

Do You Bring Your Gods With You or Do You Find Them There Waiting? Reconsidering the 1790 Polynesian Colonisation of Pitcairn Island

Martin Gibbs and David Roe

ABSTRACT: This paper re-examines the early years of the 1789 *Bounty* encounter with Pitcairn Island, with a specific focus on some of the potential perceptions and responses of the Polynesian colonists to their new home. We argue that when viewing the *Bounty* arrivals as a colonising population, the perceptions and reactions of the Polynesian participants almost certainly included responses to an existing spirit population within the Pitcairn landscape that was most likely undetectable and incomprehensible to the Europeans. In particular we draw on the notion that, especially in the early years, the Polynesians were engaged in a constant series of negotiations with spirits and other components of the landscape in order to make social, conceptual, and spatial sense of their new surroundings.

KEYWORDS: Pitcairn Island, Colonisation, Polynesian Mythology, *Bounty*

One question that has always intrigued me is what happens to demonic beings when immigrants move from their homelands. Irish-Americans remember the fairies, Greek-Americans the *vrykólakas*, but only in relation to events remembered in the old country. When I once asked why such demons are not seen in America, my informants giggled confusedly and said ‘They’re too scared to pass the ocean, it’s too far,’ pointing out that Christ and the apostles never came to America. (Richard Dorson, 1971: 36)

The tiny volcanic outcrop of Pitcairn Island has attained fame on two fronts: first as the hiding place and scene of the violent demise of most of the HMAV *Bounty* mutineers, and secondly as the place where the last of their company led their descendants to spiritual redemption, piety and purity, creating a ‘model’ Christian community. Although the circumstances of the initial settlement and subsequent life on the island have been written about many times, it has undeniably been a narrative focussed on the fates of the British seamen. In contrast, and despite being the numerically superior component of the colonising population, the

Polynesian men and women who accompanied them have been reduced to bit-players in the grand drama.

In this paper we re-examine the early years of the 1789 *Bounty* encounter with Pitcairn Island, with a specific focus on some of the potential perceptions and responses of the Polynesian colonists to their new home. It is not the purpose of this paper to identify or reconstruct the 'Polynesian-ness' of the early Pitcairn way of life. There is no doubt that the majority of the colonists were Polynesian and that social and cultural continuities occurred. However, we suggest that when viewing the *Bounty* arrivals as a colonising population, the perceptions and reactions of the Polynesian participants almost certainly included responses to an existing spirit population within the Pitcairn landscape that was most likely undetectable and incomprehensible to the Europeans. In particular, we draw on the notion that, especially in the early years, the Polynesians were engaged in a constant series of negotiations with spirits and other components of the landscape in order to make social, conceptual, and spatial sense of their new surroundings. Of necessity the scenarios explored here are largely speculative: the paucity of historical information from the earliest years makes a more grounded analysis impossible. However, the intention is to encourage a consideration of possibilities in our understanding of a well-known story, rather than to provide a strictly empirical anthropological study.

The first section of this paper presents a summary of the conventional (and Eurocentric) reading of the *Bounty*/Pitcairn story and especially of the settlement process and development of the early island community. The second section provides an overview of Tahitian religious structures and then considers how an understanding of this might provide an alternative interpretation of the experience of the Polynesian Pitcairners in their early years on the island.

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The Settlement of Pitcairn and the Path to Redemption

The general circumstances of the voyage of HMAV *Bounty*, commanded by Lt William Bligh on her mission to collect breadfruit plants, are well documented (e.g. Barrow, 1831; Denning, 1994). For just over five months between October 1788 and April 1789 the *Bounty* crew were based in the area of Matavai Bay in Tahiti as the breadfruit plants purchased by Bligh were propagated. During this extended period the *Bounty*'s crew, originating primarily (but not exclusively) from Britain, settled into intimate relationships with female Tahitians, as well as developing *taio* (special bond/ sharing) friendships with Tahitian men which saw them afforded social and economic bonds and obligations equal

to those of close kin (Finney, 1964). Many also lived in domestic arrangements with their partners and were extensively tattooed in the traditional Polynesian style (Lummis, 1997:83). By the time the breadfruit plants were ready, the crew were reluctant to leave for the return voyage to England via the West Indies. The mutiny of officers and crew led by First Mate Fletcher Christian on 28 April 1789 may have been prompted by a desire to return to Tahiti, a result of Bligh's belligerence towards his men, or a combination of these and other factors (Denning, 1994). With the captain and the non-mutineers set adrift in the ship's boat, the *Bounty* returned to Tahiti to collect male and female companions as well as further supplies, before departing to find a base for a new settlement. After an abortive attempt to settle on the already-occupied island of Tubuai, the vessel returned once again to Tahiti in late September.

