Supplement to Marshall Sahlins's Voyage Around the Islands of History (Tahiti 1768, Samoa 1787)

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The focus of this contribution[1] is the apparent sexual offers that Polynesian women made to the first Europeans who arrived in Polynesia. If we go back to some journals written during the early voyages, which have still not been studied in as much detail as they deserve, we discover an unexpected aspect of these apparent sexual offers: the "girls' very young" age and their "weeping." This leads us toward a hypothesis.

Many Polynesian sources attest that young girls who entered into marriage with a high chief had to be virgins (or at least girls who had not given birth).[2] Other myths describe how young virgins would get pregnant by sitting nude in front of the rays of the rising sun.[3] In the ritual dances, the first row was reserved for these young virgins.[4] 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 Teuira Henry's reconstruction of the rites surrounding birth "when a queen was about to be delivered of her first child, called the matahiapo." The songs chanted by those in attendance praise "the cord of the child, the sacred cord of the god that has flown hither.."[5] James Morrison, who lived in Tahiti from 1789 to 1791, explains that the high chief of the time (Pomare II) had a divine father: "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). My contention is that, at the initiative of the chiefs and priests-orators, the total cosmological framework, the mythical structure, and the underpinning of the Polynesian idea and practice of "theogamy" was transposed without modification onto the scene of the encounters with Europeans. These Europeans were considered envoys from the realm of these sources of fecundity, this cosmology demanding the presence of a female agent who had not yet given birth.

This contention is based on a range of enquiries over a number of years. I happen to have been doing fieldwork in Samoa from early 1981, focusing on social and political organization. Rather unexpectedly, this led me to tackle gender issues, since the political structure strongly showed a deep contrast between a whole set of relations centred around the brother-sister pair and another set centred around the husband-wife pair. Thus, I was led to enquire into "men/women" relations in general, including representations of sexuality (Tcherkézoff 1993, 2003a). When the "Mead-Freeman debate" began in 1983, and Derek Freeman himself came to Samoa to give several presentations, I felt that the arguments vividly exchanged all failed to give accurate consideration to the beginning of the European myth-making of "Polynesian

sexuality." I gradually undertook a close reading of early sources regarding Samoa (Tcherkézoff 2004a).

As I discovered that the sources, when read in their entirety and not only through secondary quotations of sentences taken out of their initial context (the journals of the first European visits), presented a very different picture, I began to ask how the Samoan context could have been so different from the Tahitian one as "described" by the same early visitors? I found myself delving into the sources relating to early visits in Tahiti, only to find that much of the established "knowledge" about early Tahiti was largely misconstrued (Tcherkézoff 2004b). When revised, both cases were very similar, despite the fact they came from opposite ends of Polynesia and had little contact with each other. I then thought that some generalization about early European visits in Polynesia could be offered for discussion.[6] I finalized this essay in 2006, when Alex Golub came up with the idea of a Festschrift for Marshall Sahlins.

It was twenty-five years after a certain lecture given by the same Marshall Sahlins. In Paris, in a lecture given at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in 1981, Marshall Sahlins, while addressing the question of Captain Cook's fate in Hawai'i, raised a point that was to change the view on these first sexual encounters. He hypothesized that, in the Hawai'ian case, 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 creatures considered to be envoys of the gods, as partial images of these gods. The aim was to produce powerful children and to secure new kinds of powers.

Sahlins found a first expression of this hypothesis in Diderot's famous Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage Around the World customs (1964 [1796]), presented as a dialogue

between a Tahitian elder and a European priest,[7] and he thus entitled his 1981 lecture "Supplement to Captain Cook's Voyage," published later as chapter 1 of his Islands of History (1985a).[8] That very year, 1981, as a freshly incorporated member of the EHESS, I was on my way for the first time to the Samoan islands, instructed by Daniel de Coppet to read carefully Sahlins's Moala: Culture and Nature on a Fijian Island (1962a) as a masterful example of Pacific ethnography. A few years later, a team of the EHESS translated and in 1989 its press publishedDes *Î*les dans l'Histoire (Islands of History), a copy of which also made its way to Samoa several times in my bag. These conjunctions of sailing routes prompt me to offer here to Marshall, in homage to his pioneering views of 1981, my own tiny "supplement." Indeed, a further enquiry into the mythical and social scheme of this "theogamy" can now be opened, at least for other parts of Polynesia. Why, in Samoa and in Tahiti,[9] did the females who were presented to the first European male visitors have to be so young? Why were they weeping?

