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THE UNWARRANTED ENCOUNTER BETWEEN THE ETYMOLOGY OF PAPĀLAGI AND THE APOTHEOSIS OF CAPTAIN COOK

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In a previous issue, JPS published my critique (Tcherkézoff 1999) of the folk etymology prevalent in Samoa and in the European literature on Samoa that claims that the word papālagi, used throughout the region (in various cognate forms) to designate Europeans, would have been coined by Western Polynesians with the meaning of “sky-bursters” (pā: to burst, lagi: sky). While dismissing the “burster” hypothesis, I maintained that the reference to the cosmological ‘sky’ should still be considered as an element of the word’s etymology, unless a foreign origin for the word was assumed. Recently, Paul Geraghty and Jan Tent (2001) added new and appealing data to the etymological discussion, arguing that the word was borrowed from the Malay.

But they took this finding beyond a linguistic discussion and concluded that anybody suggesting the hypothesis that ‘sky’ is a base in papālagi is creating the type of “Western-inspired myth” which made “Beaglehole, Malo, Badger, Scarr and Sahlins” suppose that Captain Cook was considered by the Hawaiians as “an incarnation of Lono” (Geraghty and Tent 2001:185-86). This type of myth is associated with the “European presumption of superiority” which made and still makes Europeans think that in early encounters they were “considered ‘gods’ or ‘spirits’ by the Polynesians” (Geraghty and Tent 2001:202-3). I find it surprising that linguists could, even en passant, fall into the trap of an Obeyesekere-type of discourse, if I may coin this expression, i.e., a discourse that is a Western-inspired misconception of pre-Christian Polynesian cosmology, as well as a misreading of Sahlins’ analysis (Obeyesekere 1992, Sahlins 1981, 1982, 1985, 1989, 1994, 1995).

ON THE ETYMOLOGY OF “PAPĀLAGI(N)G"I"

Previously, I showed (Tcherkézoff 1999) how a Euro-centric view of Polynesian cosmos and society had led the 19th century L.M.S. missionaries to invent the “sky-burster” etymology and to teach it in their schools. As for the correct etymology of the word, I was only able to suggest a hypothesis which was based on a brief pan-Polynesian comparison: papa-(a)-lagi: ‘[the creatures from] the edge/layer/
side etc. of the sky’, whereby ‘sky’ needs to be understood in the pre-Christian sense and refers to the region beyond the horizon where the sun moves, but which is still within the universe made of Earth-and-Sky. I added in a note (Tcherkézoff 1999:424 n.2) that, if we are looking for a Polynesian origin, we would have to presuppose a bi-morphemic word where the second base refers to the ‘sky’, since there is no single proto-Polynesian base which could lead to *palagi or papälagi. I added that we cannot exclude, of course, an external origin. After all, two publications by Geraghty and Tent were already available (Geraghty and Tent 1997a, 1997b) in which they demonstrated that some words used in contemporary Polynesian languages are in fact the result of borrowings from the Dutch.

Recently, the same two authors published an extensive study in the JPS (Geraghty and Tent 2001) where they concluded that indeed our word papäl(a)nigi originates from a non-Polynesian language. The origin, they suggest, is the Malay word barang ‘thing, object, goods, article, commodity, luggage’, adopted by Tongans who would have heard it from Tasman’s crew-members in 1643. The word is well attested in 17th century Malay. There were (most probably) Malay-speaking crew members on the Tasman expedition ships. In those years the Dutch sailors themselves had adopted a number of local Malay words in their everyday language. Thus it is highly probable that, in 1643, the Tongans heard from the Dutch that the gifts handed over to them (cloth, beads, iron tools, etc.) were barang. The phonological transformation to *pala(n)gi/vala(n)gi in the West-Polynesia-and-Fiji region is regular (Geraghty and Tent 2001:190-99). One unsolved problem rests with the reduplication of par-, but there are several possible explanations (Geraghty and Tent 2001:199-200). One may also raise the question: did the story of our word papäl(a)nigi indeed begin with Tasman and not with LeMaire, or even the Spaniards in the Tuamotus, since we cannot exclude the possibility that the word was coined by Polynesians themselves? While it is correct that the Tongans whom Cook met seemed to have mentioned only Tasman’s passage, it is reasonable to assume that the impact of events at sea during LeMaire’s passage (the killings and the handing over of various “trinkets”) would have induced the inhabitants to coin a word for the creatures they encountered. Could the “barang hypothesis” be applied retrospectively to the 1616 events?