With most of the mutineers now electing to stay on Tahiti despite the real threat of discovery and punishment by a vengeful British Navy, Fletcher Christian and eight other sailors, together with five Tahitian and one Tubuaian men (who, for convenience, we will refer to as the Polynesian men), 12 Tahitian women and one female child, prepared to leave again (Maude, 1968). They quickly stocked the ship with the plants and animals they considered necessary for successful colonisation and on 23 September 1789 pulled up the anchor and departed. At this point they effectively disappeared from the historical record for 18 years, until the chance rediscovery of the survivors on Pitcairn Island in 1808. From historic and ethnographic accounts Maude (1968) was able to reconstruct something of the movements of the vessel during the several months of its search for a new home. Christian had apparently decided their destination needed to be uninhabited, preferably uncharted, and without an obvious anchorage, to deter passing ships from visiting. After a period searching westward of Tahiti he eventually decided to swing far eastward and try to locate Pitcairn Island, described in a copy of Carteret's Journal which was aboard the ship. Despite Carteret's error in longitude which would ultimately help conceal Pitcairn for some years, *Bounty* arrived at the island on 15 January 1790.

Geographically, Pitcairn is only 4 km at its greatest length, 9.6 km round and 450 hectares or 4.35 sq km in area. The island is a half of a volcanic caldera rising to 300m (1,100 feet), with precipitous coastal cliffs and only two moderately accessible landing-places for small boats: at Bounty Bay on the northeast and at West Harbour (Tedside) to the northwest. After several days standing off the island due to inclement weather, an armed party of four Europeans and three Tahitian men went ashore at Bounty Bay to determine whether the island was inhabited and suitable for settlement. As described some years later by Teehuteatuaonoa ('Jenny'), one of the women aboard:

The crew reported that there were no natives on the island; that it abounded with cocoa-nuts and sea-fowl, and that they had found traces of its having been once inhabited. Charcoal, stone axes, stone foundations of houses, and a few carved boards, were discovered. Christian got the vessel under a rocky point and came to anchor.

(Jenny/ Teehuteatuaonoa, 1826)

John Adams (Alexander Smith) also provided detail of the mechanics of the first few days of colonisation in his narratives to visiting sailors. Within days the *Bounty* was unloaded, after which there was heated discussion between the Europeans about whether to save her for future escape or destroy her to reduce the chances of detection. Despite a lack of agreement, several Europeans decided to set fire to the vessel, which drifted shorewards and sank (Erskine, 2004), thus also removing any opportunity for departure. As part of the strategy of concealment, the initial shelters and then the more substantial buildings that replaced them were kept behind a screen of trees and vegetation. The existing suite of naturally occurring and introduced economic plants available on the island rendered much of the imported flora unnecessary, although Jenny/Teehuteatuaonoa (1819; 1826) reported that they planted the superior varieties of plants such as yams which they had brought with them.

Once the nine Europeans were reassured that the island was not occupied, the land was divided amongst them, a move which effectively reduced the Polynesian men to the status of landless servants. The Europeans had also initially claimed nine of the women as partners, leaving only three women for the six Polynesian men. When the death of two of the women attached to the Europeans saw an attempt in 1791 to claim replacements from those attached to the Polynesian men, tensions reached breaking point. The initial violent attacks came from several Polynesian men enraged at this insult, but led to a complex series of counter attacks, injuries, deaths and murders which extended over the next several years, involving different alliances of Polynesian and European men, as well as the women, all groups becoming involved in carrying out violent acts. As the reality of their isolation and the lack of any opportunity to escape dawned on them, a deep sense of despair also grew within the population. By 1794 only four adult males (all Europeans) survived, although by 1798 one had committed suicide (McCoy, possibly as a result of drunken derangement), and another (Quintal) had to be executed after becoming insane and violent (Lummis, 1997:125). Within ten years of landing, only two adult males remained. When Edward Young died from asthma in December 1800 John Adams was left as the last adult male on the island. He was accompanied by the surviving Polynesian women and 20 or so children (Lummis, 1997:130).

Sometime after the death of Young, Adams claimed that during a drunken stupor he had received a vision of the Archangel Michael (in later accounts sometimes Gabriel) which led him to introduce Christianity to the island, based around his own limited reading of the Bible and a vaguely remembered set of religious festivals and practices. By the time the American vessel *Topaz* arrived at Pitcairn in 1808 and discovered the fate of the *Bounty* mutineers, the island was ostensibly a model (and ‘Europeanised’) community of Christian virtue, a situation through which Adams, now the island patriarch and religious leader, also gained his own redemption in the eyes of the British Navy and the world at large. Although Adams died in 1829, Pitcairn continued to gain status and benefit as an exemplar in Christian piety, its story becoming a perennial favourite for preachers across the globe and reinforced in nearly 200 years of secular and church literature (Brodie, 1850; Denning, 1994; Lummis, 1997).

