

Chapter 5

Uncertain Times: Sailors, Beachcombers and Castaways as “Missionaries” and Cultural Mediators in Tonga (Polynesia)

Françoise Douaire-Marsaudon

Introduction: How the South Sea Islands Were “Invented” Before They Were Discovered

This chapter focuses on a particular period in the history of the first European contacts with Tonga, that is, between 1796 and 1826, a period which was unmarked by any events sufficiently important to have interested contemporary chroniclers or historians, which is why I refer to it as “uncertain times.” But in order to explain my choice of this phase of Tongan history, I would like to first describe the analytic framework within which I have situated my work on “first contacts.”

We may consider “first contacts” as a particular period in the history of cultural globalisation. From this perspective, we have to take into account the fact that this historical phase may vary considerably from one country to another and may be much longer and consequently more heterogeneous than was affirmed when academic interest in this topic began. For Tonga, the very first contact between the indigenous inhabitants and European sailors took place in the year 1616, when the Dutch vessel *Eendracht*, commanded by Captain Schouten, with the merchant Lemaire on board, visited the archipelago for purely economic reasons. If we agree that the period of first contacts came to an end with the first successful installation of the Christian mission in about 1826, the history of the first contacts in Tonga lasted more than two centuries. Of course, during these two hundred years, all European visitors were not of one type, did not share the same vision of the world and did not have the same intentions toward the populations they encountered. However, a lot of them, particularly those who narrated their adventures in the South Seas, did share, as we shall see, a kind of a common heritage, which appears to be a many-faceted representation of an imagined world of adventure.

The “beginnings” of a situation are always and by their very nature of interest to social scientists, as has been emphasised by Pierre Bourdieu and others. This is the case with these “first contacts.” Certain situations, however, are doubly “beginnings” and this is precisely the case for these “uncertain times” in Tonga. It is a time of “first contacts” in that for the first time the Tongans saw Europeans settle and live on their land; but it also coincides with the commencement of a particularly significant process, Christianisation. However, this period is not well known because, from a European point of view, no decisive events occurred and it was a time of total failure for the first “missionaries.” Accordingly, this period is rarely mentioned in books and articles dedicated to the history of Christian missions.¹ However, these “uncertain times” are particularly crucial for the understanding of the whole history of “first contacts” in Tonga, because it was during this period that the first European communities settled in the islands. Ten young proselytes of the London Missionary Society and also a small group of white people – runaway sailors, castaways and escaped convicts – became the first white residents of the Tongan islands. For the first time, the indigenous people could observe white people as they really were.

If the European vision of the South Seas may be considered a long-lasting story which began in the sixteenth century, long before the Enlightenment, the representation of Pacific peoples may be considered more complex than the commonly quoted myth of the “noble savage.” As we know, the whole story of the myth of the “noble savage” began on the shores of America at the end of the fifteenth century. The discovery and the conquest of the Americas during the sixteenth century showed the Europeans that peoples existed who could not be confused with the concept of “savage” as it was perceived during the middle ages: a sort of wolf-man, a monster, directly born from the imagination and fears of the medieval age, and much closer to animals than to man. With the discovery of the populations of America, the “savage” became for Europeans a permanent subject of fascination, corresponding precisely to the slow birth of anthropology. Faced by these new peoples, navigators, princes, theologians and missionaries were confronted with the necessity of defining the nature of this new “savage”: those inhabitants of the New World could hardly be relegated to the extreme limits of humanity.² Finally, the conquest of America constrained the pope to take a position.

The first text which speaks about the nature of the “savages” is the papal bull *Sublimis deus*, promulgated in 1537 by Pope Paul III. This text established the humanity and the divine origin of all the “savages” with whom the Europeans would come into contact. However, the colonisation of the New World led to the slaughter of the Indian populations and the ruin of the pre-Columbian empires, despite the efforts of some men, like Bartolomé de Las Casas, who drew up a veritable indictment of colonisation and pleaded for the defense of the Indian populations, presented as “noble savages.”³

In other words, when the first European voyagers after Magellan sailed into the Pacific waters, they had already, and long before J.J. Rousseau, their vision of the “noble savage.” As it has been suggested by Eric Vibart (1987), it is probable that the European “bad conscience” following the tragic episodes of the American colonisation played a role in the idea that confrontation in the Pacific would *not* be as disastrous as was the case in America. Nothing echoes these preoccupations more than the myths and legends of the Terra Australis:

Mythical territory for geographers, the austral continent also soon became an imaginary landscape for philosophers. A place of fantasy that in their minds already had an existence, it gave rise, in the years preceding the scientific exploration of the Enlightenment, to scope for creative thinking, the source and confluence of all utopias (1987, 22).