Irrespective of the Tasman/LeMaire question, the strongest argument for the “barang hypothesis” is the existence of several passages in early European journals and later word-lists that indicate without a doubt that our word papäl(a)nigi was used locally to refer to a variety of European goods (Geraghty and Tent 2001:192-94).

— ‘European cloth’ (explicitly distinguished from local cloth): Tonga (four references from Cook’s companions in 1773 for *pâlăngho, palangge, babba’langa, papalangge, one from Malaspina in 1793 for *papaa-langui, one from Labillardière 1793 for *papalanguui) and Samoa (19th century missionaries’ dictionary for apapalagi, âpâlapa); there is also this rather odd comment from Cook, already quoted in my 1999 article: ‘they [the Tongans] informed us that their ancestors had told them that two ships, (‘Towacka no papalangie’) like ours had once been at the island…. For what reason I know not, but they call our
Ships *Towacka no papalangie* and *Tangata no papalangie*; that is cloth ships and cloth men” (Beaglehole 1955-67, III:178).

Whether Cook was right or wrong in his translation of that phrase, it is clear that he knew of a Tongan word *papalangie* referring to ‘cloth’. It is possible that the Fijian word *vāvālagi* should also be included as an example (the case rests on an interpretation of a poetic text related to an event of 1800) (Geraghty and Tent 2001:195-97).

‘European manufactures, goods’ (including cloth): Tonga (Mariner, Dumont d’Urville): *papalagi, papa langui."

— ‘broken glass’: Tuvalu; ‘beads’: Rotuma, for (respectively) *pāpalagi* and *papalagi*.

— ‘iron’: Marquesas: three references, from 1773 to 1840 for *papa’annëë, pappa ane, papa-ani*; metal: Nukuoro/Kapingamarangi and Mokil for (respectively) *baalanga* and *pahrang* (Geraghty and Tent 2001:193-94). From the Marquesan case, the authors are able to suggest that this word spread in Eastern Polynesia under a truncated form and resulted in all the *papā*, *papa’a*, *papa’ā* and *popa’ā* forms that are used to designate the ‘Europeans’ (Geraghty and Tent 2001:200).

By the early 19th century everywhere in Western Polynesia and Fiji *papālā(n)gi* is attested as referring also or only to Europeans as persons and to the place of origin of Europeans (Geraghty and Tent 2001:171-75). It is not difficult to agree with the authors that by that time, the meaning of the word had expanded from ‘European goods’ (given in first contacts) to Europeans themselves and to their world. It is important to note, however, that this extension had already taken place by the time of Cook’s voyages. Geraghty and Tent present Cook’s translations ‘cloth ships’ and ‘cloth men’ for what he heard as *Towacka no papalangie* and *Tangata no papalangie* in the opening of their analysis to attract the reader’s attention to an etymology based on ‘cloth’ (Geraghty and Tent 2001:172). But Cook’s translations cannot account for what he heard; they are not accurate. As I wrote in the 1999 article, the presence of the word *no* obliges us to understand that these Tongans were talking of the boats and the people ‘originating from the Papalangie’. Whatever they imagined this Papalangie to be, it could not have been just “cloth”. They could not have meant “the people originating from the cloth”. Rather, the meaning had to be something like the ‘boats of the people of the place of these [wonderful] goods’ and, in the second case, ‘the people of the place of these goods’. Considering this argument, it is remarkable that Mariner tells us that in Tonga the word *papalagi*, as he was hearing it in the years 1806 to 1808, meant ‘White people, Europeans’ (and, in one occurrence, the ‘place of origin of the Europeans’) as well as ‘European manufactures such as cloth, linen, etc.’; the same remark is made by Dumont d’Urville in 1827 (Geraghty and Tent 2001:171, 173, 193).

