

Tupaia

Master Navigator

by Hanahiva Rose

The Polynesians have always honoured their navigators. Their creation stories tell of gods crossing the night sky in canoes, each one a star. These same stars guide travellers down here on Earth, showing them the way.

This is the story of Tupaia, a navigator and high priest from the island of Rā'iātea who died in Indonesia in 1770. How he came to be so far from home involved a remarkable journey, one that took him to the very edge of the Pacific ...

A man of mana

Tupaia was born on Rā'iātea – the second-largest island in East Polynesia – around 1725. He was from a high-ranking family and showed talent from a young age. Because of his gifts, Tupaia was chosen to train with the 'aroi – an exclusive group of priests, navigators, warriors, musicians, and artists who worshipped the war god, 'Oro.

The 'aroi were based at Taputapuātea. This great marae was at the centre of a large group of islands and home to the temple of 'Oro. Here, Tupaia studied his people's history and culture, specialising in star navigation. He travelled widely and spoke a number of Polynesian languages. This knowledge, along with his intelligence, made Tupaia a man of great mana.



Drawing by Tupaia of 'aroi musicians

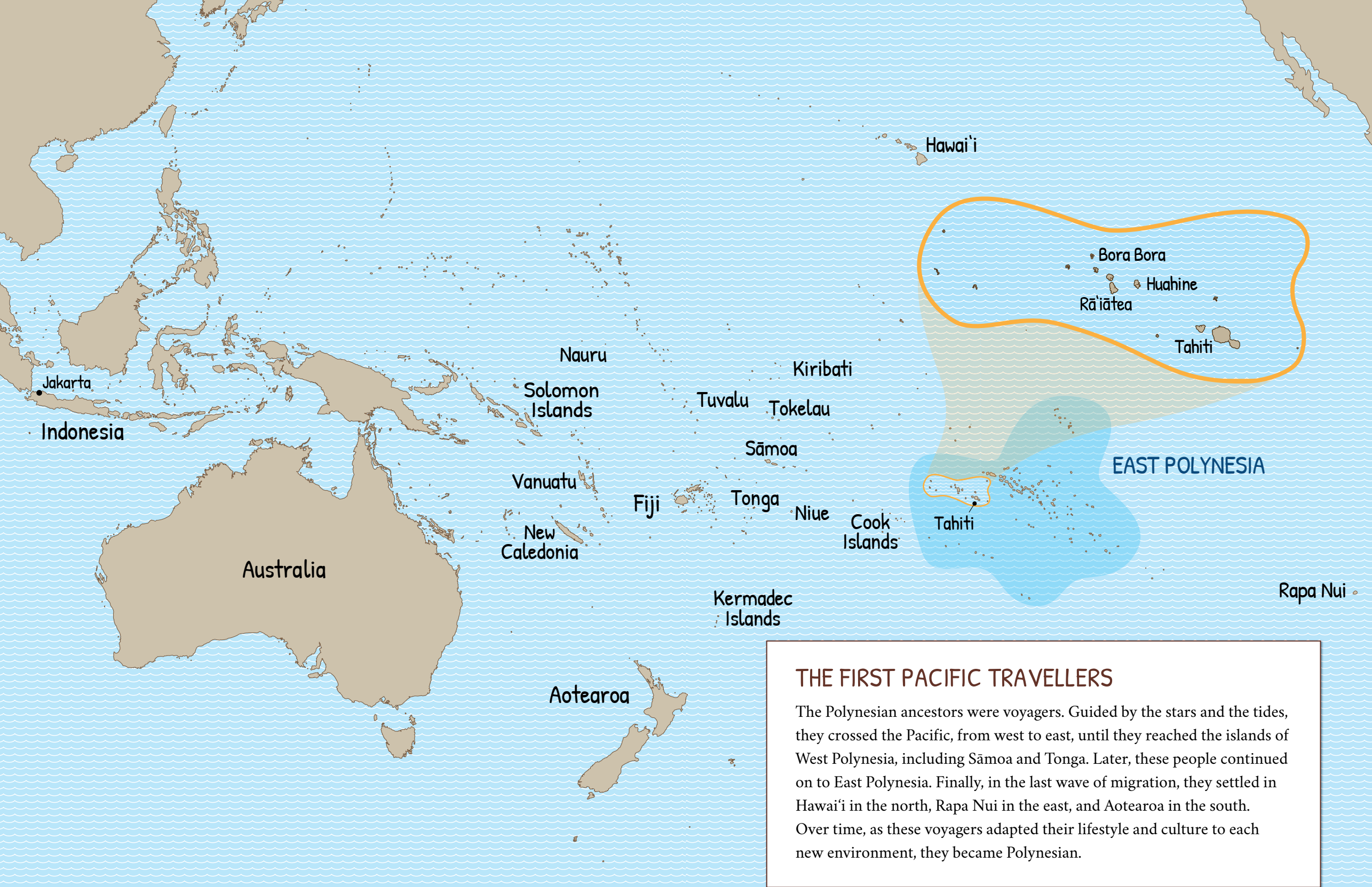
A prophecy

In the 1750s, warriors from nearby Bora Bora invaded Rā'iātea. A local priest named Vaita went into a trance and uttered a prophecy. One day, more people would come – a different kind of people altogether. They would arrive on a canoe with no **outrigger** and would change everything: “And this land will be taken by them,” Vaita said. “The old rules will be destroyed.”

