257).

It should be noted that the girl was presented wearing a "loincloth," that is barkcloth, which shows that she had been intentionally dressed for a ceremony. (If she had just come from work in the garden, she would have had on a belt of leaves).

We can judge the girl's youth from the expression used to describe her breasts, together with Fesche's own assessment that she was "aged 12 or 13." And if, as Fesche says at the beginning, the man went to look for his "wives," it was only the young girl who was offered. If we are to believe Nassau and Fesche, the role of the "women" was in fact to tell the girl what she had to do (Nassau: "the women offered me a young girl," see above) and, by means of gestures, together with the other adults, to make the French understand what was involved (Fesche: "All the Indians' gestures made us clearly understand what this was about," see above).

In the following days: Bougainville and Nassau

One or two days later Bougainville himself received propositions. He does not give any details, but this does not prevent him from enthusing about Tahiti and its inhabitants. He pays a visit to the chief, Eriti, and notes in his journal:

We had to repay their visit in the afternoon. The chief offered me a woman from his household (*le chef m'a proposé une de ses femmes*),¹⁷ young and fairly pretty, and the whole gathering sang the wedding anthem. What a country! What a people! (2002, 66).

Here again the Tahitian woman was “young.” She could have been a daughter, even if Bougainville’s sentence can be taken to mean that he assumed that she was one of the chief’s wives. But the main point is that if she had been a wife, this proposal would have meant that the context was already one of “sexual commerce” where all women could be offered (see below). In that case there would not have been a circle of adults surrounding the scene and singing. The singing rather evokes the atmosphere of the solemn presentation as described by Nassau and Fesche.

During this same period of April 7 to 9, there was another encounter that Nassau related:

These Indians offered us women as being the objects they most cherished, undeniably these well deserved this distinction. They each in turn used all their charms to please us. Here is one example. I was strolling in a charming place, carpets of greenery, pleasant groves, the gentle murmur of streams inspired love in this delicious spot. I was caught there by the rain. I sheltered in a small house where I found six of the prettiest girls in the locality. They welcomed me with all the gentleness this charming sex can display. Each one removed her clothing, an adornment which is bothersome for pleasure and, spreading all their charms, showed me in detail the gracefulness and contours of the most perfect bodies. They also removed my clothing. The whiteness of a European body delighted them. They hastened to see whether I was made like the locals and pleasure quickened this research. Many were the kisses, many the tender caresses I received! Throughout this scene, an Indian was playing a tender tune on his flute. A crowd of others had lined up around the house, solely preoccupied with the spectacle. We were living amidst this gentle nation like allies and friends. The chief, the leading men constantly made us gifts (2002, 284).

The passage offers a perfect example, one of many that can be found in the journals kept during this voyage and in Bougainville’s narrative, of the young French visitors (Nassau and Fesche) only being able to see these cultural encounters from their masculine and Eurocentric perspective: the exchanges were between “us” (the French men) and the “Indians,” while the objects of exchange were “the women” (the “girls”).¹⁸ Their views apparently influenced Bougainville. Only naturalists like Commerson (or Forster with Cook), older men and eager to come up with theories about the whole society, stressed on the contrary what appeared to them to be the women’s agency and “freedom” in those sexual matters. Of course, it could not have been otherwise for these young French men. But later readers of Bougainville’s voyage narrative had no conception of the intercultural and gender issues involved here either and took Bougainville’s framing and interpretation of the encounters for accurate

“observation.” We see, too, how Nassau reduced the Tahitian perception of the advent of these strangers to their shores, and the kind of beings they were, to the arrival of mere “allies and friends.”

Here again, the “women” offered (see the first sentence: “Indians offered us women”) are in fact “girls,” when the description becomes precise. This is one of many examples of the way in which the European narrators of these early encounters with Polynesians, whether French or British, used the term “women” in their general commentaries and conclusions about sexual offers, while they specified “(young) girl(s)” in their descriptions of particular scenes, as Nassau does five lines later. The same goes for the question of Tahitian females taking the initiative in sexual encounters when we read in the general commentaries that “women” or “girls” were “offering themselves,” while in more precise descriptions we are told that they “were brought by” elders. We should also note Nassau’s implication at the beginning of the description that if the girls did “use their charms” to attract the Frenchmen, they did so “in turn” once they were “offered.” These more precise forms of expression about the conduct of these sexual offers are to be found in the journals and in the published accounts as well. But later, because commentators tend to use short quotations, only the more general passages from the accounts came to be remembered and quoted. *Thus the idea of “women” “offering themselves” concealed and replaced the descriptions of “young girls” forcibly “brought” to the Europeans by elders.*

We should also note that while this scene is being played out for the admiring Nassau “a crowd” has gathered “around the house” and throughout the whole episode a Tahitian man is in attendance, playing his flute. The fact that the Tahitian girls examined Nassau intimately – “to see whether I was made like the locals” – is also significant (see section below, “Conclusion (II)”).

“Tahitian Marriages” (Fesche)

Fesche, the only observer to give us specific details about the first sexual presentation of a young girl, also provides us with a summary that either takes this scene up again, adding a number of points, or combines it with other similar scenes at which he had been present or that other men had described to him.

Indeed, Fesche prides himself on describing “their marriages” for us. Like the rest of the French visitors, he of course knows nothing about how Tahitians might have conceived such marriages, the French only having stayed for ten days. At least, he admits straight away that he is only hypothesising. What is interesting for us is that he admits that he is relying only on the sexual offerings made to the French (see his text below). For that reason, we need to pay his account some attention. It is not an imaginary tale about Tahitian marriages, but the presentation of points in common between the several scenes of sexual presentation that were enacted for the benefit of the French.

The description provides an important piece of information that I shall comment upon in a later section, namely the performance of an “operation” that made the young girl “cry.” But first of all let us note two aspects, namely that the Tahitians tried to force the French to take action, and that the girl was still young and was “brought forward” by the adults. The Tahitian adults were surely following a definite strategy:

Fesche’s text

Their marriages are, I believe, made in public. I make this supposition on the basis of what happened to possibly two-thirds of the Frenchmen: the fathers and mothers who brought their girls [*amenaient leurs filles*], presented them to the one who pleased them, and urged them to consummate the task of marriage with them [*consommer l’oeuvre de mariage avec elle*]. The girl [*la fille*] struck the chest of the one to whom she was being offered, uttered a few words that expressed, from the meaning we have attributed to them,¹⁹ the surrender she was making of herself, lay down on the ground and removed her clothing. Several made a fuss when it came to the point [*Plusieurs faisaient des façons quand il s’agissait d’en venir au fait*], however they allowed themselves to be persuaded. During the operation [*Durant l’opération*], the islanders assisting²⁰ [with the operation], always present in large numbers, made a circle around them, holding a green branch, sometimes they threw one of their cloths over the actor,²¹ as in Cythera they covered the happy lovers with greenery. If one of them happened to have a flute, he would play it, others accompanied him singing couplets dedicated to pleasure.²² Once the operation was over, the girl would cry [*L’opération finie, la fille pleurait*], but would easily recover her composure and make a thousand caresses to her new spouse as well as to all those who had been witnesses.

There is some evidence that these are the same ceremonies as are used in their weddings; there may be some other formalities required, I believe this all the more readily because an officer from the *Etoile* to whom a young Indian girl had offered herself, but who was not favourably disposed, a Cytheran [Ahutoru], the same one who joined us on board to follow us in our travels, took the girl and showed him how he should act. If there were no other formalities than those for a marriage, he would not have acted in this way. Moreover, all they did for us can only be viewed as honours they wished to pay to strangers.

Married women are a model of faithfulness ... but those who are unmarried are free and prostitute themselves with whomever takes their fancy (Fesche 2002, 259–60).

A forced encounter

Fesche begins his passage by saying, “Their marriages are, I believe, made in public.” But let us go straight to the conclusion: seeing the officer’s difficulty, Ahutoru gave a demonstration of what had to be done. Fesche saw in this further confirmation that “marriage” (what he was really interested in was the act of intercourse) was performed in front of everyone.

