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S. Tcherkezoff,

A bus ride in Samoa during the 1980s : hierarchy, stratification and individualism in the *fa'aSāmoa.*

...ethnography is a theory of description

(Nader 2011: 211)

Introduction

This article is a further attempt to examine social relationships in Samoa from a holistic methodological perspective. The ethnographic context may seem anecdotal: public transport. But it seemed to me that the social interactions taking place on a Samoan bus, at least for lengthy trips, provide a snapshot of the social relationships characteristic of that society in the years under consideration. As I did in earlier studies of Samoan social relations, I am calling upon three theoretical proposals put forward long ago by Louis Dumont in his classic study of India (1966): the notion of "hierarchy", the opposition between hierarchy and stratification, and the ability of hierarchy to accommodate individualism.

This article was prepared in 2009[1], when Samoa introduced its now famous "road switch" when drivers had to change from driving on the right hand side of the road to driving on the left. As I imagined that the "traditional" buses might soon pass into history, I thought it timely to describe in English, and thus in a language accessible to young Samoans, how these buses were and are a social microcosm, creating a space within which all social relations are enacted. From my notes, I was able to draw on observations I had made during the 1980s and 1990s, and the "ethnographic present" in the following pages refers to this period.

Since 2009, only right hand drive cars could be imported. Left-hand drive vehicles could continue to be driven in Samoa as long as they were in good condition, but for buses, an important change had been decided upon. At the time, all Samoan buses were, and they often still are, made up of a wooden passenger compartment fixed on to the platform of a Japanese truck. This compartment contains two lines of double seats (just a flat wooden plank on metal bars). At the front there is only one comfortable seat, the driver's seat, and a wooden seat for his "helper", as we shall see. In between the passengers' seats and the driver and his helper, an opening on the right side of the compartment allowed passengers to get in and out of the bus. Because of the road switch, a law was passed that this opening had to be on the left side of the compartment since the right side would open on to the middle of the road now that buses were driving on the left; passengers exiting and boarding the bus would run the risk of being hit by the traffic coming in the other direction. This change involved much work and expense. At the time a number of Samoans told me that many buses would be abandoned or turned back into trucks; ten years later, the prediction had not come to pass, buses were transformed, and they are still to be seen on Samoan roads.

When we see how preoccupied Samoans seem to be with distinguishing everyone's social position on everyday occasions, we assume that their society encourages social inequality to an extreme degree. Indeed this is what has always been said of Polynesian societies. However, we shall see that the very Samoans who demand hierarchical organization on all occasions find inequality – that is stratification into social classes – fundamentally foreign to their idea of a community. In a few discussions I happened to have with Samoan

[1] The text is based on an initial analysis on Samoan "hierarchies" published in French long ago (Tcherkézoff 2003: chap. 5), before any prospect of a road switch, then enlarged and translated in English (many thanks to Deborah Pope) for a collective project that was not finalised, and again reworked in 2017 (many thanks to late Dr. Stephanie Anderson who had helped me many times over the years with translation and editing; see the homage to her work in www.pacific-dialogues.fr/home.php - the News). On the Dumontian notion of hierarchy in general, see Rio & Smedal (eds. 2009), Otto & Budbandt (eds. 2010), Robbins & Siikala (eds. 2014), Iteanu & Moya (eds. 2015), Bialecki & Daswani (eds. 2015), Barraud, Iteanu & Moya (eds. 2016). My contribution in Rio & Smedal (Tcherkezoff 2009) had already addressed some Samoan contexts ("chief" system, electoral system, gender relations, levels of lexicons in the Samoan language). The present paper develops in detail a single context not previously addressed: the seating arrangement in a Samoan bus.

friends about the "classes" of fares used in Western public transport, as is the case on trains ("first/second") or planes ("economy/business"), this paradox of valorising hierarchy and rejecting a certain inequality (stratification into classes) was expressed in a condensed and ironic, indeed, emblematic way.

The Samoan bus

The following description applies to all trips between villages and the town of Apia from the beginning of the 1980s (my first stays in Samoa) until the late 1990s (for remote villages). It is much less valid for buses running through the peri-urban area between the airport and the town. In this area, salaried work has sometimes become decisive in the family economy and this has resulted in a certain withdrawal into the nuclear family and loss of interest in the rules of status attached to the "village community", *nu'u*, which is the basis of "custom" (*agānu'u)* in general (Tcherkézoff 2017).

All the buses have a scheduled route from a village to the town centre (and back). All the buses are physically similar: a diesel truck, fitted with a bare platform on which a wooden passenger compartment, locally built, has been installed. The inner arrangement is similar for any old, or modern, bus or coach. It contains an upholstered seat for the driver and two lines of double seats, with a space to move between the two lines – except that the seats are wooden two-seater benches, the seats and backrests being made simply of a plank screwed on to a metal support. Only the range of colours with which the outside is painted changes from one bus to another, according to the owner's whim. All these buses are private, often owned and run by a family from the village where the route starts (but for the last two or three decades some owners have had a small fleet of buses, for the urban and suburban area or for a whole district).

In a way, there is nothing very remarkable, apart from this wooden structure installed on the platform of a truck, comparable – even if larger – to traditional public transport in Tahiti ("*le tru[c]k*", which was so called for that reason[2]). On a Samoan bus, there is nothing

[2] According to one study (Champaud 1981), in the 1920s, the first public transport to run in Tahiti (privately owned by a family which organized the transport between a far away district and the main town) had used an American-made truck, with a wooden compartment. Even if the importation of all-metal built buses became possible (and happened later but only for tourist tours), the advantage of the wooden interior became obvious: cheaper to build and repair (local materials) with better resistance to humidity. From the 1930s until about twenty years ago, the Tahitian *tru[c]k* (spelled with or without the *c*, or even sometimes *truc*) was the usual mode of transport, until recent safety regulations led to its gradual replacement with modern buses. From the start, and this did not change, the seating arrangement consisted of two long benches on either side and facing each other, with a large space in between that allowed people to place their large baskets (often, district people

to indicate the fact that buses are private, except the variety of colours they are painted, as the fares are very homogeneous and only vary according to how far away the village is. Moreover, the list of fares is often displayed with the words "on behalf of the government", since the state keeps an eye on fares, just as it does on those of taxis. It is above all in the relation between the users and with regard to the driver that the particularity of Samoan practices appears.

The hierarchy, the bus and the ceremonial house

Seat hierarchy

The first particularity is the manner in which one takes a seat on the bus according to the "respect", *fa'aaloalo*, a statutory younger person owes to an elder. As could be expected, young people give up their seats to older people. However, one quickly realizes that the rule is more complex as an older man who is not a chief (*matai*)[3] will sometimes give up his seat to a man who is younger but whose appearance makes it obvious that he is a chief. He is better dressed because, if he is a chief, he is going to town on business while the non-chief is probably going to town to sit on the bare ground in the market and sell a few basketfuls of his garden produce. He is usually physically well-padded, obesity having always been seen as desirable in Polynesia as a mark of status. The same is true of women, those who are plump often being the wives of chiefs and therefore respected by other men or women. If it is not a question of the difference between those who are chiefs (or chiefs' wives) and those who are not, then only that of age is involved, when it concerns the difference between two individuals of the same sex. Between a young man and a young woman more or less of the same generation, the young man will tend to give up his seat to the woman: this is the respect owed to "sisters" in the village (Tcherkézoff 2017).

