Looking for interpreter zero: (6) Tupaia

How a Polynesian priest and skilled navigator became an invaluable intermediary in Cook’s exploration of the southern Pacific.

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When Captain James Cook set sail for the Pacific on the Endeavour in August 1768 he had two missions. The Royal Society had commissioned him to head for Tahiti to observe the transit of Venus across the Sun; the Admiralty had given him secret instructions to seek out the fabled southern continent, Terra Australis.

The President of the Royal Society, James Douglas, 14th Earl of Moreton, supplemented the Admiralty’s instructions with some tips on how to deal with natives in the regions explored. These Hints enjoined members of the expedition to show patience, refrain from overusing their firearms and recognise the rights of the “legal possessors of the several Regions they inhabit” – and to find gentle ways of demonstrating European superiority. They also address the question of actual communication with people by resorting to “amicable signs”:

Such as holding up a jug, turning it bottom upwards, to shew them it was empty, then applying it to the lips in the attitude of drinking. – The most stupid from such a token, must immediately comprehend that drink was wanted. Opening the mouth wide, putting the fingers towards it, and then making the motion of chewing, would sufficiently demonstrate a want of food.” [1]

While there is reason to be sceptical about the universal nature of such signs, Joseph Banks, the botanist on the Endeavour, reports taking the Moreton approach while ashore on the Tierra del Fuego. The party managed to convey that they needed water by using signs; the local people responded with the sign for drinking and pointed to the visitors’ casks as well as to sources of drinking water. Banks noted the word used (coudê), which is perhaps an indication that he thought spoken language might be more useful. His frustration with signing is shown in his account of how difficult it was to learn foreign terms by pointing at things and asking what they were called. Pointing at a stone to find out how you say the word ‘stone’ could elicit instead the word for its properties or uses, or the name of one type of stone. [2]

Interest in local languages

Members of Cook’s expedition had a mindfulness of communication that made them interested in the languages spoken in the lands visited. Five crew members had sailed to Tahiti on the Dolphin in June and July 1767 when the island had been claimed for George III. They may have been of some assistance to Cook as he attempted to replenish supplies and trade with the islanders who had already dealt with Wallis as well as the French explorer, Louis de Bougainville.
There were expectations on both sides when the Endeavour anchored in April 1769: the islanders were prepared to exchange food for iron nails, beads and trinkets while the sailors quickly ascertained that they could pay for sex with nails. There were some reunions: Fa’a, a local dignitary who had approached The Dolphin with peace offerings, was one of those who came to the Endeavour after it had anchored: he came bearing a plantain shoot and a small pig, both signs of friendship and proceeded to make an unintelligible speech - and receive an equally impenetrable reply. [3]

Tupaia

Another man who had been instrumental in earlier negotiations came to play a key role on the Endeavour: Tupaia. Much of what we know about Tupaia comes from the journals of the Europeans who knew him. A priest dedicated to Oro, the god of war - as well as a skilled navigator - he had fled to Tahiti from Raiatea after it was invaded in 1760. His high status was recognised and he was a member of the ruling circle that dealt with the Dolphin as visitors and islanders tried to understand each other and (mis)read each other’s signals. Thus it was that Tupaia and Purea, a local chiefess, assumed that a marine sergeant in a scarlet frockcoat was a figure of authority: his coat was the sacred red of Oro. When Purea invited Captain Wallis to the fore hau (hall) on the island, he read this as an invitation from royalty and later decreed that the queen had formally surrendered her island …

By the time Cook anchored in Matavai Bay in April 1769, there had been conflict on the island and Tupaia’s patrons, Purea and Amo, had been supplanted by Tutaha. Tupaia boarded the ship with Tutaha and ended up being enlisted by Cook to restore amicable relations after a shooting incident had alienated the locals. Cook came to appreciate his qualities as an intermediary as he:

… found him to be a very intelligent person and to know more of the Geography of the Islands situated in these seas, their produce and the religion, laws and customs of the inhabitants than anyone we had met with and was the likeliest person to answer our purpose …" [4]

He took Banks up on his suggestion that Tupaia and a young acolyte, Tatia, join the ship as they prepared to set sail. Tupaia apparently wished to visit Britain – unless he was tempted by the thought of a journey home to Raiatea. While we cannot know his motives for departing with the visitors, it is clear that he made an enormous difference to the expedition as it circumnavigated New Zealand, touched the east coast of Australia and then on to Batavia (Jakarta). His navigational skills were commented on, though Cook did not take him up on his route suggestions. It was as a communicator and intermediary that he made himself invaluable particularly in the months spent sailing around New Zealand.

The Endeavour party’s first meeting with Maori people on October 1769 was not a success. The unwelcome visitors ended up shooting at the people who were trying to repel them and one man was killed. Tupaia tried to ease the situation and “found their language so near his own he could tolerably well understand them.” [5] While there were more incidents and confrontations, both Cook and Banks make repeated references in their journals to Tupaia’s talks with local people, his attempts to keep the peace and introduce the Maori to European ways and trade with them.

When they moved on to Australia, he was unable to communicate with any of the Aborigines the explorers encountered. He was able to convey peaceful intent by putting down his weapons and encouraging them to do likewise, as well as seeking them out and encouraging them to come on board the Endeavour. At that stage he was suffering from scurvy as the ship’s diet and Cooks antiscorbutic regimen did not suit him. Banks included regular reports of Tupaia’s failing health after they reached Batavia (Jakarta) in October 1770. Weakened by the months at sea, he died the
following month, succumbing to what was probably malaria with pulmonary complications.


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