

The Art of Ventriloquism: European Imagination and the Pacific

Alexander Cook

When Captain Cook's crew returned from their second voyage to the Pacific with the Tahitian warrior Omai, they could hardly have anticipated the stir it would cause across Europe. Omai was discussed by scientists and philosophers, introduced to all the best circles and written about in everything from poetry to pornography. He proved a lightning rod for the expression of sentiments and anxieties regarding imperialism, civilisation and human nature. The artistic and literary legacy of Omai's encounter with Europe provides a fascinating insight into a culture in a moment of transition, when old certainties were collapsing and new ones were not yet formed.

Omai arrived in England at a time when European interest in the world beyond its borders was burgeoning. As explorers traversed the globe in search of scientific knowledge and commercial advantage, a popular fascination with the unfamiliar and 'the exotic' reached new heights. Almost every year a traveller would return from remote parts, peddling fantastical tales for the entertainment and education of an eager public. Their stories were grist to the mill of moralists and savants who used them to bolster elaborate theories of human nature and history. Newspapers fostered such debates and disseminated

them to a wider audience. The story of Europe's ambivalent fascination with Omai needs to be understood in this context. He was not the first exotic visitor to London—the tradition of collecting human 'specimens' for public display had been alive, at least since the time of Henry VII—yet Omai was to become the most popular of them all.

In part his 'success' was due to the novelty of the Pacific Ocean and its peoples for European 'armchair' explorers. More specifically, it was due to the carefully cultivated public interest in the Cook voyages and to the allure of Tahiti and its people. The latter's supposed life of abundance, ease and sexual freedom had quickly attained a quasi-mythic status from the time of the European discovery of Tahiti in 1767 by Captain Samuel Wallis. The French explorer Louis de Bougainville, inflamed matters with his lyrical descriptions of Tahiti as '*La Nouvelle Cythere*' and 'the true Utopia'. He suggested that 'legislators and philosophers should go there to see as an established fact what they had not even dreamed of—a thronging populace of handsome men and beautiful women living together in health, plenty, and ordered amity'.¹ Bougainville's report inspired his compatriot Denis Diderot to write a controversial *Supplement à la Voyage de Bougainville* in which he used a

local Tahitian, Orou, as his mouthpiece, to lament the European proscription of pleasure in favour of a life-denying morality.² It would prove the first of many acts of cross-cultural ventriloquism when it came to the European imagination of the Pacific. Even Cook, a more sober observer than Bougainville, found it difficult not to exult in Tahiti on his arrival in 1769. With one eye on Rousseau and the other on biblical myth he recorded in his journal:

These people may almost be said to be exempt from the curse of our fore fathers; scarcely can it be said that they earn their bread with the sweat of their brow, benevolent nature hath not only supply'd them with necessarys but with abundance of superfluities.³

The tendency to view the Pacific and its people through this philosophical lens can be seen in the work of Cook's voyage artists, particularly William Hodges and John Webber. Even the bare landscapes or the ethnographic portraits frequently suggest a compulsion to invest the Indigenous people and their island world with a symbolic connection to Eden, to Arcadia, or to purgatory. The suggestiveness of voyage art in this regard was invariably increased in the transposition to print media for publication.

Despite limited efforts by Cook and members of his crew to put Tahiti in a more prosaic light during subsequent voyages, much of the gloss and the prurient interest remained. We find clear traces of it in the public reception of Omai and in the debates concerning his merits and his failings. An extraordinary number of observers seemed anxious to define him, to categorise him, and to situate themselves in relation to their conclusions. It was a hobby pursued at least as much by those who had never met him, as by those who had.

Among those who did meet him, and who queued to meet him, we can include an extraordinary list of British notables from the second half of the eighteenth century. After an introduction from Sir Joseph Banks and the eminent naturalist Daniel Solander, Omai dined on at least ten occasions with the Royal Society, King George III took a personal interest in him, and he was feted widely in aristocratic circles. The young Fanny Burney, whose brother had accompanied Cook on his second expedition, took great pleasure in reporting in her diary that Omai had 'an understanding far superior to the common race of *us cultivated gentry*'. Omai, like Tahiti in the eyes of the explorers, was all too frequently transformed into an object lesson on the relative merits of 'civilised' and 'natural man'. He also served as a tool in the private social duels of high society: for example, to the end of his days, Samuel Johnson took a glib pleasure in jibing Giuseppi Baretto on his ignominious defeat at chess by the Polynesian.