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Encountering a Landscape—the Pragmatics of Colonisation.

The encounter between those aboard the *Bounty* and the Pitcairn landscape formed a watershed in relations. When the Europeans had been guests in Tahiti they had been subject to the structures and strictures of their Polynesian hosts. On Tubuai, the brief experiences ashore had in many respects been abnormal for both groups, especially when faced with a common threat from the native Tubuaian population, resulting in a settlement which had an overt military and defensive aspect (Christian, 1983:141). However, it was on Pitcairn, with the small groups of Europeans and Polynesians now stranded together, that major differences in perceptions of land and perhaps as importantly of landscape, became apparent. That these became related to power was a particular source of dismay to the Polynesian men (Denning, 1994).

When *Bounty* arrived at Pitcairn there were no humans resident on the island, despite the signs of former habitation. It is unclear as to why this was the case. There has been a continuing debate among archaeologists about ‘extinct’ Polynesian islands, that is, islands where the population had apparently left or died out in the prehistoric past (Kirch, 1988). Pre-*Bounty* Pitcairn falls into this pattern, with several possibilities considered. The first of these is that the resident population of Pitcairn had eventually failed or been forced away due to small size of the island, and limitations on both the available resources (especially water) and the human population (Kirch 1988: 31). In this respect, restricted fresh water, loss of timber and progressive land degradation once the population neared 200 people were certainly contributing reasons for the departure of the Pitcairner Islanders to Norfolk Island in 1856 (Young, 1894).

Another scenario is that Pitcairn with its impressive obsidian and fine-grained basalt outcrops was only intermittently visited by a population, possibly from the Gambier Islands (Mangareva), who would intensively produce stone tools for a period of time before departing again. Weisler (1995: 383) dismisses this notion of a ‘quarry island’ on the basis that prehistoric occupation was intensive wherever flat land was available, rather than in localised areas. However, if the intensive occupation was intermittent, the *Bounty* group may have arrived between visitation cycles, with the planned subsequent visit by its owners interrupted for some reason, most likely the impact of the Europeans into the region in the succeeding decade.

Either scenario leaves the question of when this abandonment—permanent or temporary—may have occurred. Henry (1928: 472) associated Pitcairn with Tahitian legends of the ‘then populous little mountaineous island of Hiti-au-rereva’, although it is unclear how she makes this connection. Buck (1938) however suggested Pitcairn was the island of Mata-ki-te-rangi mentioned in Mangarevan folklore. Mata-ki-te-rangi was said to have originally been settled by a displaced group from Mangareva, although on the basis of oral histories Peter Buck suggested that the island drops out of Mangarevan history around the fourteenth century AD (Buck, 1938: 223-227). From archaeological evidence of transported stone, Pitcairn and Mangareva were in regular contact until at least 1450AD, with Weisler (1995: 402) indicating probable abandonment or population loss within a couple of hundred years after that.

For the Europeans aboard *Bounty*, that the Pitcairn landscape was not currently inhabited by humans made it ‘empty’. That there were various exploitable resources upon it constituted a bonus, although the residue of past occupations was largely irrelevant to how the Europeans decided their new colony might proceed. In contrast, for the Polynesians to step ashore ‘uninvited’ on Pitcairn was to intrude upon a landscape which was immediately legible as having been ‘occupied’—and of belonging to unknown people. There was clear evidence of gardens and economic plants, of houses and occupation areas, of quarries and production, as well as of religious and spiritual sites. For the Europeans, hiding the fledgling settlement behind the trees was a strategy to deflect the attention of a vengeful British Navy. The Polynesians may have been conscious of that imperative, since the people of Matavai Bay had borne the brunt of British aggression when the crew of HMS *Dolphin* had fired upon the crowds there with canon and muskets in 1767 (Denig, 1992: 181). However, they were undoubtedly also aware, and probably significantly more concerned about, the potential for the original Polynesian owners of the island to return and wreak an equally bloody revenge upon trespassers and land thieves.