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went to town to sell their produce at the market), and to chat, as one line of passengers faced the other. The exit was at the back, at the end of this middle space. From my experience and from all that I heard in Tahiti, there were no specific local rules regarding the place that a passenger should occupy along the two benches. But the way of asking the driver to stop anywhere at the passengers' whim was similar to what happened in Samoa.

[3] In this paper, I will keep the word "chief", although this common translation of the Samoan notion of "*matai*" is misleading. A *matai* is the head of an extended family, chosen by the whole group at each generation and ceremonially invested with the founding name of the family (usually the founding name of the initial ancestor), through a bestowal ceremony. In Western literature the family founding name was misleadingly presented as a "title" in a feudal system where *matai* would be a class of "nobility" or "chiefs", clearly separated from the "commoners", and indeed, as a consequence, the mistake was made of interpreting a hierarchy in terms of stratification (Tcherkézoff 2008a).

Finally, between chiefs themselves, a gradation of "respect" exists according to the status of the family's name or "title" in village history. As a member of the village, one can easily recognize the gradation made between the chiefs, which corresponds to that which can be observed when the council of village chiefs holds one of its regular meetings in a house. The council meets "in a circle", its members sitting on the ground and leaning against a post. Every house, whether round or rectangular, is built on the same principle: a roof supported by a perimeter of posts leaving the whole of the space inside free. When council meetings are held the house is treated as a "sacred circle", *alofi sā*.

The seating system in the meeting is complex and organized around two axes: the main axis (east/west or in line with the road running through the village) and the village centre/periphery axis. Four sections are thus distinguished. Within each of them, the hierarchy of seats begins in the centre. The order existing at the time among all the families in the village can be seen at a glance, each being represented by its chief leaning against one of these posts. The places have neither numbers nor names. The number of posts varies according to the size of the house. In certain cases, some posts remain unoccupied. In others, when the house is smaller, two people lean against one post, each of them a bit askew; others have no post – which is again the mark of inferior rank with regard to the immediate neighbours who have no hesitation in planting their backs against a post as soon as they enter the house. The visitor knows all this thanks to his participation in village life. But he is somewhat surprised to observe that this order is to an extent found on the bus when several chiefs make the same trip.

It is not worth going into details. It should simply be noted that the status rules prevailing in the family and the village are also found on the bus, either because the individuals know each other (the most frequent case) or because, when passengers get on further along the route, their status can be guessed from their appearance. If this is not the case, the passenger boarding who considers someone should give up his place to him will have no scruples about making this known by tapping gently on the shoulder of a seated person who seems to him to be of lower status than he is.

So the rule governing "respect" (*fa'aaloalo*) on the bus is that of family and village organization, and that of chieftainship, and not a contextual distinction particular to the realm of public transport[4]. The contrast is marked with Western towns where the group comprising the travellers (on buses or suburban trains) is organized according to distinctions quite

[4] On the different aspects of historical and contemporary Samoan society, the reader will find an extensive bibliography of my publications in Tcherkézoff (2017).

specific to this domain, such as the opposition between the ordinary passenger and those who have priority for seats: the disabled, the elderly and pregnant women. If the rule of "respect" on the Samoan bus is that of the village community as a whole and not tied to a particular context, we shall not be surprised to learn that it invokes the entire system, such as it is in the meeting-house or the whole village. But this system includes obligations other than that which, expressed in the space of the bus, consists only in giving up a seat to a superior.

The Back/Front Hierarchy

Indeed it can be seen that respect in the bus is not only to do with the fact of having a seat but also with the position of this seat in the bus, along the valorised front/back axis. The spatial organization of the house, that of all a family's land and of the village, always, and very markedly, valorises the front in relation to the back. The "front" of the house faces the centre of the village. In a house, people of high status enter from the front, those of low status from the back. The ground in front of the house must not have any litter on it, not the smallest piece of debris, not even a dead leaf. If it is grassed, the grass must be kept short; otherwise the area is covered with little pieces of white coral or with white sand. The kitchens will be situated at the back, and there the ground can be stony, with leftovers and litter dumped there. A ceremonial meeting in a house is also organized in relation to this second of the two axes. Along the first axis (east-west and/or road), in the two quarters of the circle thus formed, the higher chiefs called *matai ali'i* sit facing each other. Along the second axis, in the other two quarters of the circle and again opposite each other, sit the chiefs called *matai tulāfale* who are often, but not always, of a slightly secondary rank, also called "orators". The great orators sit leaning against the posts on the arc of the circle designated as being the "front", *i luma* (towards the centre of the village); the orators of lesser rank are positioned along the "back", *i tua*. All the chiefs, *ali'i* and *tulāfale*, are *matai*, heads of extended families, bearing the founding name (the "title-name") of the clan.

On the bus, therefore, it is both a matter of getting a seat and of getting a place at the front rather than at the back of the vehicle, while respecting as far as possible the status gradation of the passengers, of those present at the start and also of those who board along the way. Thus, even if there are free seats at the back, the chief who has just got on will tap on the shoulder of the young man who has remained seated towards the front and the latter will quickly get up and go sit further back. In general a chief will not need to do this. At each stop, the seated passengers look discreetly to see who is boarding, and accordingly they may decide

to get up and go and sit further back, leaving the seat they had occupied empty. In Samoa, there are many "chiefs" because they are comprised of all the heads of extended families (several thousand for a population totalling less than 200 000 inhabitants).

The prohibition on remaining standing

The conjunction of the two values consisting of getting a seat and being at the front is further complicated by the fact that a younger man must not remain standing in a place where someone superior is seated. Consequently, the opposition we see operating is not between the sitting and standing places but between the seats at the front where you are sitting by yourself and the seats at the back where you are … two or three squeezed on to one seat. This obligation is widely respected in all houses (which it must be remembered are first and foremost places for meetings and discussion rather than places for privacy). You must be "seated" (*nofo*). It is forbidden to "stand" (*tu*). The latter posture is part of the world of "doing" (*fai*) – all the activities of garden "work", etc., and also the stance peculiar to fighting – whereas, in all houses, everyone is "settled (seated)" (*nofo*) as is proper when in a sacred place. In general, therefore, it is extremely rude to remain standing. *A fortiori*, a younger man must not stand beside an elder who is seated. Two considerations are combined in this: not having your head above that of a superior (the head is the part of the body which is the equivalent of the whole in the cosmological representation of the person) and the general fact that standing is forbidden within a formal space. Consequently, the younger man who gets up to let an elder sit down at the front of the bus makes his way to the back and, if there is not a seat, sits down quite simply … on someone else's lap.