Vaita's prophecy eventually came true. On 18 June 1767, a strange vessel was seen off the coast of Tahiti, where Tupaia now lived. The next morning, 'aroi priests paddled out to investigate. The boat was the *Dolphin*, a British ship searching for the **unknown southern continent**. Samuel Wallis and his crew were the first Europeans the Tahitians had ever seen.

outrigger: a wooden float attached to the side of a canoe to make it more stable

unknown southern continent: a large area of land Europeans once thought existed



THE FIRST PACIFIC TRAVELLERS

The Polynesian ancestors were voyagers. Guided by the stars and the tides, they crossed the Pacific, from west to east, until they reached the islands of West Polynesia, including Sāmoa and Tonga. Later, these people continued on to East Polynesia. Finally, in the last wave of migration, they settled in Hawai'i in the north, Rapa Nui in the east, and Aotearoa in the south. Over time, as these voyagers adapted their lifestyle and culture to each new environment, they became Polynesian.

The Endeavour

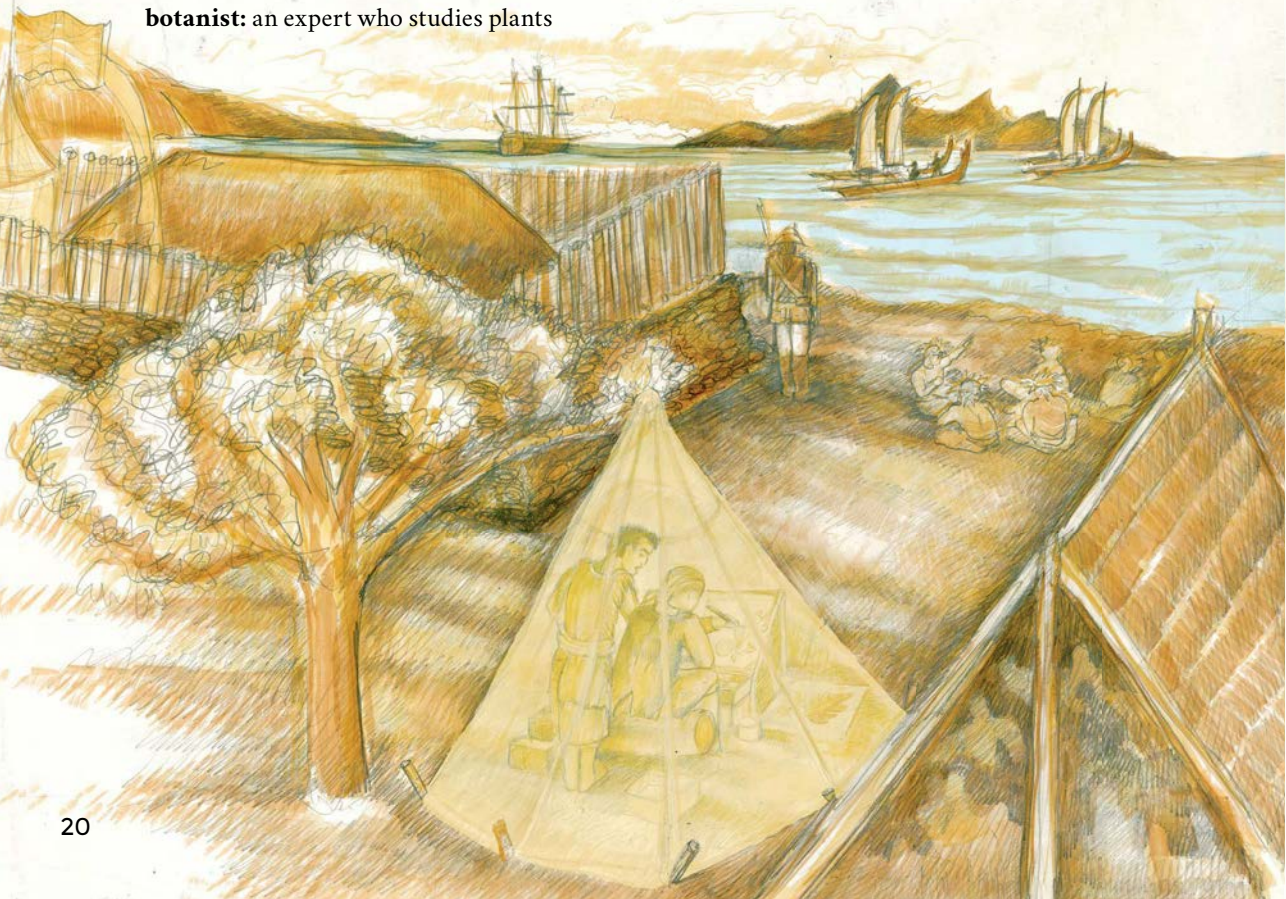
Samuel Wallis and his men stayed in Tahiti for five weeks. During this time, they got to know Tupaia. When James Cook's *Endeavour* arrived two years later, some of Wallis's sailors were on board. They remembered Tupaia as an important, well-connected man, so Cook asked for Tupaia's help as an interpreter and a guide.