In a practical sense, for the Polynesians much of the colonisation process probably consisted of recovering and reinvigorating the existing systems on the island, as well as making additions from the flora and fauna transported on the *Bounty* (Erskine, 1994). The exact nature of the settlers' agricultural practice is difficult to establish, although based on documentary accounts and later ethnographic observations it can be supposed to have been largely Polynesian in style, especially given the nature of the plants already available on Pitcairn and also transported there aboard *Bounty*. The majority of the Europeans were young and sailors by profession, with limited agricultural knowledge, with the exception of William Brown who was a gardener and botanist's assistant on the *Bounty*. The environment and range of available plants would have made a Polynesian horticultural regime a necessity. By the time Europeans again made contact and recorded the nature of life on Pitcairn, it is clear that other than knowledge of English and a variety of social and religious codes and practices linked to Adams' Christian structures, life on the island followed a very Tahitian pattern under the guidance of the women (Barrow, 1831; Beechey, 1831; Lummis, 1997).

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'Spirits' in the Landscape

While the above discussion outlines the pragmatics of establishing the new settlement on Pitcairn, there seems little doubt that the Polynesian members of the group would have had to engage with a range of other forces invisible and to some degree unintelligible to the European men. For Tahitians, their lives required constant interaction and negotiation with innumerable spirits. Oliver (1974) suggests that the spirit world could be divided into three main categories: *atua* (gods), *atua-ta'ata* (demi-gods), and *'oromatua* (ghosts, see also Henry, 1928: 380). Some spirits were powerful, had a broad relationship to humans (*ta'ata*) and may have had specific places of worship (*marae*) with priesthoods devoted to them. The period of *Bounty's* visit to Tahiti was, however, only several decades after the arrival of the god 'Oro (the god of war and sometimes of fertility) from Raiatea, together with his priesthood (Oliver, 1974: 385, 900, 912). This introduction had been attended by a shift, at least among Tahiti's political and social elites, from a broader form of polytheism to a monotheistic focus on 'Oro (Oliver, 1974: 385, 900, 912; Filihia, 1996).

The minor spirits (*atua-ta'ata*) were weaker and localized:

holding sway over specific areas of land and sea; tutelars of specific social units—territorial, kin, occupational, and so forth; familiars of individuals,

patrons of events and of activities (e.g. childbearing, voyaging, tapa making, archery); and others. (Oliver, 1974: 57)

Spirits communicated and manifested their approval or disapproval in dreams, in the success or failure of crops, in the weather, in the cries of birds, in health, injury or death, or any other event in life (Oliver, 1974: 71; also see the description of verb *aiora* in Davies, 1851: 17). Some spirits had an anthropomorphic aspect when required, while others occasionally took the form of animals or natural forces (Henry, 1928: 382-394). Some spirits were dangerous, others benign towards humans, and some had no interest in humans (Oliver, 1974: 61; Henry, 1928: 380).

Relationships between humans and spirits were recognised and negotiated in a continuum from the rarefied areas of the temples through to the daily practices of home and garden. Davies (1851: 2600) records various practices of these kinds, such as the *taumaha* or offering of food for the gods or spirits of the dead. The spirits were a continuous presence, assuredly there as much as any other phenomena. Spirits were not supernatural in the sense of them being a force beyond comprehension. Rather they were an inevitable and necessary part of the Polynesian cultural landscape; they were neighbours—sometimes relatives—and to greater or lesser degrees inhabited the same geographical spaces and places as did people, rather than in a distinct or separate overlay upon the human world. They were normal, if not always welcome, parts of the environment and could not be ignored.

Communication with spirits encompassed a range of engagements, most commonly and for the broadest range of individuals by simple offerings or recognitions at appropriate times or occasions, through to the precise performances of complex forms of prayer and ritual required for the more powerful gods and demi-gods (Douglas, 1974:85). Some interactions with spirits could be dealt with by individuals, others were undertaken by heads of families (usually patriarchs), while those associated with gods required specialists.

In considering the broader set of relationships between humans and spirits, archaeologist McNiven has evoked the idea of the ‘spiritscape’:

People ritually engage with spiritscapes either formally or informally. Informal ritual engagements tend to be situations where people experience a spiritual presence/power while undertaking everyday acts. They may occur when a person comes into close contact with spiritually charged contexts... or when a person simply senses that a spirit has made its presence felt—it is difficult to be alone in a spiritscape. Formal ritual engagements involve people taking an active role in controlling spiritual forces through special codified performances. (McNiven, 2004: 335)

Drawing on his research with the Melanesian populations of Torres Strait and Aboriginal peoples in northern Australia, McNiven described how landscape is managed through formal acts of ritual and practice which allow interaction with the spiritscape, as well as informal encounters with spiritual presence while undertaking everyday acts (McNiven, 2004: 345). These acts of *orchestration* (McNiven, 2004: 336) also have physicality in that they occur in and affect space and place. They may require construction of appropriate ritual structures or devices, or recognition of spiritual power in ‘natural’ features of the landscape, performance of dances, songs or ceremonies, and/or physical offerings. McNiven identified four key issues:

- 1) maintaining the availability of important subsistence species (i.e. ‘increase’ or ‘maintenance’ rites); 2) procuring key subsistence species (i.e. hunting magic); 3) controlling elements important to use of the sea (e.g. wind, waves and tides); and 4) mediating with the spirits and with the spirits of the dead (e.g. mortuary rituals) as a constant negotiation between the living-scape and the death-scape. (McNiven, 2004: 336)

While Polynesian cosmologies were undoubtedly different from those of Melanesians and Indigenous Australians, the key elements and drivers of these relationships between humans, spirits and landscape are consistent with Polynesian examples as outlined in Oliver’s (1974) and Henry’s (1928) works. Spirits required management, offering difficulties or even dire consequences if this was not done, or done incorrectly. However, we suggest that McNiven’s notion of ‘spiritscape’ suggests a view of the world in which humans and spirits live in different spaces, a world where there is a distinct divide between the natural and the supernatural, between the sacred and profane, between ritual and practice, and between life and death. If these differences do not exist—or exist in very different ways than those with which we may be familiar—then the construction of ‘spiritscapes’, ‘living-scapes’ and ‘death-scapes’ becomes unnecessary—and, indeed, possibly unhelpful in understanding the complexities and motivations for human actions in a world conceived and understood through different logics. Maintaining the concept of a single cultural landscape, in which humans and non-humans co-exist and interact, in which the supernatural can be completely natural, and in which the dead still ‘live’, might better lend itself to an emic glimpse of a world in which the ‘human-scape’, the ‘spiritscape’, the ‘living-scape’ and the ‘death-scape’ are parts of the same integrated yet dynamic system.

The question of how colonising Polynesian populations might have initially identified, perceived or encountered spirits on new islands remains largely unexplored in anthropological literature. Much of what has been written focuses on the narratives surrounding the heroic ancestral voyagers rather than the mechanics of colonisation and spirit encounter.

Henry (1928: 443) provides a number of Tahitian oral traditions and narratives which revolve around voyaging of major gods, including the arrival of 'Oro on Tahiti (see also Buck, 1939: 51). She relates some of the stories and processes surrounding the establishment of new deities (*atua*) on other islands, such as the construction by priests of new *marae* for their worship using sacred stones transported from other consecrated sites, offering of presents to placate existing gods and even the signifiers of arrival of the gods themselves, in the case of 'Oro as a wind and flashes of lightning as he entered his carved image on his new *marae* on Tahiti (Henry, 1928: 128-129).

While *atua* moved themselves between islands it might be imagined that some of the lesser orders of spirits, especially of the familiar/ancestral type, could have been taken with the colonisers and 'installed' in the new landscape (so to speak), while other spirits were encountered already in place and over time their presence(s), attributes and qualities are progressively discovered, recognised, accommodated, and possibly contested or even neutralised. It is probable that these processes were undertaken by ritual and spiritual specialists—the character of ritual architecture suggests, for example, a common design with locally required adaptations—or persons otherwise capable of undertaking the negotiations required to secure a landscape for occupation.

One of the few discussions which might align with this question of whether or how lesser spirits might travel in the Polynesian world is by Feinberg (1996) in his descriptions of how spirits are categorized on the Western Polynesian outlier of Anuta in the Solomon Islands.

Between gods (*tupua tapu*), and undistinguished spirits (*atua vare*) are beings known as *tupua penua*, 'land spirits', and entities that might be termed 'totemic spirits', which have no distinct class label in Anutan. (Feinberg, 1996: 104)

These tutelary totemic spirits were brought with the immigrants from their homelands to Anuta, some fifteen generations earlier. However, the land spirits (*tupua penua*) were native to Anuta, very numerous, and bound to natural phenomena and places. He further notes:

Their exploits and personalities are captured in story and song. But they are spiritlike in that they are amoral, egotistic and dangerous. They have little positive role and, even in pre-Christian times, were usually avoided or placated rather than worshipped. (Feinberg, 1996: 104)

While being cautious in drawing parallels between Eastern and Western Pacific cultural patterns, Feinberg's work provides us with some avenues of possible insight. We could consider that on arrival on Pitcairn, not only

were there the signs of occupation in the forms of stone tools, economic plants and former structures, but also both the visible and invisible indications of the island's former and possibly existing spirits. Most notable would have been the several *marae*, stone platforms with carved anthropomorphic figures, and the foci of significant spiritual power. The name *malai* is preserved in two areas of the island, one in the south-eastern part of the island on the hills above Bounty Bay, and the other near Tedside, although others sites are possible and Pitcairners suggested they had seen remains of other stone platforms (S. Christian, pers. comm. 1997). Little is recorded of the nature of these *marae* sites, although one of the carved stone bodies was retrieved for the Auckland Museum. An 1840s visitor noted

