

Tupaia's Sketchbook

Keith Vincent Smith

Two small naked brown figures paddle a canoe while a bigger man gazes intently into the water, poised to strike a dimly-seen fish with his four-pronged spear (fig. 1). This naive pencil and watercolour painting is the first known image of Aborigines fishing in southeastern Australia. What is unusual is that the artist who painted this scene at Kundal (Kurnell) on the south shore of Botany Bay in 1770 was an Indigenous Polynesian.



Fig. 1 'Otaheite' [*Australian Aborigines in bark canoes*]. Tupaia. 1770. Pencil and watercolour. BL, Add. MS. 15508, f. 10.

The painter was Tupaia, a high priest from the island of Raiatea, west of Tahiti in the central Pacific, who sailed aboard Lieutenant James Cook's ship, HM Bark *Endeavour*. Details in his painting show the wooden spacers and tied ends of the typical bark canoes used at that time in what is now the Sydney coastal area. Until recently the artist of this painting and a group of other watercolours in the European style was unknown. It had been attributed to the 'Artist of the Chief Mourner', often considered to be the wealthy young English botanist Joseph Banks. Although it clearly shows Aboriginal Australians, historians were puzzled because the image was captioned 'Otaheite' [Tahiti] in Banks's handwriting. In hindsight it is obvious that he was simply identifying it as the work of Tupaia.

Tupaia was a skilled navigator, geographer and adventurer who could speak some English. When his home island of Raiatea (Yoolee-Etea or Ullaietea) was raided by invaders from Bora Bora, he fled to Tahiti, where he became the chief priest of Purea (Oborea). Banks described 'Tubia' as 'certainly a most proper man, well born, chief *Tahowa* or preist of this Island [Tahiti]' (fig. 2).¹ Tupaia met his first Europeans in 1767 when the English ship HMS *Dolphin* under Captain Samuel Wallis anchored in Matavai Bay, Tahiti, on a voyage around

¹ J. C. Beaglehole (ed.), *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks 1768-1771* (Sydney, 1962), vol. i, p. 312.



Fig. 2 'An Heiva, or kind of Priest of Yoolee-Etea [Raiatea], & the Neighbouring Islands'.
Engraved by T. Chambers after a drawing by Sydney Parkinson. Sydney Parkinson, *A Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas, in His Majesty's Ship The Endeavour* (London, 1784), plate xi. BL, 10497.ff.6.

the world. The *Endeavour* anchored in this tropical paradise to observe the transit of Venus across the sun due on 3 June 1769 and thus calculate the sun's distance from the earth. When this mission was accomplished, Cook had secret orders from the Admiralty to search for the supposed southern 'Continent or Land of great extent'.

It was Banks who prevailed on Cook to allow Tupaia and his boy servant Taiata to come aboard *Endeavour* to accompany him back to England. 'Thank heaven I have a sufficiency,' wrote Banks famously in his journal, 'and I do not know why I may not keep him as a curiosity, as well as some of my neighbours do lions and tygers at a larger expence [sic] than he will probably ever put me to'.²

When *Endeavour* left Fort Venus in Matavai Bay on 13 July 1769, Tupaia guided Cook through the neighbouring islands, later named the Society Islands. A chart was drawn from Tupaia's description of 72 islands centred on Tahiti.³ In New Zealand, he acted as an interpreter and go-between with the Maori, who understood his language and revered him as a priest and ambassador from their spiritual home. When the ship's boats landed on the coast of Australia, he could not understand the language of the natives on the beach at Kurnell, who spoke Dharawal, an Aboriginal language, rather than Polynesian.

Watching from the *Endeavour* as she sailed into Botany Bay on 29 April 1770, Banks observed a fishing party of four men under the south headland, each in his own small canoe holding a fishing spear. The wide-eyed, intent expression on the faces of the three men painted by Tupaia echoes the thoughts Banks entered in his journal. 'These people seemd to be totally engag'd in what they were about,' he wrote. 'The ship passd within a quarter of a mile of them and yet they scarce lifted their eyes from their employment; I was almost inclind to think that attentive to their business and deafned by the noise of the surf they neither saw nor heard her go past them'.⁴

Evidence of the identity of the unknown painter was first revealed in April 1997 when Banks's biographer Harold B. Carter drew attention to the transcript of a letter written by Banks in 1812 to Dawson Turner, a Fellow of the Royal Society. Banks recalled a friendly exchange with a Maori at Tolaga Bay, New Zealand, on the first voyage of HMS *Endeavour*:

Tupaia the Indian who came with me from Otaheite Learnd to draw in a way not Quite unintelligible[.] The genius for Caricature which all wild people Possess Led him to Caricature me & he drew me with a nail in my hand delivering it to an Indian who sold me a Lobster but with my other hand I had a firm fist on the Lobster determined not to Quit the nail till I had Livery and Seizin of the article purchased (fig. 3).⁵

Sure enough, Tupaia's painting shows a florid-faced Banks, in frock-coat and cocked hat, tightly gripping the vivid red crayfish, although he holds a handkerchief, rather than a nail, to exchange with the cloaked Maori.