These contemporary European accounts reveal something of the world into which Omai had entered and the role he was invited to play. Yet the real evidence of Omai's impact on the collective imagination of Europeans lies in the cultural outpouring he inspired in the public sphere. The most striking aspect of this assortment of texts and images is the diversity of the views expressed. We find competing representations of Omai as a 'noble savage', unspoiled by civilisation, or as an unredeemed and unredeemable barbarian. The playwright and actor David Garrick, wrote to George Coleman of his plans to make 'a farce upon the follies & fashions of ye times', and suggested 'Omiah was to be my Arlequin Sauvage—a fine character to give our fine folks a genteel dressing'. Omai would indeed become the subject of a pantomime ten years later, although John O'Keeffe would script it and Omai

would be diverted from the subversive role of Harlequin to that of the romantic hero.

In the intervening period a host of other writers took up Garrick's suggestion and used Omai as a whip with which to lash the vices of Europe. They wrote pamphlets and poems in his voice. Sometimes the naive observer, sometimes the knowing sage, he proved an ideal commentator to highlight the hypocrisy and absurdity of the metropolitan culture. In one such work, published around 1780, the anonymous author began in the voice of Omai: 'after thanking you for the powder, shot, gun, crackers, sword, feathers, and watch, let me thank you also for my conversion to Christianity ...'.⁴

This sarcastic allusion to the 'benefits' Omai derived from his time in England was followed with a savage attack on Methodism, the doctrine of original sin, and the corruption of the Admiralty. The epistle concludes with a 'lament' for the death of Cook:

... who was certainly very cruelly and inhumanly butchered, for nothing more than ordering his crew to fire on a banditti of naked savages, who seemed to look as if they had a right to the country in which he found them.⁵

The possibilities for satire were endless. In 1789, the editor of *The Loiterer* claimed to have found Omai's



William Byrne, engraver (1743–1805), after William Hodges (1744–1797)
View in the Island of Pines, London: Published as the Act directs, 16 July 1776, engraving; plate mark 22.6 x 38.9 cm

journal from his time in England. In it, the Islander advanced a Tahiti-centric view of history, replete with a complex argument based on linguistic etymology. Europeans were descended from the sailors of a large war canoe that had been blown off course. Their sickly complexion and physical degeneration were clearly the results of a harsh climate and poor diet.

Omai's popularity with women elicited prurient commentary on the tastes for the exotic exhibited by 'the weaker sex'. In a piece published in 1777, the author advanced a proposal for an inter-ethnic eugenics program:

Than shall perfection crown each noble heart,
When southern passions mix with northern art ...⁶



John Webber (1752–1793), *View on a Coast, with Upright Rocks Making a Cave* c.1780
oil on canvas; 35.8 x 44.2 cm

Yet the narrator gives the game away by simultaneously professing to champion the introduction of infanticide, and the sub-text is rather more prudish than radical.⁷

A more serious argument for cultural blending, and a more substantial contribution to the 'Omai cycle', was the work of an eminent French theologian, *Narrations d'Omai*.⁸ His pretend autobiography of the Polynesian was in fact a monumental, four-volume treatise, combining ethnography of the Pacific with an outline for a utopian society. It was an ambitious yet highly eccentric attempt to mix the best of Tahitian and European traditions with the political theory of the Enlightenment. Its hero was Omai the legislator and philosopher, a highly Europeanised defender of his

people against European cupidity. It epitomises both the philosophical importance attributed to exploration literature during the period and the narcissism with which so many educated Europeans gazed at themselves in the mirror of the Pacific.