Burial-places are still to be seen, and large, flat, hewn stones, in different parts of the island, must have been for pavement in front of their houses, such as are still in use among other tribes in the South Seas. These stones, when observed by the crew of the *Bounty*, had very large trees growing up among them, by which in many places they had been displaced. (Brodie, 1850: 47)

Such pavements were a feature of *marae*, as were associations with sacred trees within their boundaries or nearby (Oliver, 1974: 97, 102). Carved boards as described by Teehuteatuaonoa (Jenny/ Teehuteatuaonoa, 1826) are also commonly visible in early depictions of Tahitian *marae* (Oliver, 1974). Burials and skulls were found in association with the Pitcairn *marae*, as were carvings on the faces of cliffs, most notably on the cliffs at 'Down Rope' on the south end of the island, although there is some suggestions that lesser engravings may have existed on boulders near Bounty Bay. The meaning and significance of these petroglyphs is now unknown, but may have had significance to the new Polynesian arrivals, or at least may have been viewed with concern.

Entering this new landscape must have immediately presented problems for the Polynesian colonists. The non-European population consisted of six men and 12 women from Tahiti, Raiataia and Tubuaia, most probably in their teens or early 20s (and thus comparable to their European companions), as well as one infant girl. Of the men, Tararo from Raiataia was socially superior to the others as evidenced by his having a wife to himself (Denning, 1992: 316). Of the 12 women, Denning (1992: 322) particularly notes that Mills' wife Vahineatua (our emphasis) as having 'a name that, in most of Polynesia, called attention to some degree of sacredness and connection with localised deities'. Fletcher Christian's wife is usually known as Maimiti, of the Tahitian *ra'atira* landowning and minor chiefly class (Christian, 1983: 95). However, other sources (e.g. Jenny/ Teehuteatuaonoa, 1819) record alternative names for her, including referring to her as Mauatua (our emphasis). We have no

idea if any of them might have been considered a ritual specialist or had competencies which allowed them to manage or negate spiritual forces of various kinds, whether of gods or lesser and localised spirits, or other forms of *tapu* removal. However, we can be certain that some form of management and negotiation would have been required.

Allowing that the *marae* were almost certainly immediately legible for their association with *atua* (gods), they would have been avoided by the women and possibly most or all of the men (Oliver, 1974: 67). Henry (1928: 149-151) includes oral traditions regarding the degree of caution required around *marae*, especially those belonging to others. She describes old and abandoned *marae* and burial grounds in Tahiti being shunned and avoided, as carelessness could lead to illness or infirmity. Even if the *marae* could be avoided, there remained the essential interactions with other spirits: those already there, those brought with them and, perhaps, those created by new deaths on the island, which were necessary to ensure survival. As noted earlier, communication with (and to some degree management of) spirits was critical for the conduct of daily life, growth of crops, fertility, health, etc. (Oliver, 1974: 71). Also, what of the 'land spirits' native to Pitcairn that presumably were encountered over the course of occupation, let alone ghosts or other entities? For a group of young Polynesians it must have presented at best a situation which required careful investigation and negotiation, and at worst saw them confronted with terrifying prospects for which they may not have had the skills to neutralise or mitigate difficult forces.

How the Polynesian Pitcairners perceived the events of the colonisation, the growing unrest between factions of the population, and the repeated spiral of violence and murder is unknown. However, Tahitian cosmology meant that injury, illness, failure of crops, defeats in warfare, and a limitless range of other grievances were the result of disapproval by spirits (Oliver, 1974: 69). To what extent were the catastrophic events of the first decade or more seen as a consequence of failing to negotiate the new landscape and its inhabitants?

