

“Some Observations on the History of the South Sea Islanders” (1775)

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Trans. Michael Olson (draft; do not circulate)

Nowhere does one find more puzzles, and irresolvable problems, than in the history of the peoples that inhabit the countless islands of the vast South Sea: upon their investigation, in an instant one stumbles across data and phenomena that compel one to make exceptions to rules that one had already accepted as proven principles in the history of humanity. But also nowhere else does the investigator of human history find as many important reports, and reasons for reflection, as here; nowhere such diverse anomalies and differences in the bodies and souls of human beings, and this alongside various routine similarities; nowhere a more special mixture of savagery and culture, of the state of innocence and wild luxuriance; nowhere such unexplainable bizarreness in customs, in the class division, the relations between the sexes, and finally in the manner of dress, nourishment, adornment, fighting, and enjoyment. [252] If anyone wants to specify the endless stages and approaches through which the most savage hunter and the cannibalistic fisherman must pass before he reaches the state of gentle sociability and civic culture, here alone can he find examples of the degree of human civilization [*Ausbildung*] that cannot otherwise be determined.

I. The sailor who has at various times investigated some of the innumerable islands that lie between the equator and the 20th degree of south latitude, and extend across the entire width of the Southern Ocean from close to the coasts of Peru to the St. Lazarus Archipelago, often found in the same region, or among the same regions, or at least at different latitudes, human beings who make evident, in the great difference in individual parts of the body and in the variety of the

color of the face and hair, if not a different origin, at least an intermixture of peoples that is difficult to explain.¹ [253] In New Guinea in 1529, Álvaro de Saavedra Cerón (Charles de Brosse), *Histoire des navigations aux terres australes*, 2 vols., [Paris, 1756] vol. 1, 160) found [254] shining black negroes with frizzy, wooly hair and moderate beards that they [255] (as le Maire and Shouten observed, *Histoire des navigations aux terres australes*, vol. 1, 397) carefully nurtured and powdered white. The same Saavedra came across islands that were only a degree away from the equator whose inhabitants had a completely white color.

¹ The different kinds of Negroes, or blacks, that were found in Guinea as well as on very many [253] islands of the South Sea have always presented difficulties for natural historians that I believe I am able to resolve, not wholly but for the greatest part, with some coincidentally obtained data. — All investigators of nature recognize that these blacks, especially the shining Negroes with frizzy, wooly hair, do not have the climate or the burning heat of the latitude in which they lived to thank for their color, because otherwise all the other people of this same latitude would have been the same in this respect; but they also did not know how to think about any connection between New Guinea, or the South Sea Islands, and the east or west coast of Africa. They did not bear in mind that a few thousand years ago the Malay were the most trading nation in the whole of Asia; that their king was called the lord of the winds, of the seas from sunrise to sunset; that they sailed to the east coast of Africa and its nearest islands; and finally that, according to the reports of João de Barros in his *Décadas* [João de Barros and Diogo de Couto, *Décadas da Ásia*, 2nd ed., 24 vols. (Lisbon, 1778-1788); first edition, 1552-1615] and de Flacourt in his history of Madagascar [*Histoire de la grande isle Madagascar* (Paris, 1658)], in the language of the inhabitants of this last island there are very many Malay and Javanese words that incontrovertibly prove a connection of east Asia with Africa and Madagascar (Engelbert Kaempfer, *Histoire naturelle, civile, et ecclesiastique de l'empire du Japon*, 2 vols. [The Hague, 1729], vol. 1, ch. 6, 73, 81). The same Malays spread just as far to the east as to the west: they populated most of the large and small islands of the Indian Ocean. Their language was, and still is, the most widespread in the whole Orient. The blacks of Guinea, and on the other islands of the South Sea, are descendants either of Malay that had been driven out and were shipwrecked or of negro slaves that they had collected from Africa. The Japanese found black inhabitants that they called 'black devils' on the islands to the south and the north of their homeland (Kaempfer, 87). The history of the Malay, this still so brave and adventurous people that greatly distinguishes itself from all other Asians, deserves to be investigated more accurately than they have been to date. It is, in my opinion, more curious than that of the Chinese, Indians, and Persians who, just like the Egyptians, always shut themselves up within the borders of their empires and did not try to convey their knowledge or culture to the barbaric nations that surrounded them. How widely the language of the Malay propagated on the islands and countries of the South Sea especially deserves attention.