Things happen as they do in a house. In a meeting of chiefs where there are more people than posts to lean against, the highest ranks keep their leaning position while the nearer you get to the less coveted sections of the circle, the more you see chiefs squeezed up together, with many therefore sitting between two posts. This is not just a question of the comfort of how you are seated. The post is seen as a ceremonial seat. All meetings, in whatever village house they are held, reproduce, in the people present, the hierarchy of the village's title-names (the founding names of the extended families forming the village). The members of the meeting sit cross-legged on the bare floor of the house, leaning against the posts (as well as meetings of chiefs, this may also be a meeting of other people who then arrange themselves with reference to their extended family's title-name as if their chiefs were there). But to the order of the posts is added the leaning/non-leaning distinction. In the general

vocabulary used to designate the rank of title-names, the lesser title-names are called the names of the "chiefs [seated] between-the-posts" (*matai va i pou*); for it is known that they rarely find a house with enough posts for them be able to lean against one.

On the bus, the endless coming and going resulting from these rules of status (there are countless stops) means that very soon the back of the bus, where people are sitting two or sometimes three on top of each other in one seat, will be swaying. But this is partially offset by the weight of the passengers in the front as the latter are of high status and therefore generally well-padded. This aspect of Polynesian cultures is well-known. The highest ranking people are constantly offered food which leads to stoutness. But, above all, he who stays slim when his rank is supposed to be high becomes the object of suspicion. Perhaps his subalterns are not treating him properly ("What a bad family…!")? Or maybe this means he is claiming a rank which does not belong to him? Consequently, high-ranking people may eat twice as much as they are given for fear of not living up to the ideal model. Whatever the case, one can see that a truck with a platform, like those used to transport tree trunks, was the vehicle best adapted for use as a bus in Samoa, with its back axle, which has four wheels instead of two, thus absorbing the extra weight at the back of the passenger compartment.

In short, the group formed by all the passengers is a "sacred circle" in the Samoan sense, even if the geometry of the bus makes it impossible to sit in a circle as in the house. In this group, the logic of the sacred prevails: the *hierarchy of status*, that is to say a gradation with reference to the value constituting common belonging, in brief the system of the origin of the extended families' title-names. We shall see below the different logic applied to the driver's position.

Against inequality, for equality

Against inequality of access

The bus, therefore, has not become just a "means of public transport" in Samoa. Each time, it transports a group who feels it is a social group. The bus and its passengers constitute an extension of the "village community", *nu'u*, and its rules of status.

Having noticed this, I mentioned to my Samoan interlocutors the idea of public transport with "classes" as it exists in the West, at least on trains and planes, by asking them what their reaction would be if this distinction were introduced, that is, if money made it possible to obtain a seat and/or a good seat. This could happen either in vehicles separated

into two compartments, as on a train or plane with their "first" and "second" classes; most Samoans know of this type of distinction as they have taken the plane to go to New Zealand, or one of their close relatives has done so and told them about it. Or, it could be as in Fiji, where, for long distances (between the towns of Nadi and Suva for example), you have the choice between a cheap ticket on a bus which stops everywhere, one built much like the Samoan vehicle, and a more expensive ticket on an American-style coach which is fast and quiet and has air-conditioning. The question made sense with regard to the discomfort of trips when two, or sometimes, three people have had to sit on each others' laps. Would the idea of having a reserved seat by paying more be appreciated?

Not in the slightest! On the contrary, everyone was shocked. Every time I asked the question, the reply, whatever the age or status, was unanimous: "it would be nasty, so un-Fa'aSamoa ("against the Samoan way"), it's inconceivable here, anyone who did that would only last a day, the people from the village would stone the bus … and the driver himself!" (In Samoa, as soon as anyone becomes so angry that they cannot even discuss their grievance, the first thing they think of is to pick up a stone and threaten to throw it at the person who has made an inappropriate remark or gesture).

So here we have a clear and perfectly explicit example of the fact that hierarchy is different from inequality. Samoans maintain social hierarchy (hierarchy of status) in their buses, but will not hear of social inequality.

Against the inequality of power relations

This rejection of inequality of access to transport, although the hierarchy of seats is embraced, is not surprising if we agree that, in essence, the bus is a ceremonial house on the move. And what are the obligations in a ceremonial meeting? We have said that each person, by choosing a particular post to lean against or by not being able to lean against one for lack of space, becomes part of a hierarchical order. The way the posts are placed, however this may be, expresses a hierarchy. No post is the equivalent of another from the point of view of *rank*, with regard to the axes mentioned. But we have also seen that it is absolutely forbidden to stand when another person or several other people are seated. This gesture would shift the distinction on to the plane of power relations as the upright position belongs to the contexts of hard physical work (in plantations etc.), sporting events and, formerly, war. Standing up introduces a kind of unequal distinction which is felt to be in contradiction with the hierarchical distinction employed in the distribution of places.

Basically, it is a simple matter. Seats, and the system of posts and axes: these refer not to individuals but to the title-names these individuals hold if they are chiefs, by virtue of which they have their place in the meeting, or to the title-names of the clan each individual belongs to. The council of chiefs is the council of the village families, which, at every generation, re-presents the council of founding ancestors. This can be seen in the fact that the meeting cannot begin without the ceremonial kava-drinking rite in which an offering is made "to God" and several set phrases are pronounced which make the meeting's circle "sacred". If an argument arises between the chiefs about choosing a post, they do not say "who are you, John (or Paul, etc.) to sit there?", but "what is the founding tale of your title-name – therefore that of your family – which makes you believe that…?" On the other hand, if one of the chiefs gets up, as I have seen happen precisely after an argument about the choice of posts, this means that the mood is changing and that the individual in question is taking up a position in a power struggle. When this occurred, I was surprised to see the young men, who are always sitting around the house in which the meeting takes place, grab hold of stones in preparation for a pitched battle between those belonging to (or siding with) the family of one of the chief protagonists and those associated with the other. But it all made perfect sense. Hierarchy was being abruptly left and another register entered, that in which inequalities are, in the literal sense, power struggles. All the oratory skill of the meeting's principal chief, the bearer of the highest title-name in the village at the time, was needed to restore calm and invoke the "shame of calling for confrontation of strength (*mālosi*), the shame of wanting to be above someone else" (*fia maualuga*) into "this sacred place under the eyes of God". The idea of superiority expressed in the word *maualuga*, being "above", is clearly in terms of inequality, with the connotation of difference in height –it is a "shame" to bring it into a space where hierarchy of status governs – and this of course brings us back to the difference between being seated within a ranked system of places and standing up.