But his remark about what Ahutoru did on this occasion is very useful. It confirms something that comes up on at least five occasions in the French accounts, namely that the Tahitians did everything they could to force the French to engage in sexual intercourse. These were the episodes (Tcherkézoff 2004b: ch. 5–6):

(1) the first contact at sea (April 5) involving two young girls “from thirteen to fourteen years old” who were presented in a canoe while the adults made gestures that clearly mimicked the act of intercourse (2) and (3) the presentation of “Venus” (the first Tahitian woman who went on board, an adolescent who was accompanying Ahutoru: April 6) and of “Helen” (the scene of April 7: Nassau caressed her breasts but found himself unable to go any further), where these two girls were brought forward by the adults or even the “elderly men.” Onlookers made explicit gestures, with one of them even using “very singular means” to attempt to arouse Nassau’s sexual interest (4) Nassau’s walk around the village, when on going into one of the houses he was surrounded, undressed and examined and touched intimately (see section above “In the following days: Bougainville and Nassau”) (5) the escapade of Bougainville’s cook (April 5 or 6), who experienced the same fate, but with less solicitude apparently (he swam to shore before the official landing was felt over, and once the examination had been made, he was pressed up against a girl, gestures being made to show what was expected of him – absolutely terrified, of course, he could do nothing at all).

On each of those occasions, the Tahitians wanted the French to perform the sexual act that they expected of them. This time, as Fesche describes it, Ahutoru also gave a practical demonstration. But Fesche only draws from the attitude taken by Ahutoru toward the officer an additional argument in support of the idea that Tahitian “marriages” always take place in this fashion, that is, “publicly.” And he sees the Tahitians’ attempt to extend this offer of “marriage” to the French merely as “honours they wished to pay to strangers” (or new “allies and friends,” as Nassau put it; see above).

The youth of the victims and the ceremonial framework

The generalisation made by Fesche suggests important elements in the forced presentations of young girls. The Frenchman speaks of “girls” and generalises by referring to “the fathers and mothers who brought their girls,” meaning,

therefore, that in every case the victim was young. It will be recalled that apart from the generalising expressions about “women” which merely express the fantasies of the Frenchmen, both of our French reporters (Nassau and Fesche), when they describe the exact situation of the first presentations, use only the words “girl” and “young girl.”

In every case the girl was brought forward by others. The Western image of young women adorned with flowers, living only for love and throwing themselves at unexpected voyagers, and only too delighted to have yet more opportunities for making love, is shattered by this account where Fesche generalises from what happened on April 7 and a number of other scenes that must have happened in the same way.

Moreover, we have seen that during these presentations of young girls to the French, the onlookers always formed a circle and held a “green branch” in their hand. From many concurring sources we know of the ritual role of these branches in Tahiti: they allowed a taboo to be set aside so that one could enter into contact with a superior (Tcherkézoff 2004b, 424–6). The formal, ceremonial aspect is quite clear.

And there is another element: a piece of *tapa* cloth might be thrown over the girl at the crucial moment. Therefore, it was not a question of voyeurism on the part of the audience with the aim of arousing collective sexual excitement. This further discredits the notion of the Tahitian taste for lovemaking performed “publicly.” It similarly calls into question the theory prevailing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which held that Tahitians made offerings to please the gods in the form of acts of human copulation performed in the open, so that they would be visible from the heavens (Moerenhout 1837; Handy 1927; see Tcherkézoff 2004b, 463–6, 474–7). But this gesture also points to something tangible. If we move forward in time and take into account more detailed Polynesian ethnography of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we invariably see that the fact of wrapping a person in *tapa* cloth is always a ritual gesture, whose aim it is to call down the presence of the sacred forces from the world of the gods onto the earthly stage and to give efficacy to their actions (Valeri 1985; Babadzan 1993, 2003; Tcherkézoff 2002, 2003c, 2004a: ch. 10).

The question of virginity in the French accounts: The girls’ very young age, deflowering and tears

Finally, a spectre haunts these texts: that of deflowering. The words for which I have added the original French version in Fesche’s description of “marriages” strongly imply something never explicitly stated, either in Bougainville’s official account or in any of the journals. Let us reiterate these elements: the likely age of the girls presented; phrases indicating that they “made a fuss” before proceeding to the awaited act; the fact that the girl “was crying,” and especially

the word “operation,” which in French as in English, when used in reference to the human body, implies some kind of serious surgical procedure. All of these things, when considered together, lead us to conclude that the sexual act offered to the visitor implied defloration.

We can see that Bougainville’s readers, who were presented with nothing but delightful and beguiling scenes and visions, had no conception that the young women of “New Cythera,” whose “only passion is love,” as Bougainville told them, were in fact – in the arms of these Frenchmen – not women gaily displaying their flower necklaces and their desires, but girls weeping: girls who were undergoing their first act of sexual intercourse. Only Fesche speaks of this directly. In the other accounts of the French stay in Tahiti, there is nothing to be found on the subject of defloration. However, one of Bougainville’s sentences, brief as it is, suddenly reveals that the officers and sailors had not hidden the truth from their captain. It was always, if we take Fesche’s generalisation as a guide or at least sometimes, the case that the girl brought forward and presented to the French was a virgin. If at least some members of the expedition had not so remarked to Bougainville, it would be difficult to see why, at the moment of his departure, he wrote, in reference to the peaceable character that seemed to him to typify Tahitian society,

... love, the only God to which I believe these people offer any sacrifices. Here blood does not run on the altars [presumably a reference to human sacrifices] or if sometimes it reddens the altar the young victim is the first to rejoice at having spilt it (2002, 72–3).

“Without Asking For Any Reward”: From Ritual to Sexual Commerce (Fesche)

Fesche was not only a keen observer of daily events. He also, like the others, made various generalisations and hypotheses. The main difference between Fesche’s method and that of Bougainville and the other officers is that he did not forget to include his observations when he was speculating or making general comments, and thus provides us some “ethnography” to reflect upon. We have seen the importance of this when we looked at his views on marriage. But we also need to consider some of his notes which, while they may seem unimportant, in fact lead us in the direction of a complete reconsideration of the historical record relating to sexual encounters at a pan-Polynesian level.

Fesche describes the funeral rites at which a number of the French were present. The corpse is kept for several days on a ceremonial stage, is rubbed with oil and receives other such attentions before being interred:

The women, no doubt out of propriety, weep abundantly, but several of the French who happened to be present at their ceremony easily caused this to be followed by most immoderate laughter through the signs and

propositions they were making to the prettiest of them, propositions that were accepted. Let one draw from this whatever conclusion one wishes (Fesche 2002, 261).

This is an interesting anecdote and it applies to numerous first contacts between Polynesians and Europeans. At the very beginning the European captains and officers who were received by the chiefs were astounded to discover that girls were being offered to them. So it did not take long before all the sailors and soldiers wished to receive the same treatment, and let it be known, as we see here.

Now, on the Polynesian side, this had different consequences. From that moment the Polynesians understood that these presentations of girls – which for them served a cosmological purpose, I believe – could also be used as a medium of commercial exchange. It was at that point that the men brought forward more girls, as well as women perhaps, and asked for objects in exchange. And then the women did this themselves. A key phrase in Fesche's narrative should be quoted here. Fesche first of all explains that married women do not grant their favours, but that "those who are unmarried are free and prostitute themselves with whomever takes their fancy, and so one can appreciate the kind of life most of the French led in this fortunate island" (2002, 260). We see again how the statement about the local ways and the rules regulating sexual behaviour rests solely on the interpretation that the French had made of the sexual relations they themselves had entered into with Tahitian women/girls. Fesche then immediately adds, "they gave themselves to us at first without asking for any reward, simply eager to give us some pleasure, but soon self-interest became their guide, they insisted on presents" (260). We can disregard Fesche's interpretation that the women/girls were "simply eager to give us some pleasure," but we should remember his observation that they made their overtures to the French "at first without asking for any reward." This remark leads us to make a distinction between two stages, something that up until now historical researchers have not done in their studies of the accounts of first sexual contacts.