Alvaro de Mendoza¹, who first discovered the Solomon Islands in 1567 (*Histoire des navigations aux terres australes*, 173), and Álvaro de Mendaña, who did so after him in 1595 (vol. 1, 259; vol. 2, 348) found on these islands, which lie approximately between nine and ten degrees south latitude and 650 miles from the closest coast of the Spanish East Indies [*Neuspaniens*], all the different kinds of humans [*Menschenarten*] that tend to arise from the interbreeding of negroes and whites. They saw blacks, mulattoes, mestizos, and whites mingled together; in some the hair was short and wooly, in others long and uncrimped, and a different color in each one, sometimes red, sometimes blonde, and even snow white, which in all probability was artificial. Quiros rightly concluded from this that the Solomon Islands and the Mendoza Islands [i.e., the Marquesas Islands], which more closely [256] border the mainland of America, could not possibly lie so isolated in the wide ocean and that one must necessarily suppose a series of islands running to New Guinea, not separated very far from each other, which alone could make such interbreeding of human beings comprehensible.

II. It is just as peculiar a phenomenon that the small islands of the South Sea—the Solomon Islands, the Mendozas, Quiros Island [i.e., Swains Island], and Otaheite [i.e., Tahiti]—are not only disparately more populated than New Holland [i.e., Australia] and New Guinea, which one can take for main lands because of their size, but that their inhabitants are many degrees gentler, friendlier to strangers, and in many cases are familiar with activities that improve the enjoyment of life that are unknown to the others. Otherwise, one will find that population and culture almost always decrease and increase with the size of otherwise equally advantaged countries: that the inhabitants of smaller islands are always rougher and more savage than those from larger islands

or a spacious part of a mainland. The discoveries of ancient and modern navigators of the South Sea are an exception to this. [257] On all the islands that lay between the equator and twenty degrees north or south latitude, they met the happiest and friendliest people that knew not only an abundance of artfully worked equipment, very long boats supplied with sails and adorned with carving, and that had spacious, neat, albeit simple cabins, but also many kinds of cute objects made of braided bark and leaf fibers, poems, musical instruments, even dramatic pantomime shows and general celebrations. On the other hand, all ancient and modern travel writers describe the small clusters of inhabitants of New Holland and Guinea as the unruliest and most wretched savages in whom traces of amazement and curiosity were never found, who were just as inhospitable to Europeans as they were indifferent to their gifts, who lived either under the open sky or in the most wretched, dirtiest huts, who did not cover themselves at all, or only with a few dried leaves, and without any tools exhibited the state of savagery in its most terrible and pitiful form.² One could object that New Holland lies at least 20 degrees closer to the south pole and that the causes of the savagery [259] of its inhabitants are thus to be sought in the region of the earth that is less mild and less satisfactory for the needs of life. But this objection

² See Hawkesworth's description of New Holland and its inhabitants (John Hawkesworth, *An Account of the Voyages Undertaken by the Order of His Present Majesty for Making Discoveries in the Southern Hemisphere*, 3 vols. [London, 1773], vol. 3, 631f) and compare it with Dampier's reports (William Dampier, *Nouveau voyage autour du monde*, 5 vols. [Rouen, 1723], vol. 2, 169; first English edition, 1697), who approached this country at 16 degrees, 50 minutes south latitude and declared the savages to be the most wretched and ignorant he had met on all of his voyages. Furthermore, one reads the former's reports about New Guinea (6°15') in the ninth chapter from which it is clear that the trees and fruits correspond precisely with those of the South Sea islands, whereas the inhabitants remain far behind the islanders in culture and sociability. It is most astonishing that the New Zealanders, who inhabit two islands between 34 and 48 south latitude in a disparately harsher climatic zone, where they do not outdo the Otaheitans with respect to friendliness as well as the skill of weaving and dying clothes, building and carving ships, and finally the craft to cultivate crops, are at least their equals. I refer here to one of the most remarkable chapters in Hawkesworth's whole book, vol. III, book II, ch. VIII.

does not apply to the inhabitants of the northern part, which stretches to 10 degrees south latitude, and those of New Guinea, who are closer to the equator than those of Otaheite, the Solomon, Mendoza, and Mariana Islands.