For equality in fares

What hierarchy is able to incorporate is equality not inequality. We are going to see this with regard to the bus stops. It can also be seen in the fact that the idea of a price difference – as in a Western system with "classes" – is violently rejected. Every one, chief or not, older or younger, pays the same fare. It can be seen again in the fact that all these passengers who pay the same fare (the only price variation is for schoolchildren), from the highest ranking chief to the young man going to sell his basket of coconuts in the market in town, always do pay their

fare. One pays by giving the coins to the driver when one gets off; the only entrance-exit is at the front of the passenger compartment. And, in answer to my questions, everyone explained that it would be extremely "shameful", *mā*, – totally inconceivable – for a chief to get off without paying on the grounds of his status.

In fact, when compared to inequality, one of the particularities of hierarchical status is that if you contravene what others expect of you, quite simply you lose status. A chief who got off without paying could be certain that the whole district would know about it a few days later and that his family would meet to inform him that he is "unworthy" of continuing to represent it. And if his family did not adopt this position which the other village families expect as being normal, the latter would behave towards this chief more or less as if his family had deprived him of his status: he would in any case be despised by his peers. Instead, when a chief gets off the bus, he is expected to pay the driver for himself and for others, friends or younger men of his clan he has met on the bus; because, it is said, a chief's first duty is to "look after" others.

In short, it is not exaggerated to assert the following paradox. In the Samoan bus, hierarchy preserves fare equality. It dispenses with any idea of unequal fares based on "classes" and obliges everyone, whatever their status, to pay for their trip like everyone else, and at the same price.

The hierarchy of levels

The bus is a social microcosm. On it you find the opposition which structures the social space of the house:

- inside the sacred circle the relation is that of equality of belonging within a hierarchy of positions; these positions form the hierarchy of status;
- but outside the sacred circle only individual assertion prevails and this can ultimately lead to power struggles.

Let me make things clear for the first relation: equality of belonging and hierarchy of positions. Samoans often insist on the fact that chiefs are all the same, that the distinction between chiefs of the *ali'i* kind and of the "orator", *tulāfale*, kind is secondary, that all the posts in the house are the same size, etc. Behind all this, there is a complex history. In fact, the notion of "chief", *matai*, is the result of a transformation in the 19th century. Before this, the notion of *ali'i* predominated while the *matai* were simply the heads of households. Having said that, it is certain that the chief's elective status and the extended family's capacity to

depose as well as to elect him existed before the arrival of the missionaries, as the latter mention this in their accounts. Christianity played a part in enlarging egalitarianism's sphere of activity. But if this egalitarianism had been in strong contradiction with the hierarchy of status, there would be indications of this in the first ethnographies. Instead, one seems to sense in these early narratives, by missionaries and others, that the Samoan system was already both an extremely hierarchically organized universe, with regard to the rank of ancestral references, yet possessing a relatively individualistic-egalitarian idea of what a "human being", *tagata*, is (within the limits of the universe then known to the Samoans: Tonga, Fiji, Uvea and Futuna and other more distant archipelagos). The Samoans also attach great importance to the space of the meeting: everyone is on the same level, on the ground: it would be inconceivable for one chief or another to come with a chair to sit above the others (as we have said: no head must be higher than another); everyone is facing everyone else, seated around the circumference of the circle formed by the meeting; the posts are all of the same size and thickness. But as has been said, there is also the matter of each post's position in relation to the "front/back" axes and the distinction between the chiefs leaning against a post, those leaning two against a post or those without a post at all to lean against. The first level then, the first space, is one of a hierarchy of positions with equality of belonging.

On the second level, in a second space of relations, we find individual assertion, which can result in an unequal power relation. This opposition between the two spaces constitutes a fundamental dichotomy. However, such a dichotomy, if it were static, would place each of the two spaces apart from each other and it would be impossible to understand how they are both elements of Samoan society. It is also necessary to see their mutual relationship. This is an encompassment of the second space in the values of the first or, to put it more directly, an encompassment of level 2 in level 1. The notion of "encompassment" has two facets:

- on the one hand, the term encompassed is defined by an inclusion in the encompassing term;
- on the other, the encompassed term asserts its autonomy by differentiating itself through a distinctive opposition which can go as far as inequality and domination. But the field of action of this distinctive opposition and of this inequality remains limited by the field of the first relation.

We can make these notions clearer by retaining the sacred/profane terminology. The space in the Samoan house is sacred (the circle). On the circumference, a hierarchy is established: the hierarchy of status. As for the space outside the house, it is profane. But this only makes sense if it is seen from the space within the house (and not in a universal

geography of a Western kind). The Samoan sacred/profane opposition is of a particular type which can be understood through the cosmological and political image of light and darkness. Light is the Polynesian chief's power as the source of life ("source of light") for those around him[5]. This relation is one of oriented reciprocity. The source of light is nothing if there is not something – somebody – to light. For what would a god be without a world he has created? What would a "chief" be without those who constitute his group? But, on the other hand, the chief's followers only exist (are only "visible") because there is a source of light; "creatures" only exist with reference to the creator divinity, etc. Moreover, as Durkheim and others have noted time and again, the sacred and the profane are not static entities. Each tends to make contact with the other. In this contact – and this is the model's essential point – the effects are different depending on whether the point of view adopted is that of the sacred or the profane. The sacred tends to encompass the profane: an encompassment which could also be called "hierarchical opposition"; but the profane tends to differentiate itself from the sacred by a purely distinctive opposition. The notion of encompassment is useful for distinguishing between a simple inequality, which remains on just one level, and another sort of inequality – in fact a whole/part relation – a hierarchy; but this hierarchy necessarily opens up the possibility of a secondary level on which the distinction can become substantive and the initial inequality be reversed.

Can this *holistic* model of the level of relations be mentioned in connection with a bus? This model was elaborated to account for far more complex facts in the field of symbolic classifications and in the opposition between powers said to be "sacred", "religious", "mystic" and those said to be "political", "pragmatic", "profane", etc. Its application to the Samoan bus may appear anecdotal. It is no longer so when one looks closely at the relationship between the passengers and the driver. Here we find the relation – omnipresent in Samoan society – between the *tāpua'i* and the *fai*: symbiosis with the divine versus unilateral human action. This relation is indeed that of two types of power, of the kinds mentioned, and it applies to a host of Samoan social contexts.

The driver and the passengers. The *tāpua'i* relation and the Samoan theory of action

In the context of transport by bus, it remains for us to talk about the driver. We are going to see a passengers >> driver *encompassment* (which we symbolize by ">>" to distinguish it from the simple inequality ">"). On one level, the driver's action is included in the entity

[5] See Tcherkézoff (2008b: chap. 9, section "the hierarchy of light").

formed by the passengers' group. On another – a secondary one – the driver differentiates himself from the passengers and asserts his autonomy and, if need be, his superiority through inequality. On the first level, the passengers encompass the driver just as the sacred encompasses the profane. As long as this *principal level* relation is respected, the driver possesses a *secondary level* on which he can assert his autonomy, just as the profane distinguishes itself from the sacred.

