

The Cult of the South Seas

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At a time when much of Europe was inaccessible to the traveller and when even the routes between major cities were fraught with danger, European explorers set sail to discover the true nature of the world and its people. Initially without simple and effective means of determining their longitude, they often carried twice the complement of sailors necessary, so as to have sufficient crew alive at the end of the voyage. These voyagers were motivated by a complex set of often-contradictory desires. Territorial ambitions coexisted with the hunger for more souls to convert to Christianity. The desire for knowledge of other peoples often resulted in the disruption and destruction of these same peoples and their societies. At the very heart of these enterprises was the desire to find evidence of the origins of human civilisation, the basis from which their own society had self-evidently progressed so far.

The cultural assumptions these voyagers carried with them, including a belief in their own superiority, and therefore their right to claim the land and resources of non-Europeans, tended to prevent too great a sense of fellow feeling with newly discovered peoples developing. And what, after all, was the point of sailing half the globe only to find an image of

oneself? Certainly the audience back in Europe, for the published accounts of these world voyages, expected tales of difference, tales that would throw their own culture into high relief. However, an unlooked for and often disturbing aspect of these tales of difference was the pressure they exerted on old certainties, including the biblical description of the creation of the world.

One such account, detailing British voyages of discovery into the Pacific, was edited by John Hawkesworth and published in 1773.¹ Hawkesworth's *Account* raised so many unsettling questions about the true nature of society that he was widely attacked in newspapers, journals and pamphlets for his 'immoral' book. The resulting furore was blamed for sending the *Account's* now notorious editor to an early grave six months later. The following year, in 1774, one of the two ships sent with Captain James Cook on his second Pacific voyage arrived back in England. Public interest in their discoveries was at something of a fever pitch. Having spent the last two years sailing in the Pacific, HMS *Adventure* had more tales to add to those disclosed in the published account of Cook's first voyage, and in addition, proof as to the accuracy of those tales. For among her crew, the *Adventure* carried

the first Pacific Islander to reach British shores. He had been enrolled as a supernumerary under the name of Tetuby Homey, was commonly called Jack by his shipmates, and would become widely known as Omai. Embodying the recent history of European expansion into the Pacific—literally carrying the scars of first contact—Omai would also come to represent a considerably older tradition of Western thought as the very personification of the Noble Savage.

Omai—more properly Mai, as O signifies 'it is'—was born on the island of Raiatea into the second rank of



Samuel William Reynolds, engraver (1773–1835)
after Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792)
Sir Joseph Banks, Bart., London: Hodgson, Boys & Graves, 1834
mezzotint; plate mark 12.9 x 9.9 cm

society, a landowning class. Above him were the *ari'i*, from whom the rulers were drawn, and below him a landless class. Little is known about his earliest years, but around 1763, when he may have been about ten years old, Raiatea was invaded by the men of Borabora. His father was killed and Omai fled with family members to Tahiti. In 1767 Captain Wallis and the crew of HMS *Dolphin* became the first Europeans to discover Tahiti. Tobias Furneaux (then a second lieutenant) claimed Tahiti for the British Crown and named it King George's Island, but it was only on the following day, when every canoe had been destroyed, that the Tahitians sued for peace. Omai was among the women and children gathered on 'One Tree Hill' who were wounded by cannon shot as the British crushed the Islanders' resistance to their arrival.

Less than a year later, in 1768, two French ships, the *Boudeuse* and the *Etoile* also called at Tahiti. The commander of that expedition, Comte Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, drew up an Act of Possession and named the island Nouvelle Cythère, after the Peloponnesian Island of Kithira near which Aphrodite was said to have risen from the sea. The following year in 1769, Lieutenant James Cook sailed the *Endeavour* into Port Royal Harbour (later known as Matavai Bay) on a mission to observe the transit of Venus. Tahiti had been selected as the base for the observation as a result of Wallis' favourable report on the friendliness of the Islanders. In addition to her naval crew, the *Endeavour* carried a scientific complement, including, and largely financed by, Joseph Banks. Like Bougainville before him, Banks decided to carry back to Europe a 'specimen' of this newly discovered society.² Unfortunately his choice, the priest Tupia, preceded by his servant Tayeto, died of disease contracted at Batavia, along with numerous members of the *Endeavour's* crew.