III. Of all the savages or not completely cultivated peoples, the fishermen or fish eaters were already taken by the ancients to be the roughest and cruelest. The inhabitants of Otaheite and the Marianas can still in a certain way be counted in this class, since fish is one of their most important foods and fishing their primary occupation. They are, according to the testimony of all sailors, the most skilled swimmers they have encountered on their voyage around the world. Regardless, they surpass in sociability and diversity of discoveries many a herding and hunting nation that had already made a start on agriculture. [260]

The general view of the savagery of the hordes of fishermen must thus be limited so far as to apply only to such fish eaters as eat mostly fish or live on fish alone. The advantages of the South Sea Islanders are easy to explain if one knows that they live in places of the earth which are not only safeguarded against the consuming heat by their elevation over the surface of the sea and by the constantly recurring cooling sea winds, but also that nature has furthermore supplied them with coconut and breadfruit trees from which they get shade, food, clothes, and housing. If it is difficult for the humans in some regions to leave the state of barbarism, to improve themselves and the physical nature that surrounds them, then the persistence of the most extreme state of savagery appears on the other hand to be impossible on these islands that produce coconut and breadfruit trees.

IV. As understandable as the extraordinary strength, symmetry, and beauty of their bodies and the cheerful, gentle friendliness of their spirit is with such a way of life and such a climatic zone, [261] so peculiar and unusual is the intemperate disposition to sensuous love and the most awful excesses of the most luxuriant sensuality. According to the reports of the English, the Otaheitan Queen Oberea, who is already well-known to everyone from the Hawkesworth, not only had avowed lovers and partners from her own people, but gave herself, like the other Otaheitan beauties, to the English without the slightest reservation. From the beginning, they invited the European strangers, through the most insistent sign language, to indulge in their female charms, taunted them with a wantonness scandalizing even to the English, since they refused to obey their alluring gestures. Young, unmarried girls are accustomed from their childhood to licentious, pantomime dances (vol. II, ch. 17, p. 207) whose movements could not, even among the depraved Greeks and effeminate Asians, be bawdier or more skillfully arouse dead desires. Young only just blossoming girls of 11 or 12 years were publicly initiated with a certain festivity [262] into the secrets of the earthly Venus by boyish youth under the direction of the most esteemed matrons, and of Queen Oberea in particular; and finally, what is strangest of all, there were despicable groups of both sexes that lived in a community of pleasures of whose exclusive enjoyment untrained people tend to be the most jealous. They had made it into an unalterable law (vol. II, p. 207) to exclude every pregnant initiated member from their fraternity. A necessary consequence of this group, thwarting all the purposes of nature, was the violent killing of newborn children, a nefariousness that is for similar reasons so common in Oriental harems.

The inhabitants of the Solomon and Mendoza Islands were not observed for long enough to get to know them in this respect. But among the peoples of the Mariana Islands, which lie exactly as

far north as Otaheite lies south of the noon line, the missionaries found [263] just the intemperate disposition to sensual lust that one commonly considers to be a precursor or successor of the highest civic culture degenerating into softness. Many young Mariana Islanders (Le Gobien's *Histoire des Isles Mariannes* [Paris, 1700] says, p. 61) have an abhorrence for marriage. They thus rent or buy girls from their parents for some small pieces of iron or turtle shells and keep them in certain shelters rented for the purpose where, in debauched communion, they enjoy the pleasures of marriage without all its inconveniences.

How should we explain this unusual moral corruption that is so comprehensible in large nations consumed by softness and luxury, but which stands in such a strange contrast to the minimal civilization [*Ausbildung*] of these islanders and the otherwise so general purity of the morals of all the other savages in the new and old world similar to them? What explains the insuperable abhorrence to marriage, and the degree of sensuality that is so high that it stifles mothers' drives for maternal love, which are otherwise so strong among savage women, and in men [264] the inclination to the most tender connections? Where does the total absence of jealousy, which is usually believed to be grounded with physical necessity in the hot climate, come from? And the lack of modesty, a virtue that certain nations that are savage to the highest degree do not in fact know, but that once they are familiar with it do not so openly or unabashedly trample?³ [265]

³ The New Zealander females are disproportionately more bashful than the Otaheitan women (III. Ch. IX, 450). They also sold their young women, as a matter of fact, but only with the consent of her family, and with the tacit condition of a modest delicacy in the enjoyment of their pleasures. The English surprised some of them being entirely undressed, while busy collecting oysters and they perceived with astonishment the most visible traces of utter embarrassment in them. The men were just as reluctant to leave all parts of the body bare (p. 454). Incidentally, let us not forget that the renting of women and daughters to strangers is not unerring proof of such moral corruption, as it is in the case of the Otaheitan and Mariana Islanders (Dampier, vol. 2, 85). It is common almost among all the very jealous Asian peoples in Bago, Siam, Cochinchina,

