

Letter dated from 7 February, sent also to the Ministre de Castries; known to be in existence, it has not been found. Here is an extract, found in a catalogue of an auction selling, when this letter has been privately sold.

As in the other 2 letters, Laperouse is anxious to persuade the authorities that he did not make a mistake when allowing De Langle to land in the other bay, where the violent encounter took place. His line of argument is constantly: “how could we know that such gentle people, as was evident in all their behaviour with us, were in fact prone to such violence and treachery?” To reinforce this argument, he is generalising from the Samoans to all the inhabitants of the South Seas. This topic, expressed in the first two letters and in the Journal, once widely published through the 1797 official publication, had a far reaching consequence. For many readers, it meant the end of the ideal of the Noble Savage. It opened the way to the 19th century European discourse which became generally quite negative, not admiring any more the Natives, including the Polynesians.

“... I can exercise the utmost care, it will always be defeated by events impossible to expect and always in occasions where we could not perceive at all that we were putting ourselves at risk. The many examples of the treachery common to the Natives of the South Sea will never be enough a lesson to the French. How one could expect horrible designs in men who were giving all signs of benevolence, although truly their faces were revealing traces of ferocity, but they were carrying us on their backs when we had to cross rivers, they were *massaging* us¹, in the way Indians do, when we were tired, they were offering us their youngest and prettiest daughters², were filling our canoes with fruits and pigs, and seemed to show only happiness and satisfaction when we were coming in their homes. [...] The most expert traitors in European nations don't come any close to the clumsiest native of Mahouna, I would like that our philosophers who praise them so much would be sent there as missionaries, they would quickly change their words; Chevalier Lamanon who was massacred by them was asserting the day before this horrible event that these men are better than us.”

(approximate translation by S.T.)

¹ Italics in the original

² On that topic, see chapter 4 in our *First Contacts in Polynesia: the Samoan Case...*, *op. cit.* Laperouse and Dumont d'Urville as well misinterpreted these “offerings” as sexual hospitality, as Bougainville did before them when arriving in Tahiti. Again, as with Bougainville, it is only *en passant* that the main information about the very young age of the girls is mentioned.

Lettre datée du 7 Février, envoyée (comme celle du 5) au Ministre, de Castries. La seule trace qu'on en ait est sa mention dans un catalogue de vente aux enchères de lettres de personnages célèbres, avec un court extrait du contenu (merci là encore à l'Association Salomon et à Jean-Christophe Galipaud pour la copie).

Comme dans les deux autres lettres, La Pérouse tient à persuader les autorités qu'il n'a pas failli à son commandement quand il a autorisé De Langle à accoster à l'autre baie, où le « massacre » eut lieu. Son argument est immuable : comment aurait-on pu deviner qu'un peuple si aimable, comme on a pu le voir dans son comportement spontané avec nous, était en réalité capable d'une telle violence et fourberie ? » Pour renforcer son argument, il généralise des Samoans à tous les habitants du Pacifique. Ce thème, exprimé clairement dans ses lettres qui seront publiées en 1797 avec son journal, mettra un terme à l'image du Bon Sauvage et inaugure la vision européenne qui dominera au 19^e siècle : les « naturels », les « Indiens » ne seront plus admirés, y compris les Polynésiens.