The Frenchman also describes the way in which, once the first days of the encounter had passed, the Tahitians took all that they could when they went aboard the French ships: "These people have minds that are very disposed toward theft, they are the cleverest scoundrels I know" (Fesche 2002, 262). Some of them came dressed in many layers of *tapa* and hid the objects that they took underneath the layers, but they were sometimes caught out when they left:

Others, aware of the special esteem we had for women, brought several very pretty ones on board who offered themselves to the first come. An elderly man, held in special respect by them as far as we could tell, led three of them into Mr de Bougainville's room and urged him most pressing to enjoy their favours. Mr de Bougainville resisted but it was

impossible for him not to be distracted to the point where, while they were there, an achromatic glass was stolen from him (Fesche 2002, 262).

Fesche is intelligent enough to note that “aware of the special esteem we had for women,” the Tahitians started to come forward with girls (and/or women, we do not know) who offered themselves to the “first come” on the ship in order to distract attention. But, significantly, this began when the Polynesians noticed this “special esteem” on the part of their visitors. We should also take note of the fact that, even at the beginning of this second phase of sexual encounters, it is again the men who “led” the women on board, and in this case even an “elderly man held in special respect by them” (Fesche 2002, 262).

So, transformation had indeed taken place by which the ritual presentation of young girls quickly turned into sexual commerce. At least this applied in the case of contacts with Polynesian societies that did not enjoy a marriage with a public defloration. The girls could therefore have a sexual relationship with the visitors without putting their future in danger. That is why this sexual commerce took place in Tahiti, Hawai`i and Tonga, but apparently not in Samoa.²³

But the emergence of this trade in a second phase (which could be set up in a few days, or only after one or even several new arrivals of Europeans) is in no way an argument for interpreting the first presentations of girls in terms of hospitality or sexual commerce. We know now that these presentations took place in the same way in Tahiti and Samoa.

Beyond Tahiti And Samoa: Also Forced Presentations of Young Girls?

The explicit nature of the French journals

Armed with this knowledge, we must now call seriously into question what is commonly believed about Tonga or Hawai`i or the Marquesas. These are always cited as the classic examples, with Tahiti (including Wallis’ stay, just before Bougainville), and again Aotearoa, of episodes of sexual license during the first contacts. The question needs to be asked even where the journals do not describe specific scenes of very young girls who act under coercion. It is possible that the first moments have not been related in detail and that too much has rather been written about the second phase in which sexual commerce featured. Moreover, if the description of such scenes seems to be lacking for Hawai`i, we have some clues, only too brief, for Tonga, Aotearoa and the Marquesas (see below).

The absence of reporting of such scenes does not mean that they did not take place. Here we need to be careful to distinguish between and compare not only the countries visited by the Europeans but equally the nationalities of the European narrators. For Tonga, Hawai`i and Aotearoa, our first sources are Dutch

or English. In the case of these authors, during the seventeenth century, or even at the end of the eighteenth century, inhibition about raising questions of sexuality meant that all discussion was a matter of allusion (“amenities of decorum forbid,” as Pritchard (1866, 139) wrote in relation to the defloration ceremony in Samoa). Admiration in the French manner is not expressed, but rather reserve or outright condemnation. Therefore, the authors do not permit themselves to describe the bodies and the ages of the “women,” and confine themselves to a general denunciation. These allusions do not allow us to reconstruct anything specific, and they therefore leave the door wide open to the usual over-interpretation about “Polynesian sexuality.” The constant references to lascivious dances and attitudes, to obscenities that cannot be described and the like could only lead the readers to believe that anything and everything was possible.

In this respect it is the French sources that are most valuable, as their authors were less prudish about telling things as they were. No Dutchman or Englishman of the seventeenth or eighteenth century described the body of a young girl in the way that Fesche did in his journal entry for 7 April 1768, nor did they reveal with such frankness the youth of such girls.²⁴

Another exemplary passage is where Fesche refers to the first case of Frenchmen who were too inhibited to perform the act expected of them because of the crowd (here it is the famous scene of the Tahitian Venus, when the first young woman was brought on board by the chief Ahutoru). Fesche complained that this failure would give a “poor impression of the gallantry and burning ardour so generally attributed to Frenchmen” (*piètre idée de la galanterie et la bouillante ardeur si généralement reconnue aux français*) (Fesche 2002, 256). Fesche’s concern reveals another French fantasy about sexuality – this time about their own. The myth of the sexual prowess of French men, who surpassed all other nations in this respect and, as the French assumed, were universally acknowledged as doing so, was quite familiar in the early twentieth century, as we know, but we discover now that it was already in existence in 1768. This is one reason why French narrators were not reluctant to go into such details, while their British counterparts, including Joseph Banks, even though he also was very taken by Tahitian girls, never in their journals crossed the boundary set by the “amenities of decorum.” The French showed no such restraint.

To take another example, Vivès, the young surgeon with Bougainville’s expedition, even compared the length of the penises of the Tahitians and the French (see Tcherkézoff 2004b, 131). Which British surgeon on any of Cook’s voyages would have done that, and then written about it? (Of course, Vivès declared the French winners over the Tahitian men!) And again, at the royal court, Ahutoru, the Tahitian chief whom Bougainville had brought back to Paris, was on one occasion seen to be looking at a painting of a woman. The subject

in the painting was clothed and when Ahoturu touched the lower part of her body, the French imagined that he was fantasising about her nude state (Tcherkézoff 2004b, 149–53). As it was, in Tahiti, when Ahoturu got them to understand that he wanted to accompany them to other countries, the French could only conclude that here was a Tahitian man “eager to enter into temporary marriage with white women.”²⁵ And that is why they took pity on him – his motive for visiting Europe being such a noble one to the French masculine way of thinking –and accepted his request to be taken on board.

It happened by chance that the French were almost the first to land in Tahiti (and the first on this eastern side of the island) and the very first to land in Samoa. So it is that we have detailed descriptions in both cases which allow us to see the high degree of congruence between them and not to let our imaginations run riot. This congruence is not a question of something that the French had devised on their own but comes out of the attention paid to sexuality typical of Frenchmen of the time.²⁶ Because of this they have been able to provide us with a comparison between the two geographical extremities of the Polynesian region. If Tasman in Tonga – or Cook, for that matter, in Tonga or in Hawai`i – had been a Frenchman of the late 1700s, perhaps we would have similar scenes from Tonga or Hawai`i to compare with the Samoan and Tahitian cases. In any event, it is better to leave the question open, rather than choosing to ignore it by affirming that narratives of encounters in other Polynesian archipelagoes do not provide any such scenes.

As it happens, there are a few indications in parts of other narratives to suggest that similar scenes did in fact occur elsewhere. These can provide significant supplementary evidence, when we read them in light of what we have now learned from the Samoan and Tahitian cases. If the information remains too scanty to be conclusive, at least we can note that, contrary to what is usually assumed, Tongan, Maori or Marquesan material may also include scenes of young girls deflowered and forcibly brought to European visitors.

Hamilton in Tonga, 1791

The date is 1791, the observer is Hamilton, surgeon on board the *Pandora* under the command of Captain Edwards, whose mission it was to find the mutineers from the *Bounty*. The period is still one in which the arrival of the Europeans represented a noteworthy event.²⁷ But the Tongans had, of course, already experienced a number of visits and the presentation of women was already taking place in the context of sexual commerce, because we note that the Tongans expected a gift in return. Notwithstanding the exchange aspect, the Tongan attitude to this situation still demanded, for whatever reason, that the female victims be young virgins. And so I am confident that the comparison is justified.

Hamilton describes what he believed to be the “sale” of “many girls”: “Many beautiful girls were brought on board for sale, by their mothers” (Hamilton 1793, 87; 1915, 134). In exchange for their daughter the mothers demanded a small axe (an exchange item at the time). Captain Edwards refused this as too high a price and, after three days of refusing, Hamilton tells us, “*la pucelage* fell to an old razor, a pair of scissors or a very large nail. The quarter deck became the scene of the most indelicate familiarities” (1793, 87; 1915, 134). The original text carries no ambiguity as to the question of virginity: “*la pucelage ...*” Hamilton was surprised to see that the mothers stayed on board and seemed to be happy with the proceedings: “Nor did the unfeeling mothers commiserate with the pain and suffering of the poor girls, but seemed to enjoy it as a monstrous good thing” (1793, 87; 1915, 134).