The Portuguese Pedro Fernandez de Quirós was, from the start of the exploration of the southern seas, one of the principal architects of the myth of a welcoming, beneficial land, perfect from all points of view as opposed to the violence and corruption of the Western world. Basing himself on the few islands discovered during his expedition, he launched into an a priori description of the Terra Australis. The riches of nature met the needs of all. The inhabitants, white-skinned natives, were represented as easy to approach, convert and civilise, and therefore superior to the American races by their physical and moral qualities. In fact, Quirós’ text prefigured later paintings of Polynesian Edens (cf. Jolly, this volume).

This vision was to be adopted and developed in the narratives called “philosophical odysseys,” which flourished on the eve of the eighteenth century. Among these narratives, we may cite *L’Histoire des Sévarambes* (Vairasse d’Alais 1715). In this book, originally published in 1675 in London, England, Denis Vairasse d’Alais, who claimed as authority Plato and Thomas More, presented an ideal city, where community law created perfect harmony between the individual and society (Vibart 1987, 28ff.), where everything – families, institutions, trade associations, groups – was in permanent osmosis. This ideal city was also a veiled criticism of the France of Louis XIV.⁴

All these philosophical travellers’ tales preceded, and up to a point prepared for, the rapid development in the eighteenth century of the natural history of man. People turned away from their religious preoccupations and made man the centre of their literary and philosophical discourse. For natural philosophers, men were not united by a common genesis, but by their common – therefore universal – nature, source of both highly civilised societies and the most remote tribes. This natural history of man was born in England with Hobbes (*Leviathan*, 1651), then Locke (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690). For the latter, we know that the state of nature was a state where all were free, equal and independent, the only obligation being to conform to the law of nature. The

necessity of respecting this natural law imposed the creation of a civil society (*Two Treatises of Government*, 1690). These writers were the precursors of what will later be called “cultural primitivism.”

These examples are sufficient to show that Europeans had “invented” the South Seas and their inhabitants, even before they were “discovered”. We can say that the arrival of the Europeans in the Pacific, and particularly in Polynesia, fleshed out an imaginary preconception built up over nearly two centuries. European travellers would come to the South Seas at different times and with very different, even divergent, ideas. However, “all show a strong intellectual proclivity, based on three elements: the American heritage, the myth of the South Seas and the principles of the natural history of man” (Vibart 1987, 46).

To conclude this long introduction and before turning to my discussion on Tonga, I would like to add a brief remark about one of the items which was exchanged between Europeans and Pacific Islanders: writing. Writing is, of course, both a knowledge and skill, and in the relations between the Europeans and the Pacific Islanders it had a status equivalent to that of healing. Many accounts show that writing and healing were both considered by indigenous people as practices related to religious and cosmic forces. But we have also to take into account that, in these societies of oral culture, the discovery and learning of writing not only transformed the system of oral transmission but also had profound effects on cognitive processes and social organisation as a whole.⁵

Missionary Fervour

At the end of the eighteenth century, England, roused by the preaching of the Methodist John Wesley, experienced a veritable religious revival, shaking up both traditional Anglican society, ensconced in its privileges, and dissenters, split into rival factions. The reports of Cook’s voyages came just at the right time: they depicted a people given over to sin, whose salvation depended on those who had received the Word of God. Missionary work was seen in all its glory as the highest expression of religious fervour. At the end of the eighteenth century, an extraordinary flowering of missionary societies was seen: the Baptist Society (1792); London Missionary Society (1795); Church Missionary Society (1799); and Wesleyan Missionary Society (Julien 1971 [1942], 68ff.) were all established.

