



HAL
open science

Documenting the History of Samoa Introduction

Serge Tcherkézoff

► **To cite this version:**

Serge Tcherkézoff. Documenting the History of Samoa Introduction. Pacific Dialogues, Canberra. Documenting History of Samoa, 2018. hal-03562934

HAL Id: hal-03562934

<https://hal.science/hal-03562934v1>

Submitted on 21 Feb 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

DHS - 1

DOCUMENTING THE HISTORY OF SAMOA - 1

At the time of early encounters between Samoans and Europeans,
particularly the encounters with the French expeditions

Serge Tcherkézoff (ed.), 2018

(1st ed. Marseilles, CREDO, 2008)

Enlarged and made available on line

http://www.pacific-encounters.fr/operation_programme_samoa_eng.php

Between 2002 and 2008, published and unpublished texts have been gathered, scanned (original Laperouse's letters...), translated in English (when original was in French: thanks to Deborah Pope), photocopied (original and translation) and bound in a thick A4 volume. 4 Copies have been produced and given to the Head of State of Samoa, the National Archives of Samoa, the National University of Samoa, and the Institute of Samoan Studies in American Samoa. The ceremony was held in October 2008, in Apia, at His Highness the Head of State Residence:



at His Highness the Head of State Residence

then at the National University of Samoa Fale Tele, and at the Consul of France Residence in Apia: see photographs of this event in the top right corner of the welcome page of <http://www.pacific-encounters.fr/home.php>

A research based on these documents, analysing the history of first and early encounters between Samoans and all European visitors, has been published in 2004 and made freely accessible on-line by ANU Press in 2008:

<https://press.anu.edu.au/publications/first-contacts-polynesia>

We wrote in 2008: "The entire content of the A4 volume of the original documents and their translation in English (the large blue colour book held by H.H the Head of State), of which only 4 printed copies are in existence for the moment, will gradually be made available on line". **As from January 2018, this goal has been achieved:**

http://www.pacific-encounters.fr/operation_programme_samoa_eng.php

INTRODUCTION

This 2018 file “DHS – 1”¹ brings together texts and pictures dating from the time of the “first contacts” between Samoans and Europeans: all the material available on the encounters with the French, up to 1838, and all that obtainable about the encounters with every European expedition of the eighteenth century. In the history of Western “exploration”, the first Europeans to set foot on Samoan ground were the French: the Lapérouse expedition. Another French captain came before, but had only contacts at sea: Bougainville. Other French captains arrived after Lapérouse; one is well-known, Dumont d’Urville, another less so, Lafond de Lurcy.

These narratives, to which those of the other early visitors, Dutch and British, must be added, do not only tell us about the history of European voyages. In describing the interaction which took place, at sea and on land, the accounts provide us with information on the Samoan people’s history and customs at these different periods.

For this reason, all the Samoans today who are interested in their past should be able to have the opportunity of reading these texts if they so wish. But they could not. Indeed, as is so often the case for the early voyages, it is very difficult to get access to the narratives. Moreover, certain French narratives were never translated into English. The aim of this file is to remove this difficulty by collecting the different accounts in one and the same volume and by supplying, for every French narrative, an English translation.

*

Access to these narratives is difficult because, often, they were only published once, on the expedition’s return, in the form of books which quickly went out of print or of articles in the journals of learned societies. This is why only a few specialist libraries, located far from the Samoan archipelago, possess these documents. This is the case for Dumont d’Urville’s account (visit in 1838, publication in 1842) or for Lafond de Lurcy’s (visit in 1831, publication in 1845). Even when they have been republished in the twentieth century, sometimes benefiting from a new consultation of the original hand-written journal in order to improve on the first publication (as is the case for the recent publication of Lapérouse’s narrative), they are nonetheless rare books, published in a particular

¹ In 2008, we were writing « this book.... »

collection of the French government stationery office or in the Hakluyt Society's series at Cambridge.

Furthermore, there is the language barrier. The account of the French expedition of Lapérouse only became available in English recently (1995). There are also the letters, those of Lapérouse, or later that of the missionary Vidal, which throw important light on what happened during Laperouse's visit. The English translation of Vidal's letter, which we ourselves were preparing, was published just a few months ago [present time is 2008], and here again in an academic journal as it is the work of American archaeologists. But, above all, other pages have until now remained totally inaccessible to those who do not read French: Lafond de Lurcy's and Dumont d'Urville's accounts have never been translated.