The discussion based on linguistics must rest at this point. The “barang etymology hypothesis” is very appealing. It is appealing for the linguistic reasons that the authors presented in detail and that I have summarised here, but also for anthropological reasons. Any anthropological study of “first contact” events in Polynesia shows us how much, on each side of the encounter, the interpretation of
the nature of the Other rested on the interpretation of the gifts offered by this Other. The interpretation of the nature of the objects given and the interpretation of the reasons and the manner of giving them were critical to any conclusions or understanding that was reached regarding the people involved. The three main categories of European objects that produced a rich variety of Polynesian interpretations during the first encounters were of course cloth, glass beads and iron tools—i.e., the three specific meanings of our word as noted above.¹

That the whole linguistic story may have begun around the gifts of cloth on Tongan shores is indeed a particularly welcome example of what we know of the role of cloth in all first contacts in Polynesia. A Tahitian example of 1768 is illustrative of what happened everywhere: the first Tahitian (his name was Ahutoru, it emerged later) to climb aboard Bougainville’s ship presented a plantain bough to the tallest officer he could see. Then, according to the journal of Vivès, the ship’s surgeon:

He wanted to swap his three ponchos [tiputa] or white cloths that enveloped him [ses trois ponches ou nappes blanches] for a European shirt. Mr Lafontaine, one of our officers of about the same height, dressed him in a shirt, trousers, jacket and hat. He indicated his thanks and embraced him. He came back to Lafontaine, caressed him and embraced him and wrapped him in the loincloths [pagnes] he had been wearing. In return Mr Lafontaine gave him a shirt, trousers and a jacket which we had much difficulty to put on him, so large where his shoulders.²

More generally, Geraghty and Tent’s analysis is another strong illustration of the benefits of the multidisciplinary method that is required for all ethnohistorical Polynesian studies (Kirch and Green 2001),³ at least when the anthropological discussion takes into account the two sides of the encounter, just as the linguistic approach must do. But, at some point, our two analysts of the etymology of papālagi have forgotten this imperative.

ON EUROPEANS AS “GODS”: THE UNWARRANTED EQUATION

If we follow the “barang hypothesis”, the proposal of a papa+lagi indigenous etymology should of course be discarded if our concern is restricted to the very origin of the word, in the early 17th century. But Geraghty and Tent’s data as well as data provided in dictionaries show that the early meaning of ‘European cloth or goods’ had been forgotten by Polynesian speakers of the early 19th century, perhaps even as early as the late 18th century or even earlier. The Samoan and other occurrences of papālagi in documents of the early 19th century never refer to meanings such as ‘cloth’ or ‘goods’, and we know that in Samoa other words were used to refer to European goods and to European and indigenous cloth (‘oloa, ‘ie, ‘ie toga, etc.).⁴ We cannot know if the double meaning of both ‘European people’ and ‘European goods’, noted for Tongan usage by Mariner (Martin 1818) and Dumont D’Urville (1834), was still explicit and transparent for Tongan speakers themselves or whether the two European observers had simply noted two meanings
for what they heard as the same phonological unit. It is clear, however, that by 1830 in Samoa the double meaning for a single word of this sort did not exist. This implies that by 1830, a word *papālagi* ‘Europeans’ was used without any known etymology and there was room, therefore, for an indigenous folk-etymology of the word *papālagi* as ‘the people [or the side, or the people of the side] of the sky’.

Geraghty and Tent do not raise the issue in this way. After having noted the very early meanings of ‘cloth, goods’ and the later meaning of ‘Europeans’, and after commenting that such a semantic extension is easily understandable, they remark that in European writings from the 1790s (e.g., George Vason in Tonga) onwards and to the present (by early voyagers and residents, later by missionaries and scholars, some of them linguists) it was first proposed and then assumed that the etymology of *papālagi* is something like “people of the sky”, or in adjective form “pertaining to people of the sky”. Indeed, all these writers proposed etymologies of this kind. In the Samoan case, it was “sky-bursters”. The idea of “bursting” proved to be entirely Euro-centric. Geraghty and Tent are now also assuming that the notion of ‘sky’ is a purely European invention and what is more, that it can only be so. They suggest that the first invention could have been made by George Vason in 1797 in Tonga (Geraghty and Tent 2001:173).