In April 1997 Carter drew the Banks letter to the attention of Professor Anne Salmond, who acknowledged Tupaia as the artist in her subsequent study, *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog* (2003). Professor Salmond concluded that, 'by implication, the entire series of works attributed to the "Chief Mourner" were drawn by Tupaia'. She believes Tupaia learned to paint in the European style during the voyage from the Scots artist Sydney Parkinson and Banks's secretary and draughtsman, the Swede Herman Diedrich Spöring, who sometimes sketched the same subjects.⁶

² *Journal*, pp. 312-13.

³ Chart of Polynesian islands drawn by Tupaia for Cook 1769, in J. C. Beaglehole (ed.), *The Journals of Captain Cook ... Charts and Views* (Cambridge, 1955), plate 11.

⁴ Banks, *Journal*, vol. ii, p. 54.

⁵ Sir Joseph Banks, Letter to Dawson Turner FRS, 1812, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, Banks Collection, MS 82.

⁶ Anne Salmond, *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog. Captain Cook in the South Seas* (London, 2003), p. 75.



Fig. 3 *Maori bartering a crayfish*. Tupaia, 1769. BL, Add. MS 15508, f. 11.

John Marra or Mara, an Irish sailor who joined the Endeavour in Batavia (Jakarta) was also aware of Tupaia's skill at painting, describing him as 'a man of real genius, a priest of the first order and an excellent artist'.⁷ Marra, who twice attempted to jump ship during Cook's second voyage, was a gunner's mate on HMS *Sirius*, flagship of the English convict fleet that dropped anchor in Botany Bay in January 1788. He was lost in the bush for three days on the north shore of Port Jackson in November 1789.

Tupaia's original paintings were taken to England by Banks and are now in the British Library, London, where they are still attributed to 'The Artist of the Chief Mourner'.⁸ While in Tahiti, Banks twice referred to the elaborate dress of 'The Chief Mourner' at funerals, adding that 'the figure annexd will explain it far better than words can'.⁹ Consequently some historians attributed that illustration and the others to Banks (fig. 4).



Fig. 4 *Musicians of Tahiti*. Tupaia, 1769. Pencil, wash and watercolour. Add. MS 15508, f. 10.

According to J. C. Beaglehole, Tupaia was an *arii*, a member of a sect called the *arioi*, who took part in ritual dances and were skilled at painting and dyeing *tapa* or bark-cloth.¹⁰ Salmond notes that the chosen colours of Tupaia's paintbox were red, brown and black, which predominate in bark-cloth painting.¹¹ Sydney Parkinson, the young Scots Quaker employed by Banks as a natural history artist on the *Endeavour*, recorded a lengthy list of Polynesian dye plants, probably obtained from Tupaia.

⁷ John Marra, *Journal of the Resolution's Voyage of Discovery to the Southern Hemisphere* (London, 1775), p. 219.

⁸ Tupaia's distinctive watercolours can be viewed in colour on the British Library's *Images Online* website, www.imagesonline.bl.uk/

⁹ Banks, *Journal*, vol. i, pp. 288-9, 378.

¹⁰ Banks, *Journal*, vol. i, p. 270n.

¹¹ Salmond, *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog*, p. 76.

While in Tahiti, Banks wrote in his Journal on 12 June 1769:

In my mornings walk today I met a company of traveling musicians; they told me where they should be at night so after supper we all repaired to the place. There was a large concourse of people around this band, which consisted of 2 flutes and three drums.¹²

Tupaia depicts two men in loincloths playing bamboo nose flutes while two cloaked men beat drums. These musicians were probably *arioi*, who travelled from island to island. Large, soulful eyes of the subjects (like those in Ethiopian icons) and awkward splayed hands are evident in all three of Tupaia's paintings.

Parkinson drew a delightful picture of Taiyota (Taiata) playing his flute with one nostril (fig. 5).



Fig. 5 'The Lad Taiyota, Native of Otaheite, in the Dress of his Country'. Engraving by R. B. Godfrey after Sydney Parkinson. Sydney Parkinson, *A Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas, in His Majesty's Ship The Endeavour* (London, 1784), plate ix [facing p. 66]. BL, 10497.ff.6.

Tupaia fell ill with scurvy after the ship left the Australian mainland, but refused medical treatment. He died in Batavia in November 1770, two days after Taiata. Both were buried on the island of Eadam. In Cook's opinion, Tupaia was 'a Shrewd, Sensible, Ingenious Man, but proud and obstinate'.¹³

¹² Banks, *Journal*, vol. i, p. 290.

¹³ Cook, *Journals*, vol. i, p. 442.