The passengers/driver relation brings us to the notion of *tāpua'i*: this is an attitude of "prayer" in which one is in communication with the other world. If our observation of the Samoan house had taken place in 1940, for example, we would have directly seen social facts revealing this encompassing link through the *tāpua'i*. These were rituals. They have all but disappeared. But we shall see how the language still retains a trace of *tāpua'i* in some spheres of daily life as in the dialogue between the passengers and the bus driver.

The driver's position on the bus

The material constraints of driving obviously mean that the driver has a fixed seat situated at the front. He is therefore outside the status system described up until now; he is in the profane. For if he were within the hierarchy of status, the place he occupies in the bus would pose a problem: the driver sits in front of everyone and he never changes places. This would mean that the driver was always the person on the bus with the highest status. The hypothesis is absurd, all the more so as the driver is hardly ever a chief, but a younger son of the family who owns the bus. This essential difference between the passengers and the driver, imposed by the operation of the bus, cannot be interpreted from within the sacred circle, in the logic of the hierarchy of status. So it is interpreted in a sacred/profane kind of relation, in the Samoan circle sense: being inside the sacred circle or outside it.

The obligatory verbal exchange on the bus between the passengers and the driver – and the tāpua'i *relation*

This relation between the passengers and the driver is expressed in a very specific verbal exchange which is heard as soon as the trip is long enough. At regular intervals, one of the passengers at the front (and ten or twenty minutes later, another, then another) says to the driver: *mālō le fa'auli*, "well done and thank you for your action of driving", and invariably the driver replies: *mālō le tāpua'i*, "well done and thank you for your spiritual support". Both

say this loudly enough for all the passengers to hear. As I shall explain, this exchange initiated by the passengers entails adopting a "sacred" position encompassing the driver, so the words are always said by the highest ranking passengers, therefore those seated at the front.

The driver's reply *mālō le tāpua'i* makes it possible to identify the kind of interaction immediately. In Samoa, whenever you go past, or find yourself next to, someone acting to achieve a recognizable aim while you yourself are doing nothing, or at least not performing the same action, you greet them. This is a social dictate. To go past someone without saying anything, whether you know the person or not, is to behave "like a spirit" (*aitu*), which is insulting since only "spirits" do not talk. To greet him, you say the word *mālō* ("well done and thank you for…") and add the term designating the action being done: gardening, fishing, cooking, weaving, building, playing sport, etc. – and here, driving a vehicle. In all these cases, the person replies without fail: "well done and thank you for your *tāpua'i*".

This word *mālō* is pronounced |*maaloo*| like the word meaning "victory", "victor", "government", etc. To say *mālō* to someone is to give him a message of welcome implying a certain submission on the speaker's part, this position of submission being offered as a mark of politeness. The meaning is therefore close to the English "well done!" but with an added connotation of thanks. It is used to honour *and* to thank[6].

The other significant word in this verbal exchange is *tāpua'i*. This is in a way the action of saying a prayer, usually silently; it is a communication with the next world done by forming a sacred circle and therefore placing oneself under prohibitions (the "taboos", *tapu*, the basis of the word *tāpu-ai*). But it is more than a prayer, it creates the conditions for the success of the action being enacted.

The elderly remember actual rites based on this *tāpua'i* principle[7]. A group forms a circle and everyone remains completely silent (other elements indicate that this is so that the divine and/or the spirits (*aitu*) will take possession of their spirit) while another group goes to perform the action planned. This division of labour existed on different levels. For example, in the family, when a relative set out on a journey; or in the village, when the chiefs of extended families had to make an important decision and needed to find inspiration in this mystical communication; or when part of the village went to fish on the open sea. Or again, in the district, when part of it went to wage war: whole villages then did the *tāpua'i* while the others went to war. There are still the cases of a relative who has gone on a journey or a group

[6] Another word, *fa'afetai*, is used to say "thank you!" when you receive a gift (food, an object, in an everyday or ceremonial context).
[7] *Tāpua'iga* is also said; the last syllable is simply a nominalization suffix : *tāpu-a'i-ga*.

that has gone to fish out at sea, but wars between districts ceased at the beginning of the century, with German colonization. The rite performed when taking an important decision lived on until about the 1960s. Coconuts, the symbolic container of the divine *par excellence*, were set out and all the blinds pulled down. This action was an invitation to the spirits (*aitu*) to slip into the house and take their places in the coconuts: contact with the next world is invited, though everyone knows it is highly dangerous. This rite is known to everyone over sixty. But most of the young, those under the age of twenty, questioned in the 2000s, and even in the 1990s, were not even aware of it. We can therefore say that it practically no longer exists.

In the kind of verbal exchange which takes place in the bus, no rite is created but the same idea is made explicit. All relations, established by the fact of saying "hello" in this way, are hierarchical. The person who initiates this verbal exchange sees things as follows. When you go past a house or a garden and notice someone else busy doing something, to say *mālō le* (plus the word designating the activity you see being performed), is to say to them, in the form of a gift of courtesy: "you are above me (in the field you are occupying, in the activity you are engaged in) because you are doing it and I am not". We are then in the mental attitude of welcoming a "victor" even if it is a metaphor. And the other person, by saying "*mālō le tāpua'i*", replies in such a way that for the two people involved this asymmetry – this inequality – which is offered to him as a gift of courtesy, becomes a sacred >> profane hierarchy and not a power struggle. With his answer "*mālō le tāpua'i*" he says: "if I am superior in this field of activity, it is thanks to the fact that you have put yourself in another field where this time it is you who are superior, through your silent and spiritual support (*tāpua'i*). My action does not entail a power struggle with you. As a mark of courtesy, I will make the following proposition which I ask you to accept: my action is a product of your *tāpua'i*". By replying in this way to the person who has just greeted you – congratulating him and thanking him for a *tāpua'i* – you are accepting the proposition of a mutual relation, by implying two basic and expected assumptions: 1) you are aware that he would have done the *tāpua'i* if he had known in advance of the action undertaken; 2) you accept placing yourself under his spiritual protection.

It is noteworthy that the reply "*mālō le tāpua'i*" is absolutely obligatory. The Samoans explain that to avoid making this reply is the height of "rudeness", the sign of a serious lack of "respect", *fa'aaloalo* (an omnipresent word in everything concerning hierarchical relations). There would therefore be a breach of relations of hierarchy if one failed to reply. As for knowing which of the two superiorities encompasses the other – and so reveals a hierarchy of

levels – there are proverbs clarifying this which say (about fishing or, in the past, war) that "the action is never superior to the *tāpua'i*"[8]. In short, the power relation – typically an inequality – implied by the idea of *mālō*, must be put on a lower level with respect to the *tāpua'i* relation.