Given this assumption, they then question why Europeans invented such “spurious etymologies implying that the Polynesians and Fijians viewed Europeans as gods”

Leaving to “historians” to find out why such etymologies have become “so overwhelmingly popular in the literature of the past two centuries” (Geraghty and Tent 2001:203), they still attempt an answer to why the etymology was proposed in the first place. They claim that the obvious reason is “the European presumption of superiority” (which made Europeans think that the indigenous population had seen them as gods) and add that “a case in point is Captain James Cook”. Going beyond linguistics themselves, the authors evoke the Sahlins-Obeyesekere debate and refer to the claim that “Cook being an incarnation of Lono is a Western inspired-myth” and open a discussion on the prevailing “misunderstanding” which makes numerous scholars assume that “early European visitors were deified” (Geraghty and Tent 2001:185-89).

In following this argument, the authors commit two errors. First, they repeat a misinterpretation of Marshall Sahlins’ discussion which was made by Obeyesekere and others. When Sahlins discussed how Hawaiians interpreted the nature of Cook “as Lono”, he showed how Hawaiians had used Cook’s material person (and later the body) as a replica of those other images or manifestations (such as the white bark-cloth) used in rituals for representing one instantiation of Lono-as-a-principle (Sahlins 1981, 1982, 1985, 1989, 1995). He did not say that Cook was deified (in the European sense). I do not elaborate this point any further here since it is examined in detail in a recent publication which is available on-line (Tcherkézoff 2002a). Suffice it to say that we are again confronted with the prevalent misunderstanding of how Polynesians used the word *atua*—a word so erroneously translated simply as “god”, with the associated mistake of interpreting the idea of “divinity” within the specifics of Christian or Judeo-Christian thought.
It is regrettable that Geraghty and Tent found the need to refer to the critiques of Sahlins by Obeyesekere (1992) and Bergendorff et al. (1988) in order to dismiss any discussion of etymologies of papālagi as people of “the sky”. It is all the more curious that they themselves offer the same critique I offered with regard to the word atua, when they discuss the example of the Fijian word kalou (Geraghty and Tent 2001:186). Notions such as atua or kalou designated myriads of things, people, behaviour and ideas that had in common only that they were considered unfamiliar and possibly originated from a non-human fabrication. They were applied to the Europeans in that these people were newcomers (and they were usually applied with a question mark: see quotations in Tcherkézoff 2002a, including the case of kalou as evoked by Sahlins 1994). As Sahlins (1989, 1994, 1995) pointed out, Europeans of the time as well as some contemporary scholars misunderstood the meanings of atua, kalou and similar terms. They only considered the idea of a “god” as a unique principle and the idea of a “divine” realm as absolutely separated from the human realm. This does not mean that one should disregard the fact that indigenous people did apply these terms to Europeans or that one should not try to understand what they meant by doing so. The point is that the Polynesian statement that Cook was “atua”, or that Europeans travelled “in the lagi”, did not mean the same thing that a European of the time was imagining when using the term “god”, i.e., the Christian God sitting in heaven (the sky).