The narrative continues and again confirms the fact of defloration, referring to it, as we see in the following quotation, as an “accident of this kind.” It also reveals a further stage in the process of victimisation:

It is customary here, when girls meet with an accident of this kind, that a council of matrons is held, and the novitiate has a gash made in her fore finger. We soon observed a number of cut fingers amongst them; and had the razors held out, I believe all the girls in the island would have undergone the same operation (Hamilton 1793, 87; 1915, 134).

Suffice to say that there is no source about Tonga, either at that time or later, that gives any indication that an act of sexual intercourse or the marriage of a girl to a high chief (there are descriptions of families bringing their daughters to the Tongan king, the Tui Tonga) had to be concluded by cutting the girl’s finger. But there are many sources on Tonga from all periods, from the early Dutch visits to the mid-nineteenth century, that show how this cutting of the fingers (beginning with the top of the little finger) was a sacrificial offering (these sources are listed in Tcherkézoff 2004b, 191–4). Propitiatory or expiatory, such an offering was made to gods and ancestors in times of great fear, when someone in the family was very ill, or grieving, following a death. These sources indicate that adults would do it to themselves and that mothers would cut the fingers of their children. The operation could be repeated according to circumstances and several fingers would be cut as well (191–4). Other considerations lead to the hypothesis that the European ship may have been seen as an Island-of-the-dead, or at least that it was thought to have come from beyond the human world (Tcherkézoff 2004c). In that case, a mother’s cutting of her daughter’s finger would have been a propitiatory act whose aim was to ensure that the girl returned safely to land (or, if here too an idea of sacred conception and reproduction was involved, to ensure that the process was efficacious).

Whatever the reason for this practice, we must note from Hamilton's observations that in Tonga, in 1791, as in Samoa and Tahiti, "*la pucelage* fell ..." by the acts of these early European visitors and that it resulted in "the pain and suffering of the poor girls."

J.R. Forster in Aotearoa, 1774

The following lines by J.R. Forster are well known, but until now it was thought that they showed how the situation in Aotearoa had differed from the warm and smiling sexual welcome (to summarise two centuries of Western commentaries) that the early European visitors had enjoyed in Tahiti and in other places in Polynesia. The quotation is of course too decontextualised to provide conclusive information and could not be held to represent the main trend of Maori–European early encounters. But it does show that similar violent scenes could occur there as well:

In New-Zeeland [*sic*] the fathers and nearest relations were used to sell the favours of their females to those of our ship's company, who were irresistibly attracted by their charms; and often were these victims of brutality dragged by the fathers into the dark recesses of the ship, and there left to the beastly appetite of their paramours, who did not disdain them, though the poor victim stood trembling before them, and was dissolved in a flood of tears (Forster 1996 [1778], 259).

Captain Marchand in the northern Marquesas, 1791

The southern Marquesans had experienced the arrival of the Spanish in 1595. Mendana's landing was brief and was sealed by a massacre perpetrated by his men. The next visit took place almost two centuries later, during Cook's second voyage. But the people of the northern Marquesas had not yet witnessed the arrival of Europeans. An American trading vessel arrived there in April 1791, but without making a landing. Two months later, a French trading vessel, commanded by Captain Marchand, reached the same place. On one of the islands, Uapou, the French made a brief landing. They were the first Europeans to set foot on this island. Captain Marchand sent a rowboat ashore. In his journal he relates what the officer told him on his return some hours later:

They landed in the southern cove ... Several huts [were] scattered here and there ... The inhabitants resembling the first men whom we are told inhabited the earth during the Golden Age ... nonetheless approached our gentlemen with confidence, almost certain proof that they had never heard tell of Europeans or of the excesses that they have committed in these seas, or of their fearful weapons.²⁸ Respectable old men leading young girls by the hand came to present them to [the men who had gone ashore] as the surest sign of, and the most sacred testament to, the hospitality which they were extending to us, these young creatures,

victims of a holy duty, obeyed, trembling, and with their eyes lowered, at the command of their parents (Marchand 1961, 251).

This is a scene that is now becoming very familiar. Adults approached offering “young girls,” the young girls obeyed the adults, but they were “trembling” as they did so. This is no longer Tonga or Aotearoa, but the Marquesas, the islands that were to become, in the work of the anthropologist Edward C.S. Handy (1923), “Polynesia” par excellence – the Polynesia where teenage girls throw themselves at any man who comes their way. But far from it: in June 1791, at least on the day that Marchand anchored in front of Uapou, the northern Marquesas were no different from the other archipelagoes – and there is no reason why they should have been.

Wallis in Tahiti, 1767

Finally, without entering into a consideration of the whole succession of events during Wallis’ “discovery” of Tahiti, it is worth noting that, on the topic of sexual encounters, one of Wallis’ companions wrote in his journal that the sexual offers concerned not “women” but “very young and small girls”:

Their love of Iron (nails) is so great that the women (or rather Girls, for they were very young and small) prostitute themselves to any of our People for a nail, hardly looking upon knives (Henry Ibbot in Corney 1913, 2: 460).²⁹

Conclusion (I): One Thing is Certain: Neither Love nor Pleasure

If we consider our two cases from Samoa and Tahiti, we should note that the presentation concerned “young girls.” The girls were even “very young,” as Vaujuas observed in Samoa, and indeed as Fesche’s physical description of the Tahitian girl presented on April 7 attests. Furthermore, a detailed analysis of all the published narratives and journals for each of these two visits leads us to the certain conclusion that the very first presentations concerned *only* the “young girls.” The “women” were not involved. Their role was to bring forward the young girls and surround them, and to make sexual gestures (in the same way that they would stand behind the young virgins in the ceremonial dances performed to invoke the procreative powers of the male gods). This they did repeatedly, the most likely reason being that they wanted to explain to the visitors what was expected of them.

However that may be, the explicit references to defloration as well as the constant references to the girls’ young age must henceforth completely invalidate the main hypothesis initially proposed by the French and then recycled in the form of a Western myth persisting until today. We now know that there is not

a shred of truth in the proposition that the sexual encounters were organised by the Tahitians and the Samoans in the name of love and pleasure.

Two conclusions are to be drawn, one from the feminine perspective, one from the masculine. The hypothesis put forward by certain Frenchmen about these young girls being driven to satisfy their desire in the constant search for new lovers is totally untenable for the type of encounters we have seen described when we take into account the girls' young age and their fear – not to mention their “suffering” during the “operation.” On the other hand, if we consider the situation from the chiefs' perspective and imagine that their motive for presenting the French with young girls, even ones shrouded in tears, was to offer sexual pleasure to their visitors, we come up against two obstacles. Firstly, this would suggest that the Polynesians had immediately seen the French as ordinary men; but I have conclusively shown elsewhere, drawing on a wide range of examples, that this hypothesis must be abandoned, because it is incompatible with too many other aspects of Polynesian society and culture of that time and as described by the same early visitors.³⁰ Secondly, one could ask why these men, if their idea had been to please their visitors with a “sexual gift,” would have chosen for this purpose young or very young girls, always or often virgins, distressed and physically tense, rather than young women who were just as attractive but more experienced. Young women, who did not have to endure the physical pain of defloration and who would most likely have been less frightened, would have been preferable sexual partners and surely a more likely choice for sexual hospitality.³¹

In Polynesia the person of the young girl or young woman who is still a virgin, or at least who has not given birth, holds an essential place in the “human” collectivity, or *ta(n)gata*. Throughout Polynesia, societies have reserved a quite specific vocabulary for such a person, distinguishing her thus from the child, from the mother, from the woman as a sexual partner and from women in general.³² But we are still waiting to see persuasive ethnographic information that could show us that the distinctive place given to the person of the young girl or woman in the social whole flows from the high cultural value put on the sexual pleasure of adolescent girls. All we have, though, is Handy's unreliable reconstruction of a hypothetical Marquesan culture and claiming that the overriding purpose of this period of a woman's life was to collect lovers.