In 1796, the London Missionary Society, in order to save the South Sea Islanders from heathenism, sent an expedition to the Pacific on the missionary ship *Duff*, under Captain James Wilson, with thirty missionaries on board. They were young men, most of them in their twenties, all artisans, sometimes accompanied by their families (Latukefu 1974, 25). They had a strong professional background, but not much intellectual education and no missionary experience

at all (Farmer 1855, 78). Only four of them were ordained. They were all Calvinists and saw themselves as saved sinners, and different from worldly men (Gunson 1977, 98). They shared a passion for the salvation of lost souls, a salvation for which each of them was convinced God had called him. The London Missionary Society had been founded with the idea of “civilising” the natives before converting them; for that, it was necessary first to teach them practical skills, like carpentry, to engage their interest before turning them toward the Christian religion (Wood 1932, 27).

First Mission, First Setbacks

On the way to Tahiti, ten missionaries were left behind in Tonga (of those ten, none were ordained). On their arrival, in April 1797, the missionaries were surprised to see two fellow countrymen coming aboard, Ambler and Connelly. The two were prisoners who had escaped on their way to the penal colony of New South Wales. They belonged to a group of six beachcombers, composed of a sailor and five escaped convicts, who were the first European settlers in Tonga, and the start of a small community of Europeans.⁶ At first, the missionaries made use of these beachcombers as translators – Ambler and Connelly were fluent in Tongan.⁷ However, their relations soon deteriorated. According to Niel Gunson, these first missionaries “were an unusual category of men. In class and background they had much in common with their beachcombing rivals. For the most part, they were lower class, aspiring to the next rung up on the social ladder; they were provincial, and enthusiastic about their religion” (Gunson 1977, 98).

From the start the Tongans, the chiefs in particular, were more interested in the missionaries’ iron tools and other equipment than in their teachings. The missionaries were generous with the chiefs and soon they became the recognised source of European goods. For a brief time, they appeared to have superior *mana* compared with that of the beachcombers: “their stocks of material goods were greater and they had influence with the ship which brought them” (Gunson 1977, 98). The beachcombers, too, asked to be supplied with this material, but, since the missionaries quickly understood that their precious stock should last as long as possible, they began to refuse. The beachcombers then incited the Tongans to steal from the missionaries, which made their relationship worse. The missionaries explained to the Tongans that the beachcombers had violated the law of their own country and had come to Tonga to try to escape their punishment. The beachcombers, in their turn, said that they themselves were men of high rank in England, but that the missionaries were only *tua*, that is, commoners or “low people,” that they were sent by the king of England to settle amongst them, destroy their chiefs and get the country into their own hands. They were singing and praying in order to invoke their gods, and they used their big book for witchcraft. Unfortunately for the missionaries, four chiefs of

high rank died within months of their arrival (Gunson 1977, 99; Wilson 1799, 257). This seemed to confirm the rumours propagated by the beachcombers. For the missionaries, the situation deteriorated until 1799, when a civil war broke out in which three missionaries were killed. They became the first martyrs of the Pacific, although the reason for their deaths had nothing to do with religion. The other missionaries left, except one, Vason, who decided to abandon the Christian religion and to live like a Tongan (*fakatonga*). He stayed in Tonga for four years under the protection of a chief of royal blood, Mulikiha`amea, married his daughters and received a large piece of land, which he cultivated with great success (Vason 1840). In January 1800, he took advantage of the arrival of a European ship to escape to Australia. Tonga would not see another missionary for almost a quarter of a century.

Beachcombers and Castaways: Mercenaries, Wreckers and ... Teachers

The beachcombers, however, became more and more numerous, particularly with the development of whaling. Some of the runaway sailors became wreckers with the help, and often for the benefit, of chiefs. We know that, at this time, at least a dozen whites, beachcombers or castaways, lived in Tonga and served like mercenaries for the chiefs under whose authority they were living.⁸ At first, these Europeans explained the handling of firearms (guns and canons) seized from ships.