Cook had come to the Pacific to observe and measure the **transit of Venus**. This information was for a project run by scientists who hoped

to work out the distance between Earth and the sun. But Cook was also on a secret mission. Like Samuel Wallis, he was hoping to find the unknown southern continent. The *Endeavour* was on an epic journey, and to help record it, many skilled people were on board, including astronomers, scientists, and artists. One of these men was the **botanist** Joseph Banks, and he and Tupaia became friends. Tupaia also spent time with the ship's artists, learning to draw and paint the European way.

transit of Venus: when the planet Venus can be seen moving across the sun

botanist: an expert who studies plants



Adventure

Cook encouraged Tupaia to share his knowledge of the Pacific. Tupaia could identify more than a hundred islands – their sizes, the positions of their reefs and harbours, their populations, the names of chiefs, and the food that might be available. As a master navigator, Tupaia also knew how to get to these islands and how long it would take. When the *Endeavour* left Tahiti in July 1769, Tupaia and a young **apprentice** companion named Taiato were on board.

Before they headed south, Cook wanted to explore the nearby islands.

Tupaia guided the ship first to Huahine and then to Rā'īātea. Wherever they went, Tupaia made sure contact between the British and locals was as smooth as possible. He also worked with Cook on a chart of the South Pacific. When finished, it named an impressive seventy-two islands. One place the chart didn't name was Aotearoa, which had been settled by Polynesian navigators about seven hundred years earlier. Tupaia told Cook that he knew of no great lands to the south – yet this distant place would be the *Endeavour's* next stop.