Mead followed close behind and thought she had confirmed this for Samoa when she heard her foremost masculine informant, a young teacher who was rather full of himself, smugly tell her about his sex life and his many feminine conquests. Mead made the grave error of attributing to the two sexes a vision that was an exclusively Samoan male view conveyed to her by this favourite informant.³³ This male vision, which one finds elsewhere in Polynesia as well, was itself the expression of the normal fantasy life of young men that derived

in turn from the myths glorifying the sexual appetite of the male gods and of the chiefs. It must be understood within the double standard³⁴ of the male conquest of virgins *versus* the female preservation of virginity until marriage. An important consequence flowed from this: Mead did not pay any attention to the fact that the detailed account that this teacher gave her of his real or imaginary conquests also indicated that the young girl was often coerced and that she would subsequently have to suffer the reproaches and even blows of her family, if the affair became public.³⁵

Conclusion (II): A Hypothesis: Virginity, Conception of the First Child

The child of the god

We have seen that there are strong reasons to think that the scene described by La Pérouse belongs to the very specific context in which brides were presented for “marriage.” The same possibility should then be raised in relation to Tahiti. After all, Fesche’s perception that the presentations to the French could convey some idea of Tahitian marriages (at least those that were hypergamic) was useful, had he not been inclined to make the comparison in relation to the act of intercourse staged “publicly,” instead of reflecting upon the young age of the girls.

It is well attested, from many sources from all over Polynesia, that the forced presentation of young girls who were to enter into marriage with a high chief, where the brides had to be virgins (or at least girls who had not yet given birth), was common practice.³⁶ Other myths describe how young virgins would get pregnant by sitting nude in front of the rays of the rising sun.³⁷ In the ritual dances, the first row was reserved for these young virgins.³⁸ What was the special significance of virginity in all of these cases?

The answer could well lie in the dialogue that Captain Bligh held with a number of Tahitians in 1789. He relates that he had numerous conversations with the “Queen” and with other “principal” people. Among other subjects, he made a “long enquiry,” he says, about a belief that the “Queen” would have her first child “through the inspiration of the Eatua” [*atua*, the god]:

The Queen, whoever she is, has her first Born Son, or the one that becomes the Heir to the Crown, through the inspiration of the Eatua. Nay more than that, they assert that while the Woman is asleep and the Husband by her, the Eatua hovers over her, and literally explaining their expression, says he has connection with her & she conceives, but that all the other children are begot by the Husband (Bligh 1789, quoted in Oliver 1974, 442).

A partial confirmation of this is to be found in the reconstitution by Teuira Henry of the rites surrounding birth “when a queen was about to be delivered of her first child, called the *matahiapo*” (Oliver 1974, 414 ff). The songs chanted by those in attendance praise “the cord of the child, the sacred cord of the god that has flown hither” (*te pito o te tama, te pito tapu o te aitu o mahuta mai nei*). Later, the child is called “the child god” (*te tama aitu*).³⁹ Next the body is rubbed with the tender inside part of a banana tree and oil.⁴⁰ We should note in passing the term *matahiapo*. This is an ancient term, used throughout Polynesia, the etymology of which could derive from the notion that “the child has come out from under the tapa.” *Tapa*, like feathers, is the attire of the gods and even a “way” for the gods to descend to earth (Tcherkézoff 2004a, 160), and also has the property of enabling the sacred to be present in what has been wrapped in it (see section above, “The youth of the victims and the ceremonial framework”). Thus, the same range of hypotheses applies to the interpretation of rites attending the birth of the first child as to the conduct of the sexual encounters.

Morrison, who lived in Tahiti from 1789 to 1791, does not raise the general question of this belief, as Bligh does, but he explains that the high chief of the time (Pomare II) had a divine father. This is the relevant passage from Morrison as quoted by Oliver, who has added the correct spelling of the proper names:

The present Earee Nooi [*ari'i nui*] (or King) is the Son of Matte or O'Too [*Tu* or Pomare I], his name is Toonooeayeteatooa [*Tunuia'eiteatua*] which may be translated “Too, the Great begotten of God”, and his title Eatoa Raa [*e Atua Ra'a*] or Sacred God—which Sacraligious [*sic*] Name and title He obtained by His Mother declaring that the Deity (Taane) Cohabited with her in her Sleep and, proving Pregnant soon after, the Child was declared to be the offspring of the Deity and is rever'd as something supernatural (Oliver 1974, 774).

The three partners involved in conception

Was Bligh's understanding of Tahitian beliefs about conception correct? Was it held that only the first child was a divine work? Or was this thought to apply to all children, but with the sacred quality diminishing according to their order of birth? Was it the case that the husband was thought to play no role at all? Or was he thought to play a facilitating role, as seems to have been an almost universal conception encountered from west to east, from Tonga to Rapa? In fact an obviously ancient notion sees men and gods intervening in different and sometimes complementary ways in relation to women. First of all let me emphasise that in Polynesian mythology concerning relations between the gods and human beings the sexual relationship is always asymmetrical favouring the side of masculinity. The male god meets a mortal female. But no earthly hero would

impregnate a goddess. Moreover, it is well attested that throughout the region the Polynesians held to the principle of the complementarity of substances.

So it is that the woman possesses a substance – her blood – that can bring life. An external principle must be added to this. But here the system bifurcates. The husband's sperm acts to obstruct the woman's blood, with "life" quickening in the blood through divine agency. Or alternatively, as it is told in certain Hawaiian legends, the masculine role in the act of sexual intercourse is needed to open the way for divine action (Sahlins 1985: ch. 1).⁴¹ Or again, in the Samoan case, it was the correct handling of the virginal blood of the female partner that was necessary (defloration and spreading of the blood on a sacred cloth, which was then displayed outside).⁴² Thus every child is divine, and the action of the husband does no more than enable divine action. But it is still necessary for conception to occur.

Conception therefore involves three main elements, even if they are not always present at the same time. First of all there is the female partner's blood. Next comes the man's contribution, which itself can take three forms enacted singly or together: a "forced" opening by means of manual or sexual intercourse to allow divine action to operate (or both); his displaying of the hymeneal blood; and the penetration of his sperm acting to obstruct the menstrual blood. Finally there is the divine element of "life" quickening in the blood via the agency of a superhuman principle. These elements are found in Samoa, Tonga, Puka-puka, Tahiti, Rapa, Raivavae, Rurutu and Aotearoa New Zealand.⁴³ Specialists of eastern Polynesia (see Hanson 1982) overwhelmingly record the obstruction of the woman's blood and the relationship between menstrual blood and impregnation (in Samoa a relationship to hymeneal blood is also adduced). But, in what is certainly an excessively reductive formulation, they combine different elements of the non-feminine role into a unitary "male principle," without distinguishing between the respective human and divine acts involved. Moreover, they attribute the *tapu* state of the woman to the "pollution" inhering in the menstrual blood, instead of seeing that the female body as a whole, or at least female blood, was a channel for divine action: a "sacred side," *itu sa*, as the Samoans say, and not a pole of impurity. In 1982 Hanson first shed light on these erroneous conceptions and was the only anthropologist who at the time criticised the idea that there existed a Polynesian ideology of feminine pollution. The Samoan case supports Hanson and provides all the counterevidence necessary to discredit any such theorising about the Polynesian representation of pollution (Tcherkézoff 2003a, 372–94).⁴⁴

Whatever the exact details of the conceptual framework that explains the precise mechanism of conception and its variant forms, its broad outlines are quite clear: three partners, one of whom was divine, and not two, were essential to the process. It is quite plausible, therefore, that how the coming into being

of the first child was conceptualised in Polynesian cosmology was one of the reasons why girls who had not yet given birth were presented to the Europeans.