V. Notwithstanding that the inhabitants of the South Sea Islands in regard to their morals, customs, and dispositions, their good and bad characteristics are very remarkably distinct from all other human beings, among themselves, they are almost completely alike in all of these points. If one compares Mendaña's description of the Mendoza (*Hist. des Nav. Aux Teres Austr.* vol. I, 257-258) and Solomon (259-265) Islands, as well as the very important reports about the many islands that Ferdinand de Quiros discovered between 10 [266] and 17 degrees south latitude (309-327), and finally the description of the Marianas (Le Gobien, book 2 and Dampier, vol. 1, ch. 10) with the widely known reports of the English of Otaheite, one can believe that all of these peaks of land jutting from the South Sea on both sides of the equator are inhabited by one and the same nation. On all the islands one encountered similar beauty, the same skills in swimming, stone- and spear-throwing. The men were as friendly as the women were beautiful and accommodating. The same tools, weapons, ships, clothing, adornment, and manner of coloring teeth and hair were found almost everywhere. This conformity extends to the smallest details. The inhabitants of the Solomon and Mendoza Islands colored their hair white and their teeth black, like the Mariana Islanders. They exchanged names with the Spanish, as the Otaheitans also did, learned to imitate and use Spanish words, were similarly desirous of iron, let their hair and beards be cut off with pleasure, and had Spanish [267] clothes put on them, and

[265], Cambodia, Tonkin (vol. V, 292) and the other Asian islands. The otherwise so simple Hottentots rent their women and daughters without further thought to the Dutch for a small portion of tobacco, but they thoroughly beat them if they come across them in forbidden intercourse with their own people. Travel writers also say the same about many Siberian and Tartar peoples. This distinction, which so many people make between their compatriots and foreigners remains most curious: perhaps the custom of the beauties in Babylon (Herodotus *The Persian Wars*, I.199 [Herodotus reports that every Babylonian woman must, once in her life, have sex with a stranger in the temple of Aphrodite]) that Voltaire found so unlikely, must be explained by their husbands' similar attitudes.

were just as willing to mimic all of the Spanish's devotional exercises. In short, in almost everything, they did with respect to the Spanish just what the Otaheitans did with respect to the English and French.

Of all of these, however, the Mariana Islanders and Otaheitans are the most similar to each other. They are similar to each other not merely in color, strength, bodily skills, and mental inclinations, but the Mariana Islanders also live in the same subordination (which is similar to the feudal condition) and are devoted to the love of poetry and music and the lusts of the flesh in just the same way as the Otaheitans. Both are equally vain, and violent in the first upwellings of pain and joy, which also recede just as quickly. The Mariana Islanders, however, appear to differ not only from the Otaheitans but also from all the other half-savages of the known parts of the world on one point: I mean on the slavish servility in which these islanders so famous for their bodily strength are held by their women, a servility that Le Gobien specifies as the cause of their abhorrence of marriage. [268]

The wives are everywhere dominators of the houses and families; the husband may not do anything at all without them and their approval. If he does not show her the appropriate reverence or if she is otherwise not pleased with him, she abuses him or leaves him. In the latter case, she takes all the assets with her, even her children, who see the man who she later takes as a husband as their father. Wives alone have the privilege of breaking conjugal fidelity; the husband can punish the adulterer as he likes, but he must leave his wife unpunished. If, on the other hand, a married man breaks his vow, then his wife will conspire against him with the local women and invite them to a particular place. They all turn up with a lance in hand and a man's

hat on their head, move in this martial armament on the offender's house, destroy all his trees and plantings, and chase him off his property with corporal punishment.

Others escape to their parents and [269] relatives to complain to them about the injustice done. These are plenty happy that they are given the opportunity, under the pretext of avenging their daughters or relatives, to seize another's property. They thus start out at once, steal everything that can be carried away, destroy the rest, and the poor man is lucky if they do not also burn down his cabin.