However, the exchange between Tongans and Europeans was not limited to trade in tools and firearms only. Some better educated beachcombers, at least better educated than the others, took up the function of teacher-advisers to the chiefs. One of them, named William Brown, became a valued retainer of the Finau family (chiefs of very high rank). According to Gunson, his life and influence resembled that of a secular missionary (1977, 105) and he taught some of the more intelligent and enterprising chiefs to read and write. William Brown and another beachcomber, William Singleton, became the official scribes of chiefs of royal rank. Soon it became fashionable for every high chief to have a white man as his official scribe. These beachcombers transmitted the art of writing to the chiefs and, because the only available texts were those in the Bible, they taught the Tongans some basic knowledge of the Christian religion.

In Vava`u, the northern group of the Tongan islands, another beachcomber, Samuel Blackmore, had the distinction of being the first runaway sailor to teach the people about the Christian god, before any missionaries: the story of Jehovah in the Bible, recounted by this English sailor, so influenced a young chief of high rank (Lolohea) that he became the first recognised Christian convert in the group. A shipwrecked 16-year-old English boy, William Mariner, became famous because his adventures were reported in detail in a book which is, today, considered as a major source of Tongan history.⁹ In 1806 his ship, the

Port-au-Prince, was captured by Tongans, looted and burnt, and some of the crew were murdered. The survivors formed the mercenary artillery force of an ambitious chief, Finau Ulukalala, who adopted the English boy as his son. William Mariner succeeded in saving some books from the ship. The first reaction of Finau Ulukalala, his adoptive father, was to burn the books. For him, in the words of William Mariner “those books and papers were the means of invocation to bring down some evil upon the country” (Martin 1981, 65), and “he would not allow him to practise witchcraft to the injury of the Tongan people” (65). He told William Mariner that, some years before, several white men had come and built a house in which “they used often to shut themselves up, to sing and perform ceremonies” and that, after a while, many chiefs died (65). Later, William Mariner discussed literacy with this chief. He told him that in several parts of the world messages were sent great distances through the medium of writing. The chief acknowledged this “to be a most noble invention,” but added that it would not do at all for the Tongan islands; that there would be nothing but disturbances and conspiracies, and he would not be sure to live, perhaps even for another month. He said, however, that he would like to know it himself and for all the women to know it, so that he might make love with less risk of discovery, and not so much chance of incurring the vengeance of their husbands (93–4). And so it passed that the young Mariner transmitted the knowledge of reading and writing to many Tongan chiefs together with notions of the Christian religion.

Learning to Read with the Bible

When Christianity was adopted by the people of Lifuka, the central group of the Tongan archipelago, Captain Samuel Henry reported that they had “actually made a sailor their teacher. He teaches them to read and write on the sand, and prays in the chapel on Sunday. One of the chiefs has given up his house as a chapel” (Farmer 1855, 174–5, cited in Gunson 1977, 106).

In 1822 three missionaries from Tahiti went ashore in Vava`u, the northern Tongan archipelago. Their reports, sent to Tahiti, testified to the situation: “So desirous are the adjacent islands to obtain native teachers that those sent to Vava`u are kept in the centre of the inhabitants lest the kings of the neighbouring islands should come and steal them away” (Gunson 1977, 110). These Tahitian missionaries, however, fled after the destruction of their chapel, some months later.

The desire for literacy seems to have spread to Samoa. After the arrival on Savai`i of the first Christian party from Tonga some of its members were appointed by the Tongan chief to teach the Samoans to read. “Although there were some Tahitian teachers there already, American, English and Hawaiian sailors were soon in demand as teachers” (Gunson 1977, 106). Finally, certain Tongan chiefs went to visit places such as Sydney, Tahiti and Canton, and came

back after having learned to read and write – and also gained some basic knowledge of the Christian religion. In their turn, they served as teachers. The missionaries who came at the end of these “uncertain times” acknowledged that amongst the first Tongans to become Christian there were many young chiefs who had already learned to read the Bible.