It would also be valuable to be able to assess the importance we should place on Bligh's observation that the notion of the divine conception of the first child concerned the "Queen" –that is, it applied only to girls from a high-ranking family. Indeed, if this was really the case, we might envisage that, before the arrival of the Europeans, the production of "divine" children required that the young woman already be reasonably close to the divine (through the rank of her family). But then, what about the success of the Arioi? (This was a Tahitian brotherhood whose members performed as theatre the myth of Oro coming down to earth to bring fecundity and to make the women pregnant). Were the young women or girls presented to the Arioi for planned acts of intercourse because the Arioi could divinely impregnate even the daughters of ordinary families, owing to their being representatives of the gods? And what happened when the Europeans landed? Quite clearly the chief Reti led the French to his house and got his daughter to come forward. But if Fesche was correct in saying that during their stay "two thirds" of the French sailors had received the same propositions, we would have to conclude that a broader receptiveness to the newcomers held sway. Perhaps because the male partner – to wit the European visitor – was both divine and able to play the enabling role at the same time (as the Tahitians had discovered having disrobed and "touched" Nassau and other Frenchmen), access to divine conception and birth was seen to be more certain? Families of low or middle rank perceived the novel possibility of theogamy (or at least hypergamy) up until that time reserved for the families of the chiefs (*ari'i*). Whence this attitude, well noted by the French and confirmed by Cook (in relation to Tahiti, but also in relation to Hawai'i), even if Cook only refers to it in a few lines: in no time, all the adults were taking every opportunity to lead the newcomers to their daughters (see references in Tcherkézoff 2004b).

There is perhaps proof that the Europeans were compared to the Arioi and that they were being asked to play the same role. Let me recall that in Fesche's account (see section above, "Fesche's text") the girl took care to "strike the chest" of the Frenchman before lying down. Then the audience made gestures to the French simulating what was expected of them. The sources on the Arioi indicate that, when they arrived in a village where they were authorised to remove the women's barkcloth and to take the young women by force, they struck themselves on their chest to announce that the cloth or the young woman had to be brought to them.⁴⁵

"Very young age": The question of the threshold of pubescence

The first Polynesian females who were forcibly "married" to the Europeans were young girls – girls of around twelve years old, according to Fesche in relation

to the encounter of April 7. Indeed, they could on occasion be extremely young: Dumont d'Urville gives a figure of "8 to 10 years old" when he called at the Marquesas.⁴⁶ This was the age at which girls learned the dances offered to the gods (in fact, instruction in the dances took place within schools devoted to the whole realm of cosmological learning, as is well known in relation to the Hawaiian "dance," the *hula*). Apparently, such dances became a feature of some of the presentations to the European male visitors.

For the acquisition of cosmological learning, it did not particularly matter if the girls were very young, even prepubescent, because, as long as their involvement was limited to dancing with the male gods and to the mythical idea of "virgin birth" (girls impregnated by the rays of the sun, by the god Oro, etc.), practical considerations about impregnation did not come into play. But how can we explain the fact that very young, and therefore (we may assume) in some cases prepubescent, girls were presented to the Europeans, if the idea was to bring about conception and to force the male Europeans to take on the role of the god "Eatua" and the role of the mortal husband at the same time?

In fact, it is possible that the idea of presentations of prepubescent girls to chiefs was already in existence at the time. Mead's male informant mentioned sexual acts with girls "under ten years old" (Tcherkézoff 2003a, 370–1). This discussion leads on to another point. In Samoa (but again there is no reason why Samoa should be unique) there was also a belief, recorded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that the marriage ceremony (defloration) could provoke the onset of menstruation if the bride was prepubescent. Somehow, the very action of this flowing of hymeneal blood and the spreading of it on the sacred cloth was symbolic of menstrual blood and of the divine action which quickened life in the girl's blood (Tcherkézoff 2003a, 352, 365, 372ff.). Significantly, for Samoa and also Eastern Polynesia in the twentieth century, there is clear evidence for the belief that the only days when impregnation could occur were those right at the end of the menstrual period (see Tcherkézoff 2003a, 372ff.; Hanson 1970).

In addition to the more specialised ethnographic questions raised in the course of this discussion, the main hypothesis elaborated here has sought to explain a fact that rather surprised the Europeans, some of whom mentioned it in their journals, namely the young and sometimes very young age of the girls presented to them during these early encounters. My contention is that, at the initiative of the chiefs and/or orators, the total cosmological framework – the mythical structure, underpinning the Polynesian idea and practice of theogamy, one in which a girl's physically having reached pubescence or not was not at issue – was transposed without modification onto the scene of the encounters with the Europeans, the cosmology demanding the presence of a female agent who had not yet given birth.

Conclusion (III): European Male Vision

Of course, European male visitors could rationalise this in only one way. It gave them a further reason to conclude that the main goal of the young girls' education, according to the "customs" of the islanders, was the proper or even "artistic" performance of the act of sexual intercourse – in effect an apprenticeship in what would later be the "main preoccupation" and activity of their adolescent and adult lives.⁴⁷

John Hawkesworth was an even more active proponent of this particular misinterpretation than Bougainville and his companions. In 1773, when he was given the task of editing the manuscript of Cook's journal of his first voyage for publication, he unfortunately rephrased Cook's and Banks' observations noted in 1769 in Tahiti, to accord with this view. He did so particularly when he dealt with a scene which later came to be called the "Point Venus scene" in the literature. It happened just a year after Bougainville's visit, and the circumstances add another ethnographic example to our file on the young age of the girls presented. On this occasion Tahitian dignitaries brought before the British a young man ("a young fellow above 6 feet high") and a "little girl of about 10 to 12 years of age," as Cook wrote in his journal, and they ordered them to have intercourse – which they could not do, as they were terrified.⁴⁸ Being himself the director of a girls' college, Hawkesworth misunderstood what he read in the journals, erroneously interpreting this scene in terms of an educational and cultural value specific to these societies. He saw fit to add a paragraph of his own on the topic, presenting the act of intercourse as the main "religious" value of Tahitian society, as if these were Cook's own words.

Shortly afterward, in 1775, the French philosopher Voltaire, from his reading of Bougainville's book (where this metaphor of "love as the only religion of the place" is present) and of Cook's voyage (as retold by Hawkesworth), concluded and made known to all of Europe that, as the French and the British "observations in Tahiti are identical," this account, however incredible, of a "Tahitian custom" which describes how intercourse must always be staged in public, how it constitutes the whole of the local "religion" and how it is the main educational goal, had indeed to "be true." And the explanation for this could only be that in this society sexuality came to be the main preoccupation, indeed the Tahitians' "whole religion."⁴⁹ Voltaire did not realise that Hawkesworth had rephrased many passages from Cook's journal, and that Hawkesworth, who knew French, had of course read the short piece by Commerson, the naturalist with Bougainville's expedition, published in Paris in 1769 (*Post-scriptum sur l'île de Taïti*), who affirmed that indeed the only religion of the place was "love." Hawkesworth would also have had the time to read Bougainville's book, which came out in May 1771, while he was working on his version of Cook's journal.

The Western myth of Polynesian sexual freedom was poised to spread in every direction. Twelve years later La Pérouse arrived in Samoa. His interpretation about the offering of female “favours” and his blindness to the very facts he had noted only a few lines earlier were already a consequence of that myth. The interpretations of Williamson one hundred and fifty years later and, of Margaret Mead’s supporters and exponents, two centuries later, are no less due to the cultural misreadings that created the Western myth of “Polynesian sexuality.”⁵⁰

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Notes

¹ Sahlins for Hawai'i; Salmond and her team for Aotearoa-New Zealand; Denig for the Marquesas, Tahiti and Hawai'i; and Baré for Tahiti, while Thomas has added numerous comparative remarks and has also worked on early encounters in the Marquesas Islands: Sahlins (1981, 1982, 1985, 1989, 1995); Salmond (1991, 1997); Denig (1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996, 1998, 2004); Baré (1985, 1987); Thomas (1990, 1997). Thomas and others have also edited numerous early accounts (Forster 1996 [1778]; Forster 2000 [1777]; Thomas; Lamb et al. 2000; Keate 2002). But, at the time of writing, only two articles had appeared in relation to western Polynesia (Linnekin 1991; van der Grijp 1994).

² Until very recently, these pages were only available in French. In 1968 a Chief Conservator at the French Archives, Étienne Taillemite, made the first transcription of extracts from Bougainville's and his companions' accounts of their stay in Tahiti (Taillemite 1968). Ten years later he published all of the journals kept during the circumnavigation (a limited edition from the French Imprimerie Nationale) (1977). And it was only in 2002, thanks to Professor John Dunmore's great work of translation, that these journals became available in English through the Hakluyt Society. La Pérouse's journal, published in 1797 by the French naval authorities in an "edited" version, became available in its original form in 1985 (Dunmore and Brossard 1985) and ten years later in an English translation, also thanks to John Dunmore (1995). Throughout this chapter I shall use Dunmore's translation. Dr. Stephanie Anderson translated the short excerpts from other French authors, namely Buffon and Captain Marchand.