In 1773 Cook returned to Tahiti, this time with the *Resolution* and the *Adventure*. He was told that another ship had visited the island in his absence, commanded by one 'Opeppe'. Cook reported that Tahiti was in a much less flourishing state, which he attributed to the pressures created by visiting ships on the food supply, and destructive wars among the Islanders. He could also have listed the effects of diseases introduced from Europe, such as syphilis. Omai, who had witnessed first-hand the power of the Europeans, expressed a wish to accompany the ships back to England. He was reputedly keen to obtain guns from the British 'Chiefs' with which to kill the men of Borabora (Pora Pora) and reclaim his land.

Omai's brief life then, had been lived against a backdrop of intense and sustained competition and intervention by European interests, both intellectual and commercial. But what of that other European empire—the realm of Western intellectual tradition—in which he also had a role to play? In this arena the ground had been well prepared over many years for Omai's arrival. Debate as to the true nature of humankind had exercised philosophers for generations, with one influential text on the subject, Tacitus' *Germanii*, dating back to the Classical period. Classical and medieval conventions regarding the Golden Age and the Earthly Paradise—and upon which notions of an original and uncorrupted human nature were based—were given new life by the reports of explorers of the New World.

From the Renaissance on, empirical philosophers attempting to apply a more scientific approach to the study of humankind, used the accounts of explorers such as Columbus, Vespucci, De Quiros and Dampier as the 'evidence' on which to base their deductions. It was hoped that the impressive advances in knowledge of the physical world attributed to this

method might be reproduced in the humanities. Ironically, because of the flawed nature of the accounts, this new scientific approach tended to suffer the shortcomings which had earlier led to the rejection of the old approach, of venerating received knowledge and authority. Untroubled by notions of cultural relativity or objectivity, the voyagers' reports of new peoples and societies reflected their own values, beliefs and expectations. While perplexed by behaviours for which they had no explanation, travellers tended to grasp eagerly at any apparent parallels with their own



James Caldwell, engraver (1739–1820)
after William Hodges (1744–1797)
Omai, London: Wm. Strahan & Thos. Cadell, 1 February 1777
engraving, plate mark 30 x 25 cm

societies, reading in them evidence of 'universal' values, common to all humanity.

A regular theme of the travel accounts, particularly among the many fictional utopias and dystopias that were accepted as part of the genre, was that many 'savage' people, while lacking the luxuries and sophistications of the West, were nonetheless happier and more virtuous for being 'closer to nature'. The idealised representative of these societies was the Noble Savage, defined as 'any free and wild being who draws directly from nature virtues which raise doubts about the value of civilisation'.³ Largely a literary convention of particular use for satirising one's own society, the Noble Savage nonetheless influenced and informed the expectations of both those who travelled the world and those who stayed home and read about it. However, the extent to which the concept of the Noble Savage was embraced bore a direct relation to one's class and education.

A perfect example of this relation is found in the account of Cook's first voyage. Cook, intelligent and highly capable but not overly burdened by formal education, appreciated the obliging temperaments of the Tahitians and their abundant food resources in particular. He also saw the Islanders as incorrigible thieves and liars, and found their sexual licence a little disturbing. Hawkesworth, a professional man of letters and well versed in the conventions of the Noble Savage, transformed Cook's views into the statement: 'These people have a knowledge of right and wrong from the mere dictates of natural conscience.'⁴

The most enthusiastic first-hand accounts of the Tahitians belong to Bougainville and Banks, both members of the upper classes. Both writers drew on their knowledge of the classics to provide descriptive metaphors for Tahiti. In recounting a scene onboard

ship shortly after the French arrived, Bougainville writes:

In spite of all our precautions, a young girl came on board, and placed herself upon the quarter deck, near one of the hatchways, which was open in order to give air to those who were heaving the capstan below it. The girl carelessly dropt the cloth, which covered her, and appeared to the eyes of all beholders, such as Venus shewed herself to the Phrygian shepherd, having indeed the celestial form of that goddess.⁵

Joseph Banks, in his 'Thoughts on the Manners of the Women of Otaheite', wrote:

Except in the article of Complexion in which our European Ladies certainly excell all inhabitants of the Torrid Zone I have no where seen such Elegant women as those of Otaheite. Such the Grecians were from whose model the Venus of the Medici's was copied. Undistorted by bandages, nature has full liberty (of) the growing form in whatever direction she pleases and amply does she repay this indulgence in producing such forms as exist here only in marble or canvas nay, such as might even defy the imitation of the Chizzel of a Phidias or the Pencil of an Apelles.⁶