<H1>Western "Knowledge" about pre-Christian Samoan and Tahitian "Customs" Relating to Adolescence and Marriage

The very first Europeans to set foot on Samoan soil were French – the officers and crew of Lapérouse's expedition, and the encounter lasted only two days (10 and 11 December 1787). The report describing the behaviour of the inhabitants insisted on two aspects. The Samoan men were "ferocious barbarians" (because of the fight during the second day, where a dozen of the French – but some 30 Samoans who are hardly ever mentioned – died) (Tcherkézoff 2004a: chapter 4). The women, on the other hand, gained the admiring approval of the French visitors. Even after the "massacre," Lapérouse 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,[10] 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” (Dunmore, who translated and edited Lapérouse, 1995: 412–13).

Lapérouse’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” (Dunmore 1995: 420). After a mere two days of encounters on land, Lapérouse, 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 Lapérouse’s journal (Tcherkézoff 2004a: 28–67), reveals the only scenes that Lapérouse’s officers could have seen and participated in: 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, Lapérouse’s opinion – condensed in this single sentence that abruptly summarizes 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 and 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 Lapérouse's journal) in order to characterize 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 Lapérouse as a witness:

<Extract>

> 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)

<End Extract>

Twenty years earlier, in Tahiti, very similar scenes had been played out, and these were similarly absorbed into what were to become the Western canons about "Polynesian" 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 sexually "offered" 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 abusively generalized: "several Frenchmen" had told him what kind of "hospitality" they had enjoyed, "in the custom of this island"; indeed, "we are offered all the young girls" (Bougainville 1966 [1771]: 194-5; Dunmore, who edited and translated Bougainville, 2002: 63). He later reflected upon this extraordinary society which 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, in Dunmore 2002). We must note that Bougainville, even if he generalized instead of quoting the exact narratives of his companions (as can be seen when reading the events described in his companions' journals), spoke of "the young girls" offered.

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 the Polynesian islands, could not imagine that they were perceived as not-entirely-human creatures and even as envoys from the realm of the gods. They thought that they were received merely as voyagers to whom "hospitality" was offered. 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 to them 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."[11] And that here in this society they were "free" to follow those impulses.

<H1>Samoan Facts: The Scene Observed by Lapérouse

Lapérouse'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, Lapérouse adds a passage which, given his typically cautious style, he was clearly hesitant about including in his official journal:

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> 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 l'exortoit à moderer sa douleur,[12] 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. (Dunmore 1995: 419–20)

<End Extract>

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

In Lapérouse'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." Let us keep in mind a few points. This incident concerned only a "very small number of young … girls I referred to." The "victims" were only "girls." Each girl was "weeping." She was apparently held by the orator during the "operation," since this "old man" is said by Lapérouse 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 Lapérouse describes corresponds to the enactment of a nineteenth-century Samoan marriage ceremony where the young bride was a virgin and was ceremonially deflowered. We can find in the narratives of the 1830s–50s the same spatial and temporal disposition. Even Lapérouse's reference to the "matrons singing and howling" corresponds to what William T. Pritchard observed in the 1850s (Tcherkézoff 2003a: 350–70). Lapérouse's remark that "all the blinds were lowered" is also very important. There were only two cases where an activity would be conducted inside a house with all the blinds lowered. One was a defloration ceremony. 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 (Tcherkézoff 2004a: chapter 3).

Let us now move to Tahiti and the events of almost twenty years before.

<H1>Tahitian Facts: The Scenes of 7–9 April (according to Nassau and Fesche)

<H2>Nassau, 7 April 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 7 April, the first full day the French spent on land. 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, in Dunmore 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 (by 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.

