

Tupaia (?1725 – 1770)

Tupaia was born in about 1725 to a high-ranking family in Ra'iatea, the second largest island in French Polynesia, and the centre of Polynesian civilisation. By birth a member of the peripatetic *arioi* (high priests) of the god 'Oro, he travelled extensively to other islands and also played an important role in local affairs of state. About 1760, after losing his father and his ancestral lands to invaders from neighbouring Bora Bora, he fled to Tahiti where he became adviser and lover to so-called "Queen" Parea. Within a few years he was one of the most powerful men in the land.

He first met Europeans in June 1767 when Samuel Wallis on HMS *Dolphin* reached Tahiti and stayed five weeks; a year later Tupaia's kinsman Ahutoru sailed to Europe with Bougainville's French expedition. In April 1769 when the *Endeavour* anchored in Matavai Bay, Tupaia made himself known. As interested in the science and technology of the Europeans as they were in the culture of the indigenous people, he spent considerable time with Captain James Cook and his scientists. He befriended naturalist Joseph Banks and showed the visitors the island's sacred places, and with artist Sydney Parkinson, sketched the *arioi* dancers. Of his own volition, encouraged by Banks and sanctioned by Cook, Tupaia, in his mid-forties, and his 12 year-old nephew and acolyte Taiata, joined the *Endeavour*. They sailed from Tahiti on 13 July 1769.

Tupaia's navigational and interpreting skills were soon in demand. He drew Cook a chart of all the Pacific islands he had visited or knew about, predicted weather and pointed out directional stars. At the same time he had lessons in English from astronomer Charles Green and helped Banks compile an account of Tahitian life. His status and knowledge of Polynesian protocol facilitated communication with the islanders and his empathy with the Māori language and culture made him a valuable interpreter and ambassador in New Zealand. In his journal Cook noted, "Tupaia always accompanies us in every excursion we make and proves of infinite service." However, on board *Endeavour* his proud, haughty and sometimes obstinate demeanour made him less than popular with the crew.

There was little communication with the Australian Aborigines – their culture was completely alien to Tupaia, and they were wary of the newcomers. During the long weeks at sea as they sailed north, Tupaia developed signs of scurvy – the ship's food disagreed with him, he refused to take the antiscorbutic "medicine" supplied to those on board, and he had little opportunity to collect his

own shellfish or greens. At the picturesque but pestilential port of Batavia (now Jakarta) Taiata was among the first of many to succumb to what was probably malaria. On 20 December 1770, distraught with grief and weakened by scurvy, Tupaia also died. Both were buried on the island of Eadem.

Tupaia's name endures as a Māori family name. Although his original map has been lost, copies have survived. Recent research has shown that several sketches previously attributed to Banks were actually made by Tupaia. He is remembered also in *Tupeia antarctica*, a mistletoe first collected by Banks and Solander in Queen Charlotte Sound on 15 January 1770. Described by Chamisso and Schlechtendal in 1828, the new genus was dedicated to Tupaia, the Tahitian who joined Cook's first voyage to New Zealand.



Tupeia antarctica

Mistletoes have green leaves for photosynthesis, but attach to a host tree from which they extract water and nutrients through specially adapted roots. Seven of New Zealand's eight native mistletoe species are endemic. Commonly known as tāpia, pirita, or white mistletoe, *Tupeia antarctica* ('of southern polar regions') grows mostly in eastern shrublands of both islands, on a range of native or introduced plants. It may reach up to a metre across, a mass of variable, drooping leaves. The fruit, white with purple markings, must have the flesh removed and the seed dispersed by birds onto a host plant for germination.