As Cook's actual journal was not widely available until the twentieth century, it was with the accounts of Bougainville, and Hawkesworth—who had been given access to Banks' journal in compiling his *Account*—that literate members of European society informed themselves of both conditions in the Pacific and the latest advances in the search for the true nature of humankind. Thus when Omai disembarked from the *Adventure*, he was transformed from dispossessed



Unknown artist, *Tabitiens Presenting Fruits to Bougainville Attended by His Officers* 1768?
pencil and watercolour; 9.2 x 6.9 cm

Islander and spare sailor into an incarnation of the Noble Savage. Within days, he was presented to the King and Queen at Kew, and being found to behave with a natural propriety and grace (as readers of Hawkesworth's *Account* would have expected), was then lionised by Polite Society.

In the two years Omai was to stay in Britain, he would meet 'the best people', dine ten times with the Royal Society, travel and botanise with Joseph Banks, stay at Hinchinbrooke with Lord Sandwich and retinue, visit the theatre and also run up considerable tailor's bills. He was not, as numerous critics would later rail, instructed in the Christian religion, nor was

he instructed in 'useful' arts with which to impress and improve his fellow Islanders upon his return.

But while Omai's genteel behaviour may have gratified the expectations of the philosophical, revelations about his homeland raised disturbing questions for the broader society. Tahiti was often presented as a version of the Earthly Paradise. Indeed, the Tahitians were reputed to be free from the necessity enjoined on the rest of humankind of earning their bread by the sweat of their brows. Similarly, the Islanders seemed untroubled by notions of sexual shame. If this really were a version of paradise, a glimpse of a pre-lapsarian world, what then was one to make of the reports of practices such as



John Keyes Sherwin, engraver (1751–1790), after John Webber (1752–1793), *A Dance in Otaheite*
London: 1784, engraving; plate mark 26.5 x 41 cm

infanticide and human sacrifice? Were these things 'natural' and therefore good?

If one adopted the idea that the Tahitians were 'good children of nature', what then of the havoc wrought amongst them by the introduction of European diseases. How could Europeans pride themselves on their role as 'civilisers' of the world, if they destroyed the happiness of the peoples with whom they came in contact? The anxieties for those of strong Christian belief were profound, and would lead to the establishment of the London Missionary Society in 1795 and the evangelisation of the Pacific thereafter.

By 1776, with Omai's moment of fame beginning to fade, plans were made for his return, which would involve James Cook in his third and fatal Pacific voyage. However, long after he had sailed from Britain, Omai's presence would be found in popular literature, art, theatre and philosophical discussion, a continuing focus for European concerns about the nature of humankind and the world—and their own place at the apex of civilised behaviour—rather than a source of accurate information.

NOTES

¹ John Hawkesworth (1715?–1773), *An Account of the Voyages Undertaken by Order of His Present Majesty, for Making Discoveries in*

the Southern Hemisphere, and Successively Performed by Commodore Byron, Captain Wallis, Captain Carteret, and Captain Cook, in the Dolphin, the Swallow, and the Endeavour: Drawn up from the Journals Which were Kept by the Several Commanders and from the Papers of Joseph Banks, Esq./by John Hawkesworth ... London: Printed for W. Strahan and T. Cadell ... , 1773.

² On leaving Tahiti, Bougainville recounts that he was pressed by the local ruler (Ereti) to take a man back to Europe with him. Aotourou arrived in Paris in March 1769 and stayed till March 1770 before setting out with Marion Du Fresne for the Pacific. Aotourou never reached home; he contracted smallpox and died off the coast of Madagascar in November 1770. See Comte Louis-Antoine de Bougainville (1729–1811), *A Voyage Round the World: Performed by Order of His Most Christian Majesty, in the Years 1766, 1767, 1768, and 1769*, translated from the French by J.R. Forster. Da Capo Press, Amsterdam, 1967, p. 241.

³ Hoxie Neale Fairchild, *The Noble Savage: A Study in Romantic Naturalism*. New York: Russell, 1961, p. 2.

⁴ As quoted in Fairchild, *ibid.*, p. 109.

⁵ Bougainville, *op. cit.*, pp. 218–219.

⁶ Banks' manuscript, National Library of Australia (MS 9). Punctuation was not one of Banks' strengths.



John Webber (1752–1793), *A View in Matavai, Otaheite*
London: J. Webber, 1 February 1787, engraving, plate mark 29.3 x 43 cm
aquatint by Marie Catherina Prestel (1747–1794)