Nassau reported that, in the chief's house 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 gave the French to believe, as they noted in their journals, and Bougainville 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 to be akin to sacred high chiefs.

<H2>Fesche on 7 April

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:

<Extract>

> 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 loincloths 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 branch[13] 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 [Nassau[14]] 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. (Fesche, in Dunmore 2002: 257)

<End Extract>

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”) 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”).

<H1>“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 hypothesizing. 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.

<H2>Fesche’s text

<Extract>

> 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,[15] 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 assisting [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, 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.[16] 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 [when it happened that] an officer from the Etoile to whom a young Indian girl had offered herself was not favourably disposed, a Cytheran [named Ahutoru], the same one who joined us on board to follow us in our travels, took the girl and showed the officer 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 honors 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; words in brackets added by author)

<End Extract>

<H2>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: chapters 5–6):

<Numbered List (NL>

1 The first contact at sea (5 April) 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: 6 April) and of "Helen" (the scene of 7 April: 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 above).

5 The escapade of Bougainville's cook (5 or 6 April) 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).

<End NL>

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 in his narrative).

<H2>The Youth of the Victims and the Ceremonial Framework

The generalization made by Fesche takes up important elements of the forced presentations of young girls. The Frenchman speaks of “girls” and generalizes by referring to “the fathers and mothers who brought their girls” meaning, therefore, that in every case the victim was young. Apart from the generalizing 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.” Moreover, in every case the girl was brought forward by others. 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 (Tcherkezoff 2004b: 424–6). The formal, ceremonial aspect is quite clear.

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 that 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 Tcherkezoff 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 the aim of which 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, 2003b, 2004a: chapter 10).

<H1>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 Lapérouse heard from his officer Vaujuas (Tcherkézoff 2004a: 45) and indeed as Fesche's physical description of the Tahitian girl presented on 7 April 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 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: the sexual encounters had not been organized by the Tahitians and the Samoans in the name of love and pleasure. 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 in front of these

unknown creatures. 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. First, 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.[17] Second, 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, distressed and physically tense, rather than young women who were just as attractive but more experienced. Young women who would most likely have been less frightened, would have been preferable sexual partners and surely a more likely choice for sexual hospitality.[18]

In Polynesia the person of the young unmarried woman (and 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.[19] But we are still waiting for persuasive evidence that sexual pleasure has something to do with young girls' distinctive status. All we have is Handy's unreliable reconstruction (1923, 1927) of a hypothetical Marquesan culture in which, he claims, 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 male informant, a young teacher who was rather full of himself, smugly tell her about his sex life and his many female 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.[20] This male vision, which one finds elsewhere in Polynesia as well, was itself the expression of the normal fantasy life of young men, one that derived from myths glorifying the sexual appetite of the male gods and of the chiefs. It must be understood within the double standard[21] 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.[22]

<H2>The Question of Virginity in the French Accounts: The Girls' 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 it is 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 1771 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 Frenchman, not women gaily displaying their flower necklaces and their desires, but girls

weeping: girls who were undergoing their first act of sexual intercourse and who were terrified to be thrown into the arms of unknown creatures to whom superhuman powers were attributed. One of Bougainville's sentences, brief as it is, suddenly reveals that the officers and sailors had not hidden the truth from their captain (who has mostly stayed on board during the visit). It was always, if we take Fesche's generalization as a guide, or 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 which 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" (Dunmore 2002: 72–3).

We now have enough data to definitively depart from those Western illusions and to come back, with more precision, to Marshall Sahlins's pioneering view: theogamy and not sexual hospitality.

<H1>Notes

1 This study was elaborated while I was hosted several times during 2001–02 at the Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies, University of Canterbury, and was presented at the 2nd Western Polynesia and Fiji Workshop (CREDO, Marseille, 2002) gathered around Marshall Sahlins. All my thanks to Dr Stephanie Anderson for her editing (finalized on a much longer version elaborated later, when I was ARC Fellow at the Gender Relations Centre, Australian National University, during 2004–05, which was to be included into a collective work (M. Jolly, S. Tcherkézoff, and D. Tryon, eds., 2009 : chapter 4) ; some changes here have been introduced by me and thus, when a passage sounds more "Frenglish" than English, responsibility is only mine.