The Role of Literacy in the First Missionary Successes

Thus, in 1800, Tonga had been abandoned by the missionaries of the London Missionary Society. After an unfruitful effort in 1822, the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Sydney decided to send two missionaries to Tonga in 1826. At first, they had many difficulties and the mission was on the point of being abandoned. In 1827, however, the chapel built by them in Nuku`alofa was filled with people every Sunday. What had happened? Firstly, the Wesleyans from Sydney had sent help in the form of two more missionaries, and one of them, Turner, had a solid intellectual background, some medical skills and missionary experience among the Maori of New Zealand. Soon, Turner decided to organise the new converts in classes where they were prepared to become active members of the mission. In these classes, the missionaries used the Bible as the basis for instruction in reading. The missionaries also decided to open a public school in March 1828. In September, the school received 150 students, boys and girls. Turner asked their colleagues to write down everything they taught, and to write it down in Tongan. In 1829, the missionaries decided to translate the Bible into Tongan, each of them having to translate a part of the Bible. In 1831, the mission received a small printing press and the first Tongan book was published on April 14 of the same year.

As from 1831, the main role in the Christianisation process was played by a young and ambitious chief, Taufa`ahau, who was to become the first Christian king and the founding father of the Tongan nation. Before his conversion Taufa`ahau, as the governor of the central archipelago, paid several visits to the main island, where he met the missionaries and also some of his relatives who were already converted. Back again in Ha`apai, he decided to use an ungodly runaway sailor “to trace the letters of the alphabet upon the sand of the seashore, for the benefit of those who wanted to learn.” (West 1865, quoted by Latukefu, 1977, 126). He also obliged the sailor to celebrate the Christian god through prayers in a house which he reserved for this purpose.

After his conversion in 1831, Taufa`ahau waged long wars against the traditionalist chiefs, including the paramount chief, the Tu`i Tonga. Although these wars were mainly political, they were undertaken in the name of the Christian god, and with the active support of the missionaries. Meanwhile, education continued to receive high priority in the work of the mission. At a district meeting in May 1850, the members of the mission unanimously declared: “We must have schools in every place ... thus elevating the rising race with the

Bible in their hands, far above the darkness and baseness of heathenism and the wicked intrigues of Popery” (Latukeyu 1974, 129–30). Taufa’ahau, then King George Tupou I, supported the missionaries’ efforts to build schools in every way possible.¹⁰ The promotion of education culminated in the establishment, in 1866, of Tupou College, where chiefs and commoners were treated alike.¹¹ Many commoners proved themselves to be outstanding scholars and formed a new educated elite, the basis of the future middle class.

Conclusion

In the Pacific region, the period of the so-called “first contacts” may vary considerably from one country to another, in terms of length and processes. In some cases, such as in Tonga, this period lasted more than two centuries. During this long-lasting time of “first contacts” the European voyagers were not of one kind, did not share the same vision of the world and were not armed with the same intentions toward the Pacific Islanders. However, it seems possible to sketch a sort of common “European” heritage, which was shared by some of them at least. When attested, this long-lasting period of “first contacts” is generally constructed in different phases, some of which are well known, while others appear blurry. The turn of the eighteenth century in Tonga is precisely one of these “uncertain times” during which, through the existence in their country of a small community of white people, Tongans came to know the new foreigners. Their goods, abilities and skills came to be regarded as more and more desirable, but at the same time they put into question the Tongan system of representation and values.

The “heroes” of these uncertain times were not only the young and inexperienced missionaries but also the beachcombers and castaways. Curiously enough, these white men who were supposed to be “undesirable,” prepared the ground for the future Christian missions and played an important role in the relationship between the European and Tongan systems of values. With the missionaries, but also without them, they were the first cultural mediators between Europeans and Tongans.

Many things have been said about the natives’ greed for European goods, particularly metal tools, weapons and cloth, those goods for which natives were – to use the missionaries’ words – “dying from desire.” There is no doubt that, in Tonga, these goods attracted the indigenous people and convinced them of the missionaries’ *mana* and the powerfulness of the Christian god. Together with these objects, certain European skills helped the missionaries’ work considerably. In many countries, the medical skills of some missionaries constituted a powerful tool in the work of evangelisation. The healing part of the mission’s work was also important in Tonga, but writing must be considered as having played a role at least as important in the process of Christianisation. However, literacy had a particular effect on the Tongan system of values and power.