In the now lost journal of Edward Young there was a passage from March 1794 (partially reported in other sources) describing how he discovered one day that the women had dug up the skulls of his former crewmates and were carrying them about with them. When Young demanded the return of the skulls, the women refused and said they should not be buried, with Jenny asking why he wanted this done when the rest of the (white) men did not insist on it (Beechey, 1831: 89; see also Oliver, 1974: 508 for a discussion of the traditional significance of skulls on Tahiti). It appears that Young then retrieved the skulls by force and reburied them. In his elegant reflection on the *Bounty* story, Greg Denning identified this as a significant insight into how the Polynesian women were socialising the Pitcairn landscape:

The women dug up the bones of Christian, Williams, Martin, Mills and Brown. They kept the skulls in their houses or carried them when they went into the fields. The women's island now included the '*oromatua*, the active souls of their murdered husbands. They knew that, as the guardians of the family welfare, these ghosts would occupy their own skulls and give a protective presence. (Denning, 1992: 323)

Although the increasing presence of their own ghosts at last gave the women a level of influence in managing non-humans in the landscape, this was presumably only partial. Violent death continued, with the suicide of McCoy as a result of alcohol-induced delirium, and the vicious insanity of Quintal which required his murder by Adams and Young. These mental aberrations could equally have been interpreted by the women as spirit-originated punishments, as might the eventual death of Ned Young from asthma. Establishing and maintaining a social equilibrium with the spirits of the landscape remained elusive.

Even in conventional histories of Pitcairn, the turning point for the community came when Adams, now the sole European and the sole adult male on the island, had his powerful dream or vision of the Archangel Michael telling him to bring the island community to the worship of the Christian god (although in some versions there was also a vision of his own damnation if he did not repent—see Brodie, 1851: 64). There are some hints that soon after the deaths of McCoy and Quintal and prior to Ned Young's death there may have been some intention to revive religious practice (Brodie, 1851: 64). This included Young starting to teach Adams how to read from the *Bible*, but it seems likely that it was only after the former's death and Adams' epiphany that any concerted effort was made. For the Tahitians, visions, possession, dreams and prophecy were recognised modes of communication with spirits. In this case Adams had been visited by an especially powerful *atua-ta'ata* (demi-god) commanding him to return to worship his ancestral *atua* (god). Given the shift from their traditional polytheism to the monotheism of '*Oro* worship on both Raiatea and Tahiti, the idea of a single and all-powerful god may not have been that alien.

By virtue of being the only person with any knowledge of this *atua*, its powers and the appropriate rituals and prayers required for worship and daily practice, including being the only person (partially) able to read the prayerbooks wherein lay further knowledge, Adams by default became the priest (*tahu'a pure*) of this 'new' religion. Based on his apparently limited memory of Anglican liturgy and his weak skills in reading the materials available to him, Adams surrounded his religious practice with rituals of devotion. In addition to daily morning and evening prayers, there were blessings at meals, and several services on Sundays. Through a misreading of Ash Wednesday and Good Friday being fast days he required fasting on

all Wednesdays and Fridays (Brodie, 1851: 62-64). A strict and stern moral code was also applied to the whole population. Adams taught the prayers and the creed, and became the fount of knowledge and guidance (see Denning, 1992: 324 for his analysis of Adams' fundamentalist approach and philosophy).

An interesting incident is reported on how the children on the island took up the 'new' religion.

The manner in which the children first learned their prayers is rather strange. Adams wanted a piece of ground broken up to plant some yams in, and he engaged two young men, Edward Quintal and Robert Young, to do the same for him; and, as payment, a small phial of gunpowder was to be given. After the ground was all broken up, and the yams planted, these two young men asked Adams which he would like to do best—give them the gunpowder, or teach them some prayers out of the Prayer Book: Adams, who was much pleased with this remark, consented at once to teach them, and offered them the gunpowder, which they refused to take from him. Adams told them that, if there were any more of them who would like to be taught, he would teach them. (Brodie, 1851: 63)

Greater knowledge of the new religion and of the formulas by which to communicate with (and manipulate) spirits, Christian or otherwise, could provide a powerful incentive and opportunity for youth, a situation seen in many cross-cultural examples. As seen in many places, adoption of a new religion presents many advantages to a population in unsettled circumstances, allowing them to reposition themselves with regard to the spirit world. The introduction or recognition of new god(s) provided a mechanism for controlling a wide range of other spiritual forces. That the introduction of Adams' Christianity marked or coincided with the end of hostilities within the population may also have been taken as 'evidence' that it represented a successful new formula for engaging with spirits and for repressing their displeasure or malevolence.

It would be unfair to doubt the sincerity of the uptake of Christianity on Pitcairn. However, as noted by Mageo and Howard (1996: 2), there are many instances where its advent did not result in a shift to monotheism, but a reinvention and blending so that it lived beside local tradition. Belief in spirits survived, sometimes with little alteration, beneath the umbrella of 'high' religion; that many missionaries sought to 'cast out' evil spirits and 'devils' may simply have served to confirm their existence. It was only much later that the Pitcairn islanders engaged in those acts of defilement of the old *marae* so commonly demanded by missionaries, resulting in the eponymous site named 'Down The God', where the small anthropomorphic statues were rolled off the cliff. Although the adoption of Christianity may have replaced the necessity of belief in the Polynesian

atua, it may not have affected relationships and negotiations with other forms of spirits on the island.