³ Although Diderot himself really only proposed this idea in jest. Diderot's *Supplement*, written in 1772 –immediately after Bougainville's book appeared – but banned for fifteen years, is an imaginary dialogue between a Polynesian elder and a European priest. In it the Polynesian elder relativises, even mocks, European certainties of the time about religion and political systems. He also explains that Europeans are naïve in their exchanges with non-Europeans. He describes what his people had really planned in Tahiti. The French, he says, thought they had been offered sexual hospitality and gave the Tahitians many gifts in return, when in fact they had been cunningly used. Firstly, they had been depleted of their seed to give some of the local women a chance to get pregnant, so that the Tahitians could secure the "intellectual abilities" of this "new race." Secondly, Tahitian men, too busy with their wars and garden work, could not waste their time and their own seed with the "sterile women" (the elder does not comment on the presence of these women). It is these women, he says, that were offered first. Then he generalises about human nature: everywhere in the world, in every exchange, one party tries to cheat the other (Diderot 1964 [1796], 499–501).

⁴ The sexual encounters were not Sahlins' main topic. In this lecture and in a book published in 1981, he dealt mainly with the rise and fall of Captain Cook's fortunes in Hawai'i (Sahlins 1981, 1985: ch. 1). Many other works on this question were to follow (see references in Sahlins 1995).

⁵ See pictorial portfolios in Tcherkézoff (2004a, 2004b): La Pérouse refers to the drawing by John Webber (the artist on Cook's third voyage) of a Tahitian girl bringing gifts of barkcloth and necklaces (we can see the extent to which the Tahitian scene played on La Pérouse's mind when he visited Samoa).

⁶ We shall see this expressed explicitly by Fesche and Nassau.

⁷ In his book, Bougainville only admitted to having noticed a temporary shyness or hesitation when the girls were presenting "themselves" to the French; but he was convinced that it was ingrained in the "nature of women" always to "claim not to want what they desire the most" (*prétendent ne pas vouloir ce qu'elles désirent le plus*) (Tcherkézoff 2004b, 128, 203).

⁸ Forster (1996 [1778]) was among the first voyagers to the Pacific to express these views, preceded only by his French fellow naturalist of the Bougainville expedition, Philibert Commerson, who raised the issue in his famous letter of 1769 published in the main Parisian newspaper (*Post-scriptum sur l'île*

de Taïiti) which was written on his way back from Tahiti (Tcherkézoff 2004b, 210ff.). See the discussion about the European views concerning a supposed West/East (later called Melanesian / Polynesian) contrast in Jolly (1992, 1993, 1997a, 1997b, n.d.) and Tcherkézoff (2003b).

⁹ A record that he knew he would be sending to the French authorities from his next port of call, which was Australia. This is how the narrative of his voyage up until early 1788 came to be left for posterity, since, once he left southern Australia, no further word was heard from the expedition. See Tcherkézoff (2004a, 28–9, 49) for discussion of the fate of the expedition, which was shipwrecked in the Solomons (Vanikoro), and the recent archaeological findings that relate to it.

¹⁰ The French expression may imply physical pain as well as sorrow.

¹¹ La Pérouse's journal gives no details about digital/penile penetration. In the nineteenth-century sources there seems to be general agreement that in Samoan marriages the first sexual act was preceded by an act of digital defloration, performed by an officiant or by the bridegroom, because it was important to collect the hymeneal blood on a sacred cloth (Tcherkézoff 2003a, ch. 8). Was it the case in the 1787 meeting that the Samoans did not perform this initial procedure? Or did the French account fail to mention it because it was seen as unimportant or perhaps embarrassing?

¹² The word is of Spanish origin. Pritchard is referring to the old women who were the guardians of the unmarried daughters of Spanish royalty or nobility.

¹³ The description was published by Pritchard in his "Notes on Certain Anthropological Matters" (1864, 325–6) and is cited by Danielsson (1956, 116–7). In his well-known book *Polynesian Reminiscences*, published two years later, Pritchard did not include this description as "amenities of decorum" forbade it, he said, and he only alluded to it: "The ordeal by which the virtue of the chief girl of Samoa was tested was as obscene as severe, and the amenities of decorum forbid the description here" (1866, 139).

¹⁴ The "spirits" (*aitu*) of today may appear to be ranged only on the negative side and opposed to any idea of life. This was not so in pre-Christian times, as the first missionaries specifically note a constant mixing in the Samoan language of references to various *atua* (later translated as "God") and to various *aitu* (later translated as "spirits"). Jolly (1996) describes a comparable case for Vanuatu.

¹⁵ This was a ritual gesture which made the way open for stepping into a sacred and tabooed area (Tcherkézoff 2004b, 424–6).

¹⁶ As we now know from his own journal.

¹⁷ Dunmore translates this as "one of his wives," but rightly explains to his reader that the French *femme* can mean "woman" or "wife," and that he had to "guess" the meaning. But when the expression includes the possessive adjective as in *sa femme*, it usually means "his wife," so his guess was correct. Nonetheless, I have departed from his translation at this point in order to maintain the possible ambiguity.

¹⁸ In these French journals a mixed Tahitian crowd is always described as "the Indians," a male Tahitian (such as a flute musician) is referred to as "an Indian," while Tahitian women and girls are simply "women" and "girls." During this period French men, particularly in educated discourse, were able to refer to the female gender, of any nation, in its entirety as *le sexe* (the more usual expression being *les femmes*), while the only term used for the male gender was *les hommes*.

¹⁹ We should remember that the French only communicated by signs, as we know from the descriptions of other scenes, as in the negotiation between Bougainville and the chief Eriti about the question of knowing whether the French could set themselves up on the shore. They could not understand and, as Fesche tells us, they just tried to guess the meaning from the context. In fact, the words uttered at this moment were certainly not meant to inform the French about "the surrenderer she was making of herself," which was already obvious and did not need any further explanation, but were probably ritual words linked to the act of striking the chest, a gesture that appears in the rites of the Arioi cult (see this chapter, Conclusion (II)).

²⁰ *Les assistants insulaires*; Dunmore translates this as "the islanders themselves" rather than as "island assistants/participants." It is not clear whether Fesche means "assisting" (helping with the procedure) or just "attending" (merely present at the scene). Still, the ritual gestures of these people (i.e. holding the branch, singing) suggest that their presence was a meaningful component of the whole ceremony.

²¹ *Sur l'acteur*, thus singular. Fesche probably means that the girl was partly dressed, or temporarily covered, with a ceremonial barkcloth.

²² See previous notes. As the French were unable to understand what was being sung, this is only Fesche's interpretation.

²³ For Samoa, sources as late as the 1830s continue to note that sexual advances on the part of European male visitors were rejected (Tcherkézoff 2004a, 82).

²⁴ Physical descriptions only became more exact in the nineteenth century with the advent of the theoretical framework of “sciences” such as raciology and phrenology. By that time the period of early encounters in Polynesia was over and the “naturalists” of the eighteenth century were now naval medical officers concerned with measuring facial angles and the volume of skulls. It was not until the 1920s that there was a revival of interest in the “sexual life” of “savages” (see Malinowski 1927, 1929). This was precisely the time when the theme of sexuality in the narratives of the early voyages to the Pacific was beginning to be considered as a source of knowledge (and even as a model for the West by philosophers such as Bertrand Russell), after the relatively general condemnation of “heathenist” practices according to the European conceptions of Pacific cultures that had prevailed during the nineteenth century (Tcherkézoff 2001a, ch. 4).

²⁵ As Fesche wrote in his journal, “*l’envie qu’il a de se marier pour quelque temps avec des femmes blanches*” (Tcherkézoff 2004b, 152).

²⁶ See Tcherkézoff (2005c, 2005d). In his theory of the nature of Man, the French naturalist Buffon held that the size of the penis and the level of male sexual prowess were an expression of the original masculine condition as created by God – and for Buffon “white people” best exemplified this original humanity. In his view, men who were “coloured” had obviously departed (“degenerated”) from this original design, and were found to be “small in the size of their sexual organs” (*petit par les organes de la génération*) and with “no passion for their female partner” (*nulle ardeur pour sa femelle*) (see Tcherkézoff 2004b, 212–3).