In the latter case, to the pages recounting the visit ashore, must be added the first drawings and engravings in the history of contacts. Dumont d'Urville's expedition is the first to return with these. The plates represent Apia, its houses and some of its inhabitants. They have never been the subject of a publication accessible to the Samoans and here again one has to go to rare, distant libraries to seek out the "Atlas Pittoresque" which in the 1840s had been published along with the narrative of Dumont d'Urville's voyage. Previous visitors to Samoa had returned empty-handed, or with merely schematic maps of the coast. This is the case for Bougainville, but also for Lapérouse, without it being known whether the lack of any sketches, other than maps, means that no portraits or landscapes were drawn or whether they were lost for they were not among the papers which Lapérouse had sent to France from Australia (then called New Holland), during his last port call, in January 1788, just after his visit to Samoa, before making for the Solomon archipelago where his whole expedition disappeared in a storm near some reefs (it was discovered thirty-five years later). But with Dumont d'Urville, we have the first picture of a Samoan "big house", with absolutely remarkable regard for detail, which enables us to observe the continuity and the antiquity of this building technique so often admired by subsequent visitors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This DHS 2018-1 file therefore brings together all these French sources, in each instance with the photocopy of the original and the English translation, reproduced if it already existed or printed here for the first time in a translation done specially for this project. In order for this selection to form a historical whole, the English pages of the few non-French visits which also took place, at least during the 18th century, have been added. Later a second file DHS-2 will include early 19th century non-French sources (whalers and merchants' logs, Mariner, Wilkes and his companions, Jackson, Erskine...). In this DHS-1 file now available on line, the following narratives can be found:

- 1) 1722: the very first contact between Europeans and Samoans took place only at sea and was with the Dutch. The account was translated into English in the middle of the twentieth century by an eminent specialist, Andrew Sharp. According to the Dutch texts experts we asked, this translation is very faithful. It has therefore been reproduced here with no changes.
- 2) 1768: the second visit was a French one, but here again contact only took place at sea and therefore very briefly as was the case for the Dutch. This was Bougainville's expedition, on its way westwards, at the beginning of the second half of its circumnavigation after the famous visit to Tahiti. The original text, published in 1771, is presented here, with the English translation which was done in 1772 by Captain Cook's companion, J. R. Forster. This is a very faithful translation, as we were able to see when we compared it line by line. Oddly enough, this translation was only reprinted once, in *fac simile*, in a rather specialised edition, in 1967 (Amsterdam, N. Israel, Bibliotheca Australiana). So the difficulty of gaining access to this text can well be imagined. We were able to photocopy the pages of the 1772 edition.
- 3) 1787: the third visit was once again French, led by Lapérouse, and this time the newcomers went ashore. This was the first contact on land between Samoans and Europeans. It took place on the island of Tutuila, in what is today American Samoa. Unfortunately, the encounter was violent. The analysis of the events is still the subject of debate today. It is therefore essential to have the complete original text at one's disposal. Here will be found the account Lapérouse wrote, as transcribed by John Dunmore and Maurice de Brossard, as well as the English translation, recently done by John Dunmore (published in 1995), which is excellent. Lapérouse's letters have been added as the captain's comments on the violent encounter which took place make them essential reading. These letters are presented here for the first time in their original, hand-written form, as we found them in Noumea thanks to the help of the Association Salomon (Noumea) and its late president, Alain Conan, and the help of our colleague, Jean-Christophe Galipaud, a member of the association (this association is leading the excavations on the Lapérouse expedition wreck site in Vanikoro). A nearly unknown third letter, which only a part is known of, is added in original text and English translation. A letter (the original and its translation) from the missionary Vidal has also been added. He lived on Samoa much later, in the second half of the nineteenth century, but was able to attest to local memories of these events. *Addendum 2017: during this year, every admirer of the Association Salomon had the immense sadness to learn that Alain Conan passed away, on his favourite battle ground, the deep diving. His memory deserves so many thanks for the grand bulk of data that he gathered, with his associates, and that he shared with everyone: see <http://museemaritime.nc/salomon/histoire/44-hommage-a-alain-conan> ; see*

<http://museemaritime.nc/salomon/objets/43-la-collection-la-perouse>,

and

<https://www.collection-laperouse.fr/>

- 4) 1790: the fourth visit was English, led by Captain Edward Edwards who was looking for the “Bounty mutineers” and who sailed all over the region in search of them. (he found those who had stayed on Tahiti but searched in vain for the others, who had left Tahiti for an island then unknown, Pitcairn). His narrative was written in English. These pages are presented here. From the 1800s on, there were a few visits from merchantmen or whalers. Very little information was recorded. Even Kotzebue’s visit in 1824 provides very little, [add. 2017] apart one significant even, which is the reason for pages of his narrative in English to be provided here.
- 5) But then, in 1831, so before any missionaries had settled there, a French captain made a visit of several days: Lafond de Lurcy. This text is very little-known and has never been translated. Here will be found the original and the English translation done for this selection.
- 6) In 1838, the last visit during this period preceding the missionaries’ and foreign administrators’ influence is that of Dumont d’Urville. The text has never been translated *in extenso*. The pages concerning the visit to Samoa are reproduced here: the original and, for the first time, a complete English translation. The drawings and engravings made at the time and which, as we have said, are the only ones in existence from this period and which have until today remained unknown to the Samoan public, have been added.