For Tongans, writing was at first suspected of being witchcraft: like firearms, writing appeared as a secret skill, the property of a few (white) experts, who used the magical power to kill at distance. Soon, however, Tongan chiefs understood the multidimensional character of writing, as the Tongan chief, Finau Ulukakala perceived: a technical means of communicating at a distance; a privileged way to get access to secret knowledge; and thus, a means of power. No doubt Tongans were conscious that writing could serve purposes other than religion. However, because it was learned through biblical texts, literacy was, for Tongans, intrinsically associated with the religious interests of the white people: their god, their mythology, their rituals. For Tongans, literacy was therefore conceived as a privileged tool to get access to the white people's world. And, because the evangelical undertaking was by definition a global one, in principle every Tongan – not only chiefs – willing to be Christianised could get access to writing. Thus, for commoners, the art of writing was soon to become a powerful means of challenging the traditional hierarchy of rank. In many respects, it is still the case today, in contemporary Tongan society.

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Notes

¹ We do have sources, but they did not yield lengthy narratives as did the voyages of discovery. It must be noted that the last years of the eighteenth century corresponded precisely to the slowing down of the "narratives of discovery" all over the Pacific (Vibart 1987).

² In some late descriptions, Europeans still confused Amerindian peoples with Medieval-style ideas about savages. However, generally speaking, the continued confrontation with these peoples during the conquest and the colonial period, their mutual frequenting on an increasingly daily basis, tended to impose, little by little, the "*principe de réalité*" (reality principle) at the expense of the fiction.

³ In the years following his return to Spain in 1546, Bartolomé de Las Casas published the *Très brève relation de la destruction des Indes* (after *Trente propositions très juridiques* (1974)) and other texts (cf. *Histoire des Indes*, Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 2002). Throughout his writings, he stayed true to the image of the "noble savage." Until his death in 1566, Las Casas spoke for all those who sought to modify the status of the Indians and to put an end to their extermination.

⁴ In another odyssey of the same type, *Les aventures de Jacques Sadeur dans la découverte et le voyage de la terre Australe* (Christophe David, Paris, 1705), Gabriel de Foigny presents his hero Jacques Sadeur, a hermaphrodite, who reaches Terra Australis after a long and difficult voyage (Vibart 1987, 30). His hermaphroditism saves his life, because Australians are hermaphrodites and systematically massacre any unisexual beings who fall into their hands (Vibart 1987, 30).

⁵ Compare the work and comments of Jack Goody (1979, 2000) on the implications of literacy. See also Brigitte Derlon's article concerning the association of cargo and books with Europeans' *malanggan*, an association around which a cargo cult developed. This association left a highly significant trace in the verb that designates the act of writing in Mandak, which is itself formed from *malanggan* (Derlon 1997, 135–66).

⁶ The beachcombers who arrived in Tonga before 1797 appear to have been convicts from New South Wales who left the American ship *Otter* in March 1796. Morgan Bryan, an Irishman, was perhaps the most influential of these; "he was the prototype of the hedonistic low-cultured beachcomber, skilled in the use of iron tools and weapons but otherwise deficient in communicating the advantages of western

civilisation. The first missionaries ... found him singularly depraved and they did not like him near them" (Gunson 1977, 96; see also Wilson 1799, 246).

⁷ Connelly resided with Fatafehi, the Tu`i Tonga (paramount chief) designate, while Ambler was married to the daughters of the chief of the fleet of Tuku`aho, the *hau*, or "working king" (see Gunson 1977, 96).

⁸ According to Gunson, from 1796 to 1826 over eighty aliens from Europe and distant Pacific islands resided in Tonga (Gunson 1977, 90).

⁹ His adventures were written by an English doctor, John Martin, in 1817 (see Martin 1981).

¹⁰ In a memorable sermon, he exhorted his fellow countrymen with these words: "See what knowledge has done for the white man! See what ignorance has done for the men of this land! Is it that white men are born more wise? Is it that they are naturally more capable than the others? No: but they have obtained knowledge ... This is the principal cause of the difference (Latukeyu 1977, 130).

¹¹ As soon as the hostilities ceased, Taufa`ahau concerned himself with evangelisation as much as education, the two going together as far as he was concerned. Tupou College was intended to form an elite with the mission of enforcing the new laws. In this school it should be noted that while they evidently learned English, the Tongan language was used for religious instruction (from which stems the development of a body of religious – and also literary and scientific – studies in Tongan). Girls were admitted into the school from 1880.