²⁷ See the chapter by Douaire-Marsaudon (this volume).

²⁸ Captain Marchand’s particular perspective on the voyages of discovery was rare for the time. A little later he tells us that he felt obliged to nail a copper plaque attesting to his “taking possession” of the island, an act he undertook for “His Majesty Louis XVI, King of the French,” although acknowledging “I have never been able to conceive how and by what right a civilised nation could take over an inhabited land without the consent of its inhabitants.” He relieves his conscience, however, by adding immediately that the act of taking possession is a preventive measure against “oppression if some European nation ever tried to enslave them” (Marchand 1961, 253; my translation).

²⁹ Wallis, in the official “edited” publication of his narrative in 1773 by Hawkesworth (I have not been able to consult the unpublished manuscript of Wallis’ journal), speaks of “women” who “openly trafficked with our people for personal favours” (hence he declares – or Hawkesworth makes him declare – that “chastity does not seem to be considered as a virtue among them”). But even so he specifies that these women “were brought down by their fathers and brothers” (see reference in Tcherkézoff 2004b, 248).

³⁰ For Samoa see Tcherkézoff (2004a, 60–2); for Tonga, Hawai’i, Cook, etc. (109–53); in relation to the term “*Papala(n)gi*” used in Western Polynesia, (193–6); and for Tahiti see Tcherkézoff (2004b, 200–1).

³¹ As shown by various chants, all Polynesian cultures plainly recognised the desirability of sexual pleasure for both sexes (and practices involving sexual mutilation were quite foreign to them).

³² As *tapairu* in Maori or, in Samoan, *tamaitai*, *tausala*, *augafaapae* (in sharp distinction to *fafine*).

³³ Aside from the whole question of how the Western myth about Polynesian sexuality obviously influenced her interpretation in the field, the main thrust of the revised view that we must now adopt in relation to Mead’s interpretation of girls’ adolescence in Samoa bears on gender roles. She thought that she had understood the feminine perspective on sexuality in Samoa, but in fact it was her male informant, absent from the published book but crucial in her field notes, who was her source (Tcherkézoff 2001a, ch. 8 *passim*). As these girls were constantly “joking-and-lying” (*pepelo*) when telling her the story of their supposedly free and easy private lives, their discourse (quite at odds with what they were actually experiencing, but Mead did not realise it) appeared to Mead to correspond well enough with what her male informant had told her (Tcherkézoff 2001b).

³⁴ I use this expression for the sake of brevity. But it does not reflect accurately the *two levels* of the ideology involved here. On one level, where the ideology is governed by ideas of family inheritance, the ancestors’ cult, etc., girls as “the relationship to the whole,” *feagaiga*, are seen as somewhat asexual, while boys, who are all their “brothers,” “serve” them. On another level, according to a universalistic notion of gender dualism and heterosexuality, boys as “males” are supposed to become full males by showing their ability to conquer the “females” (Tcherkézoff 1993, 2003a: ch. 7).

³⁵ I have analysed and published the informant’s account (Tcherkézoff 2003a, 366–71; for the original English text see Orans 1996).

³⁶ See Tcherkézoff (2003a, 384) on Tongan and Hawaiian cases quoted by Douaire-Marsaudon (1998a, 182–3) and Sahlins (1985), in addition to the description of Samoan “marriages” given here at the beginning of the analysis.

³⁷ For this theme in Tonga, see Douaire-Marsaudon (1998a, 182–3); for Tokelau, see Tcherkézoff (2003a, 48–9). There are also Samoan legends on this topic.

³⁸ There are very precise descriptions of the Samoan dances of the 1830s in Williams’ journal (Tcherkézoff 2003a, 384–7). In relation to Tahiti, Cook and Banks had noted that the young girls learning and practising the dances had to give up this specialised learning “as soon as they have form’ d a connection with man” (Tcherkézoff 2004b, 303–4).

³⁹ The word *aitu* is equivalent to *atua*. In Tahiti as in Samoa, ancient practices show the use of these two words even if in Samoa today we find two quite distinct notions: “God” is *O le Atua*, while *aitu* generally refers to spirits (spirits of place and the wandering souls of the dead who have returned to trouble the living).

⁴⁰ The complete account told by Teuira Henry is quoted by Oliver (1974, 414–6).

⁴¹ With one more element to be added: in the case recorded by Sahlins (1985), a chief must perform this operation for the husband (the fact that the body of the woman is taboo and that not just anyone may touch her certainly comes into it). In Samoa, too, it seems that a distinction was made between marriages where it was the orator of the family group of the husband who manually performed the act of deflowering before the newly-wed couple themselves engaged in intercourse, and cases where the husband was of sufficiently high rank and performed the defloration himself.

⁴² With the idea that this display was intended for the sun, the wind and the gods, and not simply the crowd of villagers who had come to see that the “honour” of the husband was intact (according to the Eurocentric interpretation of the missionaries and first ethnographers).

⁴³ See Douaire-Marsaudon (1998a: 187–8, 1998b); Pérez (1996, 168ff.); Oliver (1974, 442; 1981, details recorded by Bligh, Morrison and Henry); Babadzan (1982); Hanson (1970); Best (1975); Tcherkézoff (2003a, ch. 8).

⁴⁴ See also the discussion regarding Melanesian examples in Jolly (2002).

⁴⁵ Babadzan (1993, 274, quoting an observation recorded in 1797). On the dual figure of Oro and the Arioi cult, see Babadzan 1993. For a discussion of the whole context of the Arioi in relation to the Western over-interpretation of their “orgies,” see Tcherkézoff (2004b, 304–14, 411–21).

⁴⁶ In September 1838, in Nuku-Hiva, Dumont d’Urville was surprised to see how young the girls were who were being offered: “from 12 to 18 years of age” and “some much younger, no more than 8 to 10 years” (1842, 6). We are still at the time of early encounters, as there were no missionaries, he said. Unfortunately, he does not give any details of the encounter, and that is why it cannot be included as primary evidence along with the other comparative cases.

⁴⁷ This was an application to the specific context of these encounters of a general male vision of the mid-eighteenth century about the “nature of females”: “desire” and “love” were said to be the main components of that “nature” (see note 7; Tcherkézoff 2005b, 2005c).

⁴⁸ From Hawkesworth’s interpretation, and, two years later, Voltaire’s in the same vein, to references in all the books on “Old Polynesia,” the chain of over-interpretations was a long one. If the hypothesis presented in this chapter is valid, it also provides an explanation of this famous scene (see discussions in Tcherkézoff 2004b, 273–83).

⁴⁹ See Voltaire’s correspondence quoted in Tcherkézoff (2004b, 286).

⁵⁰ In the course of its development, this analysis has been strengthened by many discussions with colleagues. My thanks go particularly to the participants in the following seminars and workshops: the RSPAS Department of Anthropology Seminar (Head, Mark S. Mosko, RSPAS, ANU, Canberra, October 2001), the Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies Seminar (organised by the Centre’s then Director, Ueantabo Neemia-Mackenzie, University of Canterbury, March 2002), the “Second Western Polynesia – including Fiji – Workshop” (CREDO, Marseilles, May 2002; organised by Steven Hooper, Françoise Douaire-Marsaudon, Serge Tcherkézoff; Marshall Sahlins as discussant), and our RSPAS–CREDO symposium on “Oceanic Encounters” (Marseilles 2002, Canberra 2003) which is part of the RSPAS–CREDO program of ongoing cooperation under the guidance of Darrell Tryon (see Preface to this volume). For this published version, the analysis has been considerably enlarged in scope thanks to the very hospitable and academically exciting environment of the Gender Relations Centre of the RSPAS at the ANU, where this work was undertaken during my appointment there in 2004–05 as an Australian Research Council Linkage Fellow. I would like to extend my special thanks and appreciation to Margaret Jolly, Head of the Gender Relations Centre and of the ARC projects *Oceanic Encounters* and *Enlightened Explorations*,

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