We are not unaware of the fact that accounts of intercultural encounters, when the author is the European visitor, are overladen with prejudice and over-interpretation. It is of course necessary to be able to strip away the ideological presuppositions related to the period and to the country of the narrative’s author in order to use these accounts. But it is not very difficult to realise at what point in the narrative some fact or another, regarding the Samoans’ actions, is too different from European expectations and presuppositions of the times; it is then highly probable that the fact mentioned was not invented by the author of the account; but well and truly observed, even if the words used to describe it sometimes reveal great naivety and condescension on the Europeans’ part with regard to the inhabitants they encountered.

*

With the French Embassy accredited to the State of Samoa, based in Wellington, and the Permanent Secretary’s Office for the Pacific of the French Ministry for Foreign Affairs, whose committee is chaired alternately by French Polynesia and New Caledonia, we formed a project to “restore” this part of their history to the members of the Samoan

community, in both the State of Samoa and the Territory of American Samoa, by collecting these texts and translating into English whatever was still only available in French.

For part of this research it was possible to use documents we had gathered during our study of “first contacts in Samoa”, which resulted in the work published in English, mentioned above. But the quotations in this book were restricted to certain passages judged essential for the work’s themes, centred on the reconstitution of each side’s vision of the other’s nature (human/divine etc.) and on the question of relations between men and women. For the selection presented here, it was necessary to find the complete documents and to have a translation made of those which had not been translated. We were able to benefit from the help of the Embassy and the Permanent Secretary’s Office for this research, as well as from that of the administrators of the libraries at the University of French Polynesia in Papeete, at the Australian National University in Canberra, at the University of Canterbury’s Macmillan Brown Library in Christchurch (all photographs of pages, text or drawings, labelled as “personal photographs” were made at this Library) and at the Association Salomon (now one of the richest holding of Laperouse’s papers) in Noumea. For the translations, the expertise of Ms Deborah Pope, affiliated to our CREDO laboratory, was invaluable. A big thank you to all these people, institutions and their administrators. Downloading all these documents from our website is not restricted by any copy right, provided that the source is clearly indicated (the web site and the origin of documents, photocopies, photographs), for any personal research, presentation in seminars etc, and quotations in published research, excluding any commercial usage.

This involvement of the French authorities and the help of several universities, including that of French Polynesia, which made this work possible, mark another step in cooperation between France and Samoa and in regional cooperation between the English and French-speaking territories and countries of the Pacific. If there is one aspect for which I have been actively fighting for the almost thirty years I have been conducting research into the societies of the Pacific, it is that of being able to overcome the linguistic barrier that colonisation had left by creating French and English-speaking areas, with very little communication between them, at least during the years when I started coming to the region. At this time, scientific exchanges did not form a regional network but merely reflected relations with the metropolitan countries. Tahiti had scientific exchanges with France, Western Samoa with New Zealand, American Samoa with the universities on the west coast of America ... Today, fortunately, everything is changing very fast and the Permanent Secretary’s Office for the Pacific itself has very clearly expressed its intention of giving priority to assisting projects which promote this regional cooperation. One example of these is the regular exchanges which have been taking place for a few years now between the students and teachers of the National University of Samoa (NUS) and

the University of French Polynesia (UPF). We must also develop these with teaching institutions in American Samoa. In our French Centre for social science research on Oceania (CREDO), masters and doctoral work is in progress on English-speaking Polynesia, and Samoa is well placed in this. Recently a cooperation agreement was signed between the University of French Polynesia, the New Zealand centres for “Pacific Studies” (Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch), where Samoan studies occupy the foremost position, and the CREDO. The creation of this book and the gift made of it to the teaching and archival institutions of the two Samoan countries are another example of these new priorities.

[Add. 2017] The endeavour has been actively continued and developed through the “Pacific-dialogues” program (ANU-EHESS-French Permanent Secretary’s Office for the Pacific): www.pacific-dialogues.fr

Soifua,

Serge Tcherkézoff, Marseille, 1st September 2008 / 30 December 2017