Of course, this inclusion of the power relation in the social relation is just as implicit as when Westerners shake right hands to say "hello". When we greet each other, we do not think about the fact that, in times past, proffering the right hand was a manner of showing that we were refraining from reaching for a knife or a sword. Similarly, most Samoans simply know that the verbal exchange in question is an obligation of "politeness", of "respect", and very few of them think of the old *tāpua'i* rites. But for the observer language is a valuable witness. Not only of the past, but of the implicit. The question is not of knowing to what extent Samoans today remember the *tāpua'i* rites. It is that this verbal exchange will last as long as the social relation is thought of as something which must contain and restrain or, more precisely, encompass power relations.

The bus, the car and sport

The driver, by his reply, agrees to put himself in this *tāpua'i*/action relation vis-à-vis the passengers.

The same verbal exchange takes place in a car, whether it be a taxi or a private car transporting a group of relatives or friends. It even occurs more often than on the bus, perhaps because, in a car, it is the passengers/driver relation which automatically takes precedence. For the possibility of status gradation of seats is much more limited than on a bus. Let us note that it does exist however, as far as is possible in a car. People never fail to give the highest ranking person in the group the front seat, next to the driver, while the others – three, four and sometimes five of them – squash onto the back seat.

The examples of traditional *tāpua'i*, but also the context of contemporary sport, indicate how hierarchy is oriented between the levels of relations. In the stadium, the spectators are the *tāpua'i* side, the players the other side, that of action; and there too it is clearly stated that it is not the second side which is responsible for the result because "it is not superior to the *tāpua'i*". It is the *tāpua'i* which is the matrix of the action or at least of its result. The spectators are thus much more than a sports club's "supporters". Without them,

[8] *E sili le ta'i i le tāpua'i*. The word *ta'i* is a war term: the army's front line.

there would be no match, no result. They say they "are there to *tāpua'i*". Furthermore, this hierarchical *tāpua'i*/action opposition (here: spectators from the village/players in the village team, those who do the *tāpua'i*/those who perform the action) is always a very strong expression of the unity of a social group – in this case a village; all sports clubs are teams representing a village. Thus, it is really two whole villages that are present in a stadium. (That is why, taking into account the endemic rivalry between villages in the Samoan system, the atmosphere is electric after a tight or controversial match; a general brawl is never far off but it seldom breaks out[9]).

Generalization: action is always the product of the tāpua'i

Of course, it is known that, on a certain level, action exists by itself. A driver can drive an empty bus. But when you are acting, you cannot at the same time position yourself in order to be "seated", *nofo*, under the divine gaze. You are alone. Similarly, prayer by itself is only a request, subdivided, in the Samoan form of church worship, into "thanks", "(a request for) forgiveness" and "requests (for things, for desires to be fulfilled, etc.)". But when the two – the *fai* and the *tāpua'i*, the action and the prayer – are combined, by this ritual and hierarchical division of social work, the Samoans consider that life is under way. You are no longer alone, neither in the danger of action, for action is then the product of a *tāpua'i*, nor in contemplative prayer because the action requested in the prayer is already being carried out. As can be surmised, it is the introduction of the Christian religion which in a way decontextualized the *tāpua'i* to give the word the added meaning of "prayer" in the Christian sense; a prayer that can be termed contemplative because it is not organically connected to an action being done. But outside the church, the word regains its pre-Christian meaning, with the examples given.

It can therefore be said that the driver – more accurately: his action of driving – is what the passengers encompass, what the passengers' imaginary *tāpua'i* encompasses. Just as in Samoa all actions are encompassed by a *tāpua'i* (at least the actions belonging to the realm of "day" (*ao*), unlike those performed in a "hidden" or "nocturnal" fashion). Action is always, explicitly or implicitly, the product of a supposed *tāpua'i*.

To summarise:

1) The space inside the sacred circle is organized by the hierarchy of status. These are the passengers.

[9] For the sports context, see Clement (2014) on the socio-cultural aspects of Samoan rugby.

2) A space outside this hierarchy is imposed by the operational context of the bus. This is the driver's space.
3) A relation between the two poles is established: the driver's action is the product of the passengers' prayer, *tāpua'i*. The notion of *tapu*, "prohibition", is the mark of a hierarchical organization. When the driver acknowledges the passengers' *tāpua'i*, he acknowledges their group's hierarchical character, the sacred character of the space they occupy. The verbal exchange that makes the relation explicit is initiated by the passengers. From their point of view, and therefore from the sacred point of view, the driver is encompassed by their *tāpua'i.*

This model must now be developed further by observing how, in a limited space, the driver can nonetheless assert his autonomy.

The driver and his autonomy: hierarchical reversal

The driver's own private domain

The action is the product of the *tāpua'i* but it has the particularity of retaining its autonomy on another plane where the idea that there is a sphere proper to the action itself is essential. This is a sphere with its own logic and, on this plane – *on this secondary level* to be more accurate – the relation between he who acts and he who is in a *tāpua'i* state becomes the opposite of the one we have seen.

To begin with, we notice that the passenger must never make a comment to the driver about the way he drives or the route he takes. This is the case in a taxi too, and we have to accept the idea that, even if we are paying, we are not in the relation that is familiar to Westerners, that of a client who pays the operator to act. Of course, the idea that the taxi driver's autonomy must be respected exists in the Western context because of the fact, although this is increasingly rare in large towns, that the taxi driver owns his vehicle. On this level, the driver can reverse the client/operator relation: if the client is in a great hurry and asks the driver to take every risk he can, the latter does not have to accept. But this dimension is exaggerated in Samoa. The driver can do as he likes with his vehicle and the passenger has no say. For example, the vehicle is often in an advanced state of disrepair. Moreover, the way of driving, "to save petrol", is to stay in fourth gear all the time, even when the traffic or the road makes it necessary to slow down considerably, and the driver only changes gear if the engine is hiccupping and beginning to stall. Hence it is no exaggeration to say the driving

speed is sometimes that of someone running. Nonetheless, it would be very rude for the passenger to make the slightest comment. This would be to encroach on the level occupied by the driver's action and therefore, by putting different types of consideration on to one and the same plane, to create a distinctive opposition in the form of inequality: "your car is incapable of… you are incapable of…" which implies: "if I were in your place, I would do it better". This is precisely, people explain, why such a remark would be "very rude"; you are usurping a place, imposing yourself "forcibly" (*fia mālosi*). Here again we remember the power struggle context of the chief suddenly standing up in a ceremonial meeting to attempt to impose his point of view.

All this is encountered on the bus. The passengers will do no more than make little noises with their mouths[10] when the driver, not long after having driven off, in stifling heat, remembers he needs to go and fill up with petrol although he could have done it before (but this would have entailed him making a short trip with an empty bus and wasting some petrol), parks in front of the pumps and even has a little chat. Or when the driver, departing from the market place in Apia, a very hot, dusty spot with ten or fifteen buses all trying to inch their way through the traffic at the same time, starts the engine, drives round for a bit and comes back again two or three times in the hope of finding more passengers to fill the bus before setting off, the passengers now impatient to get on the road when the vehicle will finally pick up a little speed and the air will start to circulate, making the heat less unbearable.