apprentice: a kind of student





Aotearoa

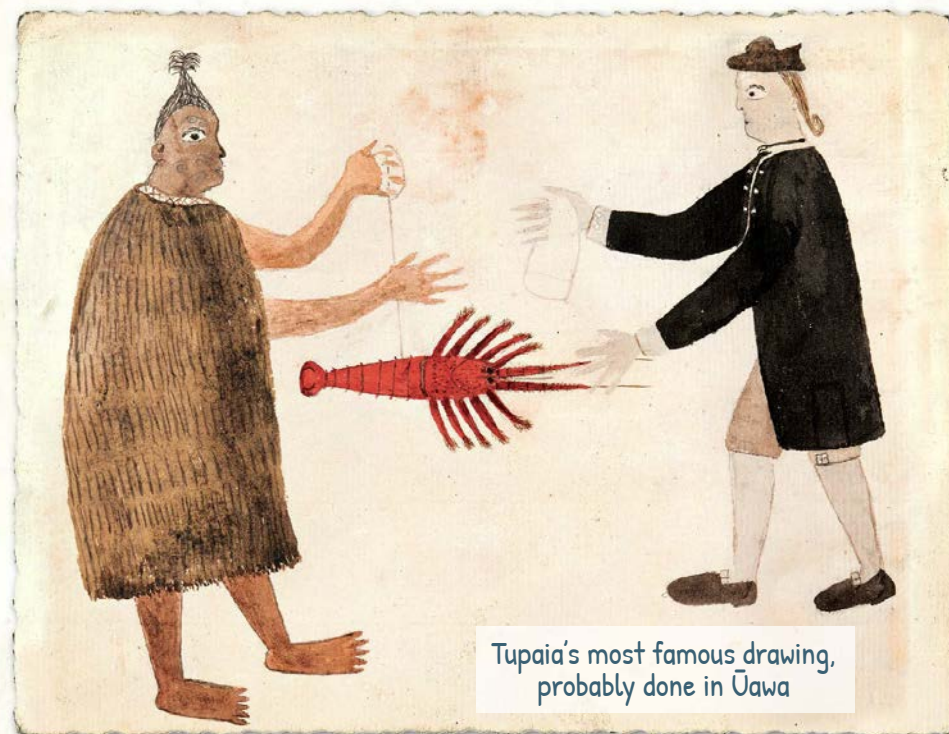
The British sailed into Tūranganui-a-Kiwa, near present-day Gisborne, on 8 October 1769. The first time Cook went ashore, he didn't take Tupaia – a mistake that ended in tragedy. Te Aitanga-ā-Hauiti warriors challenged some of Cook's men, and one of them, Te Maro, was killed on the beach when a British sailor fired his musket.

The next day, Tupaia did go ashore, saving the crew from attack when he called out to a large party of warriors. Because of the similarities between te reo Mā'ohi (the Tahitian language Tupaia spoke) and te reo Māori, the warriors were able to understand. A long conversation followed. Where were these men from? Why had they killed Te Maro? What did they want?



The diplomat

Over the following months, word spread about the high priest from Tahiti travelling in a strange waka with pale companions. Now, when the British had contact with Māori, Tupaia often took a leading role. Using his skills as a diplomat, he would speak to both sides, sharing his knowledge to prevent confusion and conflict. Tupaia was greeted as an honoured guest and given cloaks and other taonga. He was from the homeland after all. Māori wanted to hear his stories. They wanted to connect with their ancestral past.



Tupaia's most famous drawing, probably done in Ūawa

Tupaia continued to draw in Aotearoa. His only surviving artwork from his time here is thought to have been made in Ūawa (now called Tolaga Bay), where Tupaia spent a lot of time ashore. The drawing shows a Māori and Joseph Banks trading a crayfish and white tapa cloth. The British also offered iron and beads, but Māori were more interested in cloth, nails, and especially guns. These goods were exchanged for food and sometimes pounamu.