Even if this domination by women is historically accurate, surely it belongs to the rarities of human history of which one will hardly find several examples. Otherwise, as is well known, the female sex lives among all savages and half-savages in the greatest subjection and in a state of oppression where all the hard work of the house and the field falls to them.⁴ The voyaging English did not pay enough attention, as well as to many other curious things, to the situation of the other sex and its relation to the male among [270] the Otaheitans. Individual data scattered throughout Hawkesworth appear to contradict each other or are at least of such a nature that I

⁴ Here one could object, presenting the report of Diodorus (Diodorus of Sicily, *The Library of History*, trans. C.H. Oldfather, 12 vols. [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989], I.27), which says that in Egypt, out of thankful and great respect for Isis, [270] queens are more valued than kings and the women of this land are allowed to rule over their husbands, and tend to have this ceded in marriage contracts. — But here, as in innumerable other places, he embellished the truth, or concluded too much from his observations. Because the women in Egypt (Herodotus, II.35), like in many Oriental empires, in Tonkin, in the Kingdom of Achin on Sumatra (Dampier, vol. 3, 160), traded, exchanged, and drove the economy while the men worked quietly at home, our Greek, who was not accustomed to this, concluded that the rights and advantages, like the occupations, of each sex were swapped. Meanwhile, one sees some reports of a strange matriarchy in Achin on Sumatra (Dampier, vol. 3, 171-173) where an old maid always rules, under whom twelve *Oronkeys*, or respected men, truly rule, however.

cannot make them compatible. There, the Otaheitans conform with the negroes, Caribs, and all the savages that regard their women as slaves and let them work, in that they never eat in community with their women and the latter, accustomed to such a [271] distance, could not be moved by all the encouragements of the English to offend this unsociable custom. One should conclude from this that among the Otaheitans the women lived in the same state of servitude as among all other brute peoples. On the other hand, however, we encounter a female queen who at a certain time dominated tribes, kept lovers, and was just as much venerated as a male head of a tribe. One will search in vain for the same, as well as the freedom in their way of life, among all the savages. All of this seems to demonstrate again a degree of freedom that approaches the matriarchy of the Mariana Islanders.

The so extraordinary similarity in the way of life, morals, customs, and inclinations of all the South Sea Islanders arises from the equally great similarity of the land on which they live, the air they breathe, and the fruits and food they eat. All the islands mentioned above have pigs, chickens, coconuts, and breadfruit, the last of which Mendoza encountered in 1595 (*Hist. de Nav. Aux terres Austr.*, 257) [272] on the Mendoza Islands, extensively described, and called 'white food' (*blanc manger*). Dampier likewise found them (vol. 1, 377) on the island of Guam, one of the Marianas, and already called them *fruit à pain*, bread fruit.

I want to close my observations with some doubts about the first discovery of Otaheite, which is so famous in our day and over which the French and English dispute each other's right. If one has studied only the above history of the voyages of the 16th and 17th centuries, then the thought must necessarily arise that those great sailors of unknown seas would not have made so much

noise for the sake of a single small island. Mendoza and Mendaña in the sixteenth and Ferdinand de Quiros in the 17th century, discovered at the same latitude an innumerable quantity of islands of the same size to which they have of course given names, but which were subsequently either forgotten or have become uncertain. The islands the latter encountered in 1606 on his trip to the South Sea, are so similar to Otaheite and the adjacent islands, in particular in position, fruits, [273] and inhabitants that I am almost convinced that this insightful traveler deserves the glory of the first discovery at the beginning of the 17th century. He sailed from Lima, from between 10 and 20 degrees south latitude, to the coasts of New Guinea. One reads in a short summary (*Hist. de Nav. Aux terres Austr.*, I, 315f) what he says about the islands of the beautiful people, which lay at 13 degrees south latitude, whose inhabitants were exquisitely beautiful and white, and had just the fruits, clothes, and weapons that the English and French discovered among the Otaheitans; the beauty and courtesy of the savage women especially stood out to the Spanish, according to whose confession the savages would shame the ladies of Lima. What he says about the island of Taumago [i.e., Taumako] (321) and the Nuestra Señora de Luz Islands (14 degree south latitude, p. 325) and their inhabitants agrees just as much with the reports of the English and the French about Otaheite, and I thus believe that I do not do the latter any injustice if I maintain that among the many islands Quiros found at the same latitude at which Otaheite lies, he likely also saw and described this island, which is now well known throughout the whole of Europe.

ⁱ Meiners seems to be thinking of García Hurtado de Mendoza y Manrique, 5th Marquis of Cañete (1535–1609), who was governor of Chile and patron to Álvaro de Mendaña de Neira, who sailed to the Solomon Islands in both 1567 and 1595.