Moreover, no one will take the liberty of making a comment on seeing the driver, when he goes through a village or on the suburban part of his route, stop in front of the house of each passenger who gets on or off, sometimes every fifteen metres, with the unpleasant consequences this entails: loss of time, lack of air circulation and the jerks painfully felt on these seats made of planks. Or even worse, when the driver stops at his favourite shop, on the edge of town, to do his shopping in anticipation of his return to the village[11]. Finally, it is impossible to complain if, on that day, for whatever reason good or bad on the part of the driver or owner, the bus does not run.

A model with two levels of relations

[10] A certain clicking of the tongue against the top of the palate is a sign immediately recognized as expressing annoyance but which calls for no antagonistic response: obviously, as can be seen in other contexts of use, the message is clear but one can pretend not to understand it.
[11] He often stays at the wheel and sends his "helper", *soa* (see below).

He who acts can impose his will on he who is in a *tāpua'i* state. Superiority is reversed: the inferior person can become the superior one. But he becomes superior *on an inferior level* of practices with respect to the overarching ideology of relations. It is an inferior level for two reasons. First of all, the range of application is limited and predetermined by the existence of the first level. Second, the reversed superiority is not of the same nature as the initial superiority. What was a *tāpua'i*/action encompassment, an almost divine/human relation, becomes simply an inequality. Here the driver's autonomy depends on the following inequality: owner (of the vehicle)/non-owners (the passengers), better at or more skilled in driving/worse or less skilled.

Within the hierarchy of status whose logic is that of the sacred, only one type of relation is at work. But the logic of the sacred/profane relationship requires two types of relations as well as a ranking of their levels: a *hierarchy of levels*. From the sacred point of view, the relation is that of encompassment. Our example shows the way in which action is the product of a *tāpua'i*: the village sports team has no meaning, no social existence, if there are no spectators to *tāpua'i*, whereas from the profane point of view, the action becomes autonomous and can assert its superiority, but in a secondary space.

This is what happens on the bus. On the principal level, the driver's driving is the result of the passengers' *tāpua'i*. Once this has been established and acknowledged, the driver can impose on his passengers whatever stems from his superiority as the owner of the vehicle (or as the owner's delegate) and as a professional driver.

The driver and his "helper": a confirmation

Samoans understand quite well that the action can exist by itself. People know that a driver can, physically speaking, drive a vehicle by himself. Yet it is very significant that no one in Samoa likes be alone at the wheel of a vehicle. Whether the trip is a long or a short one, whether it is by bus or private car, the driver always asks to be accompanied, even when it is obvious that he will not need any material help. This request is even more pressing if night has fallen. And yet there is no danger of his being attacked by highwaymen. So the fear is situated elsewhere: an action undertaken alone, without therefore the possibility of its being conceived as resulting from a *tāpua'i* circle, is meaningless or opens the door to all dangers (encounters with evil spirits).

This leads to a final point I need to discuss in order to complete the description of the seating system on the bus and one that confirms the ideology I have examined here concerning the order of seats.

The idea that for a given action the actor will have a "companion who helps", *soa*, is very common in Samoan life. The traditional action often cited is that of male tattooing, which is very dangerous because a little blood is spilled during the operation and the spirits, *aitu*, are hovering around ready to steal the soul. These practices involving the *soa* were still current in the 1960s. A chief's son who gets tattooed always has one or two *soa*, the sons of men of inferior status connected to the chief, who will also get tattooed and who, it is said, will be the first to experience the potential attack of evil powers. Another traditional example of *soa* is when they act as intermediaries in talks between an engaged couple's families: the boy takes one of his male friends and the girl one of her girlfriends. This is still done. The *soa* relation is called *fesoasoani*, "mutual aid". The concept of *fesoasoani* is constantly invoked in family, village and friendship relations.

Let us return to the bus. This horror of doing things alone means that the driver nearly always has a "helper", *soa*. He sits next to the driver, on the bench situated on the same level. So this bench is the one furthest forward, of course unrelated to the hierarchy of status/seats. The exception which applies to the driver's seat applies equally to this bench.

Note here a technical consideration already mentioned. Access to the bus is from just behind this bench. It cannot be otherwise as the first bench is situated over the front axle and, taking into account the height of the axle on this kind of truck, it is not possible for the passenger compartment to have an opening there. The status rules we have spoken about therefore begin with the benches situated behind this entrance. The bench right at the front, next to the driver, is placed outside the system. Yet this bench, like the others, has two seats. If the driver's companion occupies one of these, the other remains free. Who is going to sit there if the bus becomes very full? It is no surprise to see that a younger man can happily come and occupy the empty seat next to the driver's companion. This bench is not in front of the other benches, it is not a "front" (*i luma*) seat, it is not a high status place. Just like the driver's seat, it is situated outside the space organized by the hierarchy of status. So the "companion", *soa*, and a younger man may sit there. This seat is treated exactly like those situated at the back of the bus. And so, when the vehicle is very full, another younger man can sit on the lap of the one who is sitting next to the driver's companion, as is done in the seats at the back of the passenger compartment. (It is true that this place does have a few inconveniences. You only have the windscreen to press your hands against if the bus brakes

suddenly – that is to say every time the driver brakes; moreover, you are above the engine and the floor is burning hot).

The *soa* is a companion for action; he helps morally or practically, and provides protection from danger. On the bus, as in the taxi, a driver who finds himself alone, on a long trip and/or at night, dreads – he is quite explicit about it – the danger of "spirits", *aitu*, just as much as someone who is tattooed with no companion does. There are many stories in circulation about such and such a taxi-driver who is said to have driven his taxi alone in the evening and picked up passengers who turned out to be *aitu*. Once they had got out, they tried to lure the driver out of his vehicle, but the driver was "strong" enough to resist their entreaties and drove away as fast as possible without asking for his fare. The driver is nearly always a man and these *aitu* are very often women who sexually entice the driver out of his vehicle. All those who tell this story had been "strong" enough, according to them, to resist – otherwise they would not be here to tell the tale.

The driver is thus surrounded by two types of protection: that obtained from the passengers' *tāpua'i* and that afforded by "a companion who helps" (*soa*). The passengers who manifest the *tāpua'i* or who at least represent the *tāpua'i* side offer protection of the first order. They are on God's side and cannot be "spirits" (*aitu*). As for the "helper" (*soa*), he is a comrade-in-arms against the spirits (the relation with the evil *aitu* is often expressed in terms of war, the latter must be "fought against"): he offers a lesser order of protection.

The passengers and the stops. For equality and individualism

We have noted the manifestation of the driver's domination on a secondary level, in his individual capacity as the sole owner (or as the owner's delegate) of the bus and the only person with an official licence for driving vehicles transporting passengers. By placing ourselves on the passengers' side this time, we also notice behaviour which seems to reverse hierarchical etiquette on a secondary level. This attitude seems to be the height of individualism: stopping the bus, and therefore everyone on board, in order to be able to get off or on wherever it suits the passenger.

