

Section 4: Humanity and the noble savage

The video argues that for the *philosophes* across Enlightenment Europe an interest in non-European peoples, like the passion for the classics, not only added to knowledge generally but also provided standards of comparison against which to measure existing values and practices. The ancient civilizations of China and India were much admired.

One of the most lasting Enlightenment concepts of human nature was 'the good savage' or 'noble savage'. The phrase embodied a utopian myth, with roots both biblical and classical, of a Garden of Eden or Golden Age. Mythology seemed to become reality with the discovery of the Pacific (South Sea) Islands and their attractive inhabitants (see Figure V1.4).



Figure V1.4 Sir Joshua Reynolds, Portrait of Omai, c.1775, oil on canvas, 225 x 143 cm, private collection. Photo: Sothebys, London.

In 1767 Captain Samuel Wallis, commander of HMS Dolphin, discovered Otaheite (Tahiti) and claimed it for Britain. In 1768 Count Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, claiming it for France, named it 'New Cythera' (a Greek island reputed to be birthplace of the goddess Venus) and described it as 'the true utopia'. In 1769 Captain Cook, commanding HMS Endeavour, visited Tahiti with the naturalist Sir Joseph Banks. Both Bougainville and Banks wrote enthusiastic accounts of Tahiti as an earthly paradise. Bougainville's account inspired Diderot's encomium of the 'natural' life of the South Sea Islanders, his so-called Supplement to Bougainville's Journey, which enthused over their sexual freedom.

Omai (more properly, Mai – 'O' signified 'it is') was brought to Britain in 1774 by Captain Furneaux aboard HMS Adventure. He was the first Pacific Islander ever seen in Britain, and his two-year visit marked a high point in the vogue of the noble savage. He was presented to King George III and Queen Caroline. At the king's command he was inoculated by Dr Thomas Dimsdale (who in 1768 had journeyed to Russia to inoculate Catherine the Great). Omai was lionized by English society. He dined ten times as a guest of the Royal Society. He was admired for his 'natural' charm and dignity. Even Dr Johnson was 'struck by the elegance of his behaviour'. Omai was painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds, and the picture was exhibited at the Royal Academy. Significantly, no attempt was made to convert Omai to Christianity.

This enthusiasm for and idealization of Pacific Islanders was seldom extended towards Africans or Afro-Caribbeans, who were commonly considered as inferior. This was a convenient view for those who benefited from the brutal but highly lucrative slave trade.

The *philosophes* were unanimous in their opposition to slavery, and de Jaucourt denounced it in his article 'The slave trade' in the *Encyclopédie*. The essential objection was that slavery was a violation of our common human nature. As de Jaucourt wrote:

This buying of Negroes to reduce them to slavery is one business that violates religion, morality, natural laws, and all the rights of human nature.

(Gendzier, 1967, p.229)

A very few former African slaves, such as Olaudah Equiano and Ignatius Sancho, succeeded in British society, thus vindicating the Enlightenment belief in basic human equality.

EXERCISE

- 1 How do you account for the attraction of the myth of the noble savage for men and women of the Enlightenment?
- 2 Why were the Encyclopedists hostile to the slave trade?

DISCUSSION

- 1 The myth of the noble savage appeared to provide a striking combination of freedom and happiness, and to demonstrate the inherent goodness of human nature. The discovery of the South Sea Islanders and the visit to Britain of men like Omai seemed to lend substance to the myth and attracted much uncritical acceptance of it.
 - 2 The *philosophes* were unanimously critical of the slave trade both because of its savage excesses and cruelty and because it denied to the Africans and Afro-Caribbeans the inherent dignity as human beings which men such as Equiano and Sancho showed they could put to good use.
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