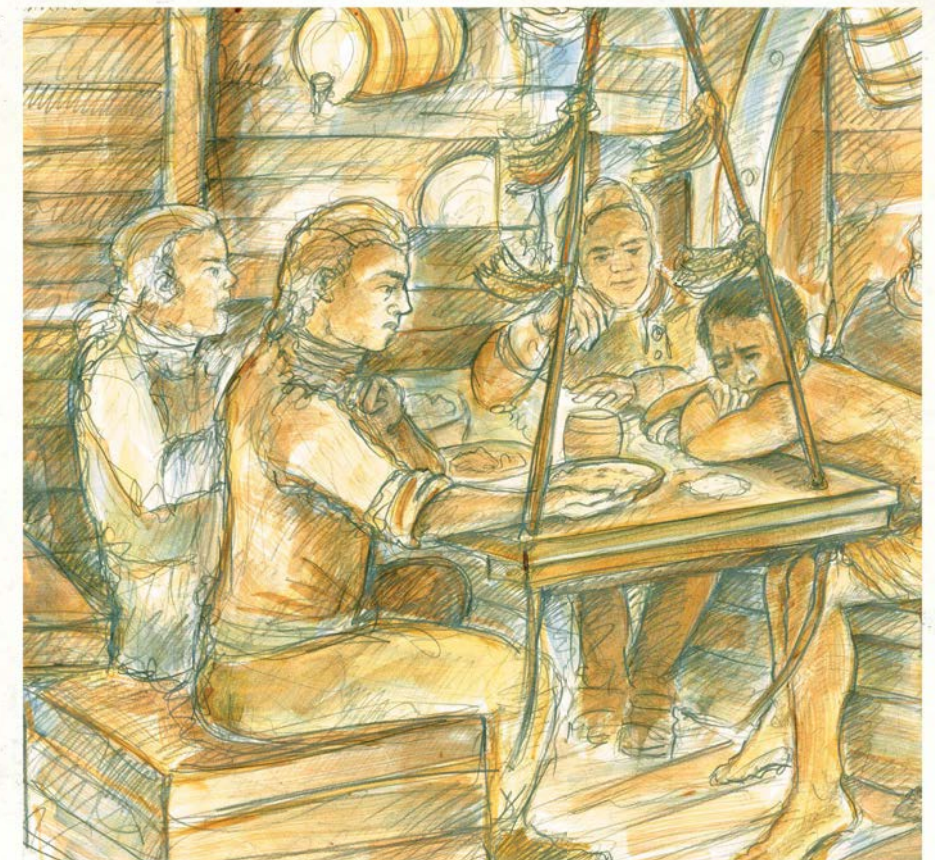
Australia and Batavia

Cook and his men spent six months in Aotearoa. In April, the *Endeavour* sailed west, arriving off the east coast of Australia four weeks later. Cook had hoped that Tupaia would be able to communicate with the indigenous people of Australia, but the languages were too different. “We could know but very little of [Aboriginal people’s] customs as we were never able to form any connections with them,” Cook wrote in his diary.

Not being able to talk with locals changed things for Tupaia. He was no longer of any use to the Europeans, and the crew began to ignore him. He was also sick with scurvy, a serious disease caused by a lack of vitamin C that was common among sailors at the time.



Indigenous Australians drawn by Tupaia in 1770





When the *Endeavour* arrived in **Batavia** in October 1770, Tupaia was suffering badly from the effects of scurvy. Along with other sick sailors, he was sent ashore to eat fresh fruit and vegetables. As their health improved, Tupaia and the young Taiato were said to be fascinated by the local people and their customs. Although Tupaia had worn Western clothing during the voyage, in Indonesia, he decided to wear Tahitian bark-cloth.

Batavia: an old name for the city of Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia



Farewell, Tupaia

Taiato and Tupaia recovered from scurvy but then fell seriously ill again. This time, they had either dysentery or malaria. Nothing could be done. The young Tahitian died first; Tupaia a few days later. They were buried on an island in the harbour – the exact site now unknown. When Cook returned to Aotearoa in 1773, Māori were expecting to see Tupaia. On hearing of his death, they were greatly upset. Priests at Ūawa, where Tupaia had spent so much time, chanted a lament.

Up until recent times, there was little mention of Tupaia in the history books – although he was remembered in Māori oral history. We now know the importance of all that Tupaia shared and did during his time on the *Endeavour* and in Aotearoa. His skills were especially crucial when it came to building relationships between Māori and Pākehā.



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The Ministry of Education and Lift Education would like to thank Jayne and Michel Tuffery (MNZM) for their generous help with this article.

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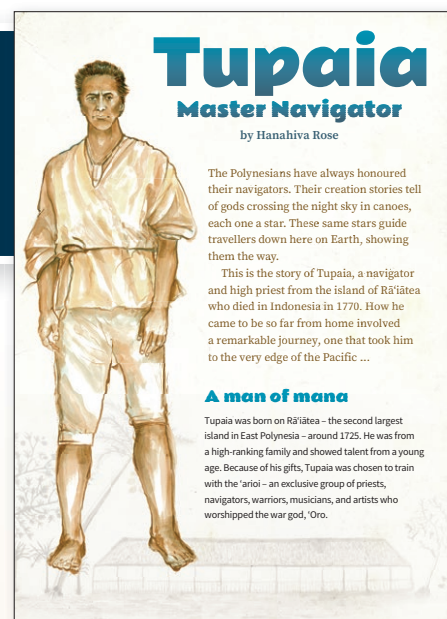
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www.education.govt.nz

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ISBN 978 1 77669 676 5 (online)
ISSN 2624 3636 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū
Editor: Susan Paris
Designer: Liz Tui Morris
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui and Emeli Sione



SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 3 AUGUST 2019

Curriculum learning areas	English Social Sciences
Reading year level	Year 6
Keywords	art, change, colonisation, communication, diplomacy, discovery, <i>Endeavour</i> , exploration, Gisborne, history, interpreting, James Cook, Joseph Banks, journeys, language, Māori, migration, misunderstanding, navigation, New Zealand history, Pacific, Polynesia, Rā'iātea, science, Tahiti, Taiato, Taputapuātea, Te Hā, te reo Māori, Tolaga Bay, transit of Venus, translation, Tupaia, Tūranganui-a-Kiwa, Ūawa, unknown southern continent