Amid all the babble of gossip and impersonation that dominates the historical record of Omai, the great tragedy is the absence of Omai's voice. We are left peering at a series of purpose-built portraits, wondering about the model. We know that he was an outsider in Tahiti, a refugee from Ulietea (Raiatea). We know that his primary motive in agreeing to

accompany the voyagers was to gain British aid in a project to reclaim his homeland and avenge his family. He returned to this theme repeatedly in his interactions with Cook, Lord Sandwich and George III. Yet we know little else. Even his name, as it has come down to us, is a misunderstanding. The shreds of surviving evidence suggest that Omai's life after his return was probably not a happy one. He may have found himself caught between two worlds, with no proper place in either. Perhaps his ambitions for revenge made him a disruptive influence. His countrymen told later sailors he died early of an unknown disease.

Even with the gaps, Omai's story is remarkable. He stood quietly at the centre of raging debates over a bewildering range of social, political and metaphysical issues. He travelled across the world, saw things his compatriots had never seen and, after five years abroad, returned to tell the tale—to his own people, if not to us. We can only speculate what his version might have been.

NOTES

- ¹ Written in L.A. de Bougainville, *Voyage Autour du Monde par la Fregate du Roi la Boudeuse, et la Flute l'Etoile, en 1766, 1767, 1768 and 1769* (Paris: Chez Saillant and Nyon, 1771). For an early English edition see *A Voyage Round the World* (London: Nourse and Davies, 1772). Quotation cited in E.H. McCormick, *Omai: Pacific Envoy* (Auckland: Auckland University Press/Oxford University Press, 1977), p.16.
- ² See Denis Diderot, *Supplement au Voyage de Bougainville, ou, Dialogues Entre A et B sur l'Inconvenient d'Attacher des Idees Marales a Certaines Actions Physiques qui n'en Comportent Pas*. Paris: Editions de la Nouvelle Revue Francaise, 1921.
- ³ Written by Cook on his first visit to Tahiti on board the *Endeavour*.

Quote taken from A. Grenfell Price (ed.), *The Explorations of Captain James Cook in the Pacific as Told by Selections of his Own Journals, 1768–1779* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1969), p.35.

- ⁴ See *A Letter from Omai to the Right Honourable the Earl of ******, *Late-Lord of the —: In Which ... is Fairly and Irrefragably Stated the Nature of Original Sin: Together with a Proposal for Planting Christianity in the Islands of the Pacific Ocean* (London: Printed for J. Bell at the British Library, [1780?]). In reality, no attempt was ever made to convert Omai, though this was a matter of some public controversy. For a contemporary view on this issue, see George Forster, *A Voyage Round the World, Performed in His Britannic Majesty's Ships the Resolution and Adventure, in the Years 1772, 1773, 1774 and 1775* (Dublin: W. Whitestone, 1777), and the response by William Wales.
- ⁵ A similar anti-imperial theme was explored at greater length in *The Injured Islanders, Or, The Influence of Art Upon the Happiness of Nature* (London: Printed for J. Murray, 1779. In this work, attributed to Gerald Fitz-Gerald, the author impersonates the infamous deposed 'Queen Oberea' to mourn the passing of an age of innocence and harmony in the wake of European exploration ('For Europe's crimes with Europe's commerce spread').
- ⁶ See William Preston (1753–1807), *Seventeen Hundred and Seventy-seven, Or, A Picture of the Manners and Character of the Age. In a Poetical Epistle from a Lady of Quality*. London: Printed for T. Evans, 1777.
- ⁷ Many did, however, find the whole Tahiti myth enormously titillating. James Perry (1756–1821), the author of the ribald pamphlet *Mimosa: Or, The Sensitive Plant, A Poem. Dedicated to Mr Banks, and Addressed to Kitt Frederick, Dutchess of Queensberry, Elect* (London: W. Sandwich, 1779.) wrote an ode to the penis and to Tahitian sexuality in a language of sniggering suggestion and heavy innuendo.
- ⁸ See Guillaume Andre Rene Baston, *Narrations d'Omai, Insulaire de la Mer du Sud, Ami et Compagnon de Voyage du Capitaine Cook*, Vol.1. à Rouen: & à Paris: Chez le Boucher le jeune ..., Chez Buisson, 1790.



Unknown artist, *A Man of the Sandwich Islands with His Helmet* 1830?
watercolour; 75 x 51 cm