The second error Geraghty and Tent commit is that by ascribing the “sky” etymologies to be a Western-inspired myth of first-contacts with Polynesians, they dispossess the Polynesians of their own (possible) interpretation of the word papālagi, once the first meaning had been forgotten or obscured through the process of semantic expansion (from ‘European goods’ to ‘Europeans’). It may very well be that Vason was the first to see the base lagi with the meaning ‘sky’ in the word, or it may not. It is certainly true that the idea of “bursting through (the sky)” was invented by L.M.S. missionaries. But would that invention have been adopted by Samoans so easily if the Samoans themselves had not “heard” in the base lagi the meaning ‘sky’? Geraghty and Tent are neglecting the Polynesian and Fijian ideas that were expressed repeatedly during first contacts, i.e. that Europeans, whatever their nature, travelled by “boats originating from Tagaroa” (see Tcherkézoff 2002a), or that they had passed “near the sun” (for Hawaiian examples see Sahlins, quoted in Tcherkézoff 2002a; see Fijian example from 1817, noted in Geraghty and Tent 2001:174). When residents such as Vason or Mariner, who were linguistically well integrated into the local population, were assuming the presence of a reference to the ‘sky’ in the word papālagi when used by indigenous speakers, as the missionaries did in Samoa (even if the latter added the mistaken meaning of “bursting through”), it is highly probable they had discussed this point with their local friends and that their interlocutors did not contradict them.

I think we can maintain the hypothesis that an indigenous (and not only European) folk etymology of the word papālagi as somehow referring to the ‘sky’ may have been operating since the early 19th century and probably earlier. We can leave open the discussion as to how much this indigenous interpretation appeared within a dialogue held locally with the first European visitors and
residents, and later the first missionaries, all of whom had indeed, as Christians, a “sky”-oriented cosmology and who, from the late 19th century onwards, became prone to erroneously attribute to the inhabitants a European view of “divinity”. The critical point is, however, that the two sides of this dialogue did not mean the same thing at all when talking of ‘lagi’ and ‘sky’ and of ‘atua’ and ‘God’. Not only their views of the cosmos, but their conceptions of time and space were entirely different (Tcherkézoff 1998, 2002a).

In sum, the discussion of the ethno-historical-linguistic uses of papālagi should not be linked to the (biased) Bergendorff-Obeyesekere discussion of the “divinity of Captain Cook”, because this latter discussion wrongly assumed that Europeans and Polynesians had the same idea of what is and is not “divine”. Just as much as Polynesians did apply the word atua to Europeans, they could very well have reinterpreted papālagi with a base -lagi, with or without the influence of external teachers and they could have coined the word from the start, with a base -lagi (as the “barang hypothesis”, appealing as it is, is still only a hypothesis). Raising the possibility that they could have done so does by no means amount to adopting a position which Obeyesekere sees as “the Western myth of the Europeans’ ‘divinity’” (and where Sahlins never happened to stand).

NOTES

1. On iron tools, see Tcherkézoff 2002a; on cloth, in the Tahitian and Samoan case, see Tcherkézoff 2003; on glass beads, in the Samoan case, see Tcherkézoff (in press): Chs 1 and 6 on Roggeveen and Lafond de Lurcy. In the matter of the Polynesian gifts and the European interpretation of them, the category that immediately became the most productive of (European) interpretations was of course the sexual presentation of females—but this is another story (for the Samoan case, see Tcherkézoff (in press): Ch. 4 on Lapérouse’s visit).

2. The journals of the French expedition have been edited by Etienne Taillemite, Bougainville et ses compagnons, Paris, Imprimerie Nationale, 1977 (see p. 237); the translation of that passage by Chloe Colchester is quoted from Tcherkézoff 2003.

3. Kirch and Green call for a “triangular” method (anthropology, archeology, linguistics). When archeology cannot help, as in the case of the “first contacts”, at least anthropology and linguistics must always be side by side in Polynesian studies.

4. See the special issue of JPS on Samoan mats, 2000, vol. 108 (2), which includes studies on the Tongan (A. Kaeppler, P. Herda) and Samoan cases (P. Schoeffel), and Tcherkézoff 1997, 2002b. The Samoan word āpāpālagi is rendered as “foreign cloth” in the Samoan-English section and “foreign cloth” rendered as āpapalagi in the English-Samoan section of the several editions of the L.M.S. dictionary from 1878 to 1911. The word does not appear in Krämer’s volumes (1902-3). Its form (with the initial ā-) and that it did not refer to European people, who were designated papālagi, together suggest that it was already a different word from papālagi in the Samoan language when the missionaries recorded it in the 1840s.
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