It seems that this extreme individualism can coexist with the kind of highly developed hierarchy that we have observed in the system of seats. Of course, this is not the moral and social individualism characteristic of Western modernity. Nevertheless, in comparison with the hierarchical etiquette present throughout Samoan society, this behaviour attracts the

observer's attention – while for the Samoans there seems to be nothing to be surprised at or even worth commenting on.

There is no system of fixed stops in the way of signs in the streets or on the roads. Inside the vehicle, there is a rope above the benches, extending the length of the right hand and left hand rows. The passengers can raise their arm, grab hold of the rope and pull it. A bell rings near the driver who stops the bus without looking for a specially prepared part of the verge or a set stop as these do not exist. The most extraordinary thing for the observer is that this system has no limits. Sometimes you can actually see a passenger stop the bus, then another one, who had made no move, pull on the rope ten seconds later and get off ten metres after the spot where the first one had alighted, and then a third passenger do the same thing. Neither the driver nor the passengers say anything. The observer's astonishment continues: this system pays no attention to status. The bus stops ten metres further on and no one says a word even if the person who has requested the stop is a child. He jumps off nimbly and – the observer says to himself – could, therefore, have very easily used the stop requested by the former passenger and walked the remaining ten metres. It is true that the sun is at its zenith and you can really feel the back of your neck burning as you walk along, which means that three hundred metres more or less does count; but ten metres… It is exactly the same thing for the passengers who want to board. Positioned along the route, at the spot they have chosen, they just have to raise their arm and the bus will stop.

Of course, our interlocutors found a European system with enforced stops utterly "unjust" and "anti-Fa'aSamoa". When told that a Parisian bus driver, stopped at a red light, often refuses to open the door for passengers who want to get off or on at this point rather than wait for the official stop (and ignoring the question of insurance: if anything happens to the alighting customer, the driver and the transport company are fully responsible), they commented sadly on "this lack of *alofa*" which – for they have heard many other anecdotes recounted by their cousins who have emigrated to New Zealand, Australia or the United States about "the *Papalagi*'s lack of *alofa*" – seems to them so characteristic of the Europeans' way of life. In fact, shortly after or just before independence, Western Samoa's local government had tried to put up bus stop signs; but everyone had ignored them which meant that the experiment was never repeated[12]. So this practice really represents the height of individualism. Each passenger obliges the whole community of passengers to stop wherever it

[12] The only recent (in the late 1990s) development is that, in the actual town centre, the authorities have stationed policemen simply to prohibit buses from stopping before they get to the bus station; this ban covers two to three hundred metres (fifteen years later, the ban has been extended to the whole downtown area).

suits him. For the Samoans, there is no reason for complaint as this individualistic behaviour is open to any and every passenger; it is therefore egalitarian. This is the argument put forward in response to my astonishment, and so because this individualistic behaviour is egalitarian, it has no difficulty coexisting with the hierarchy of status.

Public transport and comparing cultures

In summary, for the Samoans, the coexistence of such a hierarchy and of individualistic egalitarianism is not contradictory, however contradictory it may appear in Western terms. The Samoan configuration makes sense *in the overall contrast* with the Western manner of conceiving how relations may coexist. It is through this contrast that the observation becomes comparative and therefore anthropologically significant. In essence, the bus is both a means of transporting the village "sacred circle" and a taxi which stops on request in front of everyone's house. In addition, the comparison prompts us to look at the kava-drinking ritual, a ritual which precedes all formal meetings and constitutes the "sacred circle" *par excellence*. Everyone sits around the circle. An officiant brings an enormous bowl containing the liquid and takes just one small cup (half an empty coconut shell). He gives a full cup to each person, in turn, following the hierarchical order of places around the circle. Everybody drinks from the same cup the same quantity, taken from the same bowl – but everyone drinks in turn. This intimate mixing of equality and hierarchy is, in contrast with Western thinking and practices, a characteristic trait of Samoan culture.

Through such a contrast, the specificity of the Samoan transport system can be made anthropologically significant. In Western societies, the bus and the coach are elements of a transport system defined on a different scale: that of the urban area or country-wide, with an urban or national transport authority to run it. The transport system will have fixed stops and a set timetable. But in Samoa the bus is a social microcosm. So it is a partial whole, an entity which is not at the service of a larger technical system. Hence the absence of fixed stops and the absence of a set, or even approximate, timetable. The hierarchy of seats is fundamentally alien to Westerners, class inequality is fundamentally unpleasant to Samoans. Lastly, equality is valorised to the extent, on occasion, of assuming a form in which the individual takes precedence over the community: everyone gets off wherever they want.

And let me raise a last point in the comparison. In the West, the passenger is a client. That is why he always pays at the beginning of his ride, on boarding. But, in Samoa, what

happens is the reverse of this, and this fact may also be significant in the contrast we noted. In the village of L., a Westerner from New Zealand who was not very well-off, married a Samoan woman and bought a bus that he drove himself. At first the Samoans found this highly amusing, the Westerner being in theory a person of high status in Samoan representations; people expected him to take one of his wife's brothers as driver. When he started his operation, as passengers got on, the driver held out his hand and asked for payment much to the astonishment and displeasure of the passengers. He soon understood, as I was told, that “this is not done in Samoa". If the passenger paid in advance, he would have the same kind of relation with the driver and the bus as a Samoan when he borrows, from a relative or a neighbour, an object which is not part of ceremonial circulation: a vehicle, a petrol-driven mower, a power-saw, etc.; he pays to borrow it, even from his cousin. Once money has been given, the relation can no longer be of the *tāpua'i*/action type. This is undoubtedly why Samoans find it contradictory and therefore improper to be asked to pay when they get on. It is not until he gets off that the passenger is no longer part of the sacred *tāpua'i* circle but becomes an individual defined by strict equality (as we saw in relation to payment) and by individualistic behaviour (as we saw in relation to stops) – with the possibility of acting on both levels (a chief getting off and, having spotted some relatives in the bus who will get off further on, giving the driver the fare for all of them, with a few words to enable him to identify them).

My analysis of Samoan practices in the everyday context of journeys by bus has shown that by avoiding the confusion of hierarchy and inequality and adding the distinction between them to the only alternative provided by Western ideology (equality/inequality), we are able to advance intercultural dialogue. The distinction enables us to understand that Samoans are shocked by a certain kind of differentiation they observe in Western countries, such as the inequality of “classes” in transport systems, and that this judgment is not in conflict with their own valorisation of inequality in the "positions" (*tulaga*) system in the village, the house… and on the bus. To make explicit our understanding of the non-contradictory character of these two Samoan judgments, it is useful to add another term to the notion of "inequality". Following Louis Dumont, I have chosen the word "hierarchy".

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