2 See Tcherkézoff (2003a: 384) on Tongan and Hawai'ian cases quoted by Douaire-Marsaudon (1998: 182–3) and Sahlins (1985a<AU: insertion of a correct here? i.e., do you mean Islands of History?>), in addition to the description of Samoan "marriages" (Tcherkézoff 2003a: chapter 8 passim). [[[ST Comment: I don't understand "a<AU:insertion of a correct here?" And Yes I do mean Islands of History]]] (Word does not allow me to insert a comment in the margin, as we are in footnotes, thus I add my comment-question within the text)]]]

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

4 There are very precise descriptions of the Samoan dances of the 1830s in Williams's 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 specialized learning "as soon as they have form'd a connection with man" (Tcherkézoff 2004b: 303–4).

5 The complete account told by Teuira Henry is quoted by Oliver (1974: 414–16).

6 This led to taking a deep interest in gathering and making available sources of "first" and early encounters between Europeans and Pacific peoples. A joint program with Anne Salmond was elaborated, supported by the French "Pacific Fund" and French Embassies of Wellington and Canberra. Some results are now available online (www.pacific-encounters.fr), with the participation of the EHESS Branch hosted by ANU (www.pacific-dialogues.fr).

7 Although Diderot himself really only proposed this idea in jest (Diderot 1964 [1796~~]<AU: Pls obtain and insert here the original publication date – also do so in the References>~~: 499–501). When Diderot circulated his piece (1772) (unpublished until much later because of censorship), the 2nd edition of Bougainville's Voyage had just come out in French with a "Supplément" (title of volume 2, which is the French translation of the anonymous first available narrative from Cook's expedition, published in London in 1771), and Diderot probably found there the idea of his own title.

8 The sexual encounters were not Sahlins's main topic. In this lecture and in a book published the same year 1981, he dealt mainly with the rise and fall of Captain Cook's fortunes in Hawai'i (Sahlins 1981a<AU: insertion of a correct here?>, 1985a<AU: insertion of a correct here?>: chapter 1) [[[I don't understand the question "insert of a correct…": yes I do mean Sahlins 1981, which is *Historical Metaphors…,* and Sahlins 1985 which is *Islands of History*]]]. Many other works on this question were to follow (see references in Sahlins 1995). The hypothesis of theogamy rests on the hypothesis that Polynesians have seen Europeans as flesh and bone forms of superhuman entities, as images of the gods (but not fundamentally different from the ritual images, elaborated in wood and barkcloth, used by Polynesians in their yearly rites of fecundity). The case considered was how Captain Cook has been assimilated to

such an image of the Hawai‘ian god Lono – and not how Captain Cook would have been just "taken for Lono," as Gananath Obeyesekere (1992) abusively simplified and presented Sahlins's hypothesis (see Tcherkézoff 2004a: 109–53).

9 I cannot attempt to show it here, but there are some strong elements, even if few of them, within the narratives concerning early encounters in Aotearoa, Tonga, Marquesas, and Rapa Nui that open the possibility for a generalization of the hypotheses drawn here for Samoa and Tahiti (Tcherkézoff 2004b : 189–197).

10 See pictorial portfolios in Tcherkézoff (2004a, 2004b): Lapérouse 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 Lapérouse's mind when he visited Samoa).

11 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).

12 The French expression may imply physical pain as well as "sorrow."

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

14 As we now know from his own journal.

15 We should remember that the French only communicated by signs, as we know from the descriptions of other scenes.

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

17 See references above n3, and Tcherkézoff (2004a) for Samoa (60–2) and for Tonga, Hawaii, Cook, etc. (109–53), and in relation to the term "Papala(n)gi" used in Western Polynesia (193–6); for Tahiti (200–1).

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

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

20 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: chapter 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 realize it) appeared to Mead to correspond well enough with what her male informant had told her (Tcherkézoff 2001b).

21 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 : chapter 7).

22 I have analyzed and published (in French) the informant's account (Tcherkezoff 2003a: 366–71); for the original English text of this account, see Orans (1996).