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Spirits in a Modern Landscape

This paper has its origins in two events during 1999 archaeological fieldwork on the wreck of *Bounty* and several terrestrial sites associated with the colonisation of Pitcairn (Erskine, 2004). One evening the authors were invited to a party at a house near Pulau, beyond the northwest bounds of the main ‘Adamstown’ village. When it was time to depart (now after dark), a party-goer called to beware the ‘no-head behind the rahulu in the plun’, in essence, the headless spirit who lives behind the old hanging leaves in the banana plantation located at the bottom of one of the valleys which separated this house from the village. At the time this was taken as a light-hearted jest to beware the local bogey-man, and largely dismissed.

Several days later while completing some small archaeological excavations near the site of John Adams’ house, several older Pitcairners had come up to see what we had found and also to sweep around the graves of Adams and his daughter, located close by. As the light fell with the advance of evening at least one of the women was becoming noticeably agitated. When asked why, she replied that she didn’t like being there after dark because of ghosts. When queried if she meant ghosts like the no-head near Pulau she replied ‘no’ and explained that ghosts were the human dead, whereas the no-head was a spirit that had never been human. Further discussions that evening and with older Pitcairners on other occasions solicited memorates regarding more recent manifestations of spirits or spiritual forces on the island. This included areas where people were uncomfortable to be (especially alone or in the evening), how until recently people would not walk alone at nights and in particular avoided the valleys after dark, how some in the past had visions of ghost ships and floating coffins, or received omens and warnings, etc. When asked why people did not speak of this openly (in particular to strangers), older people remembered the stern admonitions of former missionaries that they were not to talk about ‘devil business’. Some also recognised that these sorts of topics were inconsistent with how many ‘outsiders’ (sometimes ‘strangers’) wished to focus on the *Bounty* story or fantasize about the island’s utopian or Christianised aspects (see Amaomo, 2013). There was also a sense of protecting aspects of the island’s identity from outsiders, beyond what they were prepared to reveal (see also Amoamo, 2011: 7).

While in no way attempting to link these anecdotes of modern Pitcairn Islanders’ beliefs to those of their ancestors, it is interesting to see that some of the key Polynesian distinctions between ghost and spirit have

survived. Feinberg has written several papers on how, even though Christianisation of the Anutan population has seen the loss or at least replacement of the major gods and deities, interaction with spirits of the lesser types continues (Feinberg, 1995, 1996). The same is certainly possible for Pitcairn and further exploration should be considered on the forms of early Christianity and the possibilities of hybridized spiritual beliefs on the island.

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Conclusions

When the Polynesian members of the *Bounty* group arrived on Pitcairn in 1790, interactions with the spiritual population of the island would have been just as immediate as their encounters with the physical attributes of their new home. It is difficult to know how this relatively young group of men and women perceived the spiritual aspect of the environment, or what strategies they brought to bear in their engagement with the new landscape. However, one of the critical points we would like to reinforce is that gods and spirits were normal, expected, and required attention as an essential fact of everyday life. To what extent the extraordinary events of the first (and subsequent) years of the occupation of Pitcairn were perceived as being a consequence of a failure to establish a viable relationship is unknown, although there are hints that the women were active in their attempts to ameliorate the situation.

John Adams' belated embracing of an austere Christian faith with associated practices provided an ideal opportunity to renegotiate some of the key relationships within the surviving Pitcairn community, and presumably also between the human and non-human inhabitants of the island. With the patriarch now espousing spiritual superiority and the Christian god's ascendancy over the Polynesian pantheon, previous deficiencies could be addressed. The extent to which Adams himself was aware of this is hard to know, especially given his later representations to the outside world as being an innocent in the events of the mutiny, an unsophisticated sailor yearning for his English homeland, and a good-hearted father to a Christianised community, born of his need for redemption. Conversely, after a decade of daily intimate contact with a primarily Polynesian society and a good understanding of the needs of 'his' people (and himself), a return to faith may have had a far more calculated attraction.

Even with the 'conversion' of the Pitcairn population and the adoption of the Christian god, as seen in so many other instances, the ghosts and spirits of and within a landscape were of a different order and not so easily removed or replaced, even if the structures for managing them shifted

slightly. As noted by Mageo and Howard (1996: 3) 'spirits and gods perform vital social, cultural and psychological tasks for a people occupying an uncertain world'. Even beyond the initial decade of violence and unrest, the physical, social and economic isolation of Pitcairn demanded a very particular type of control.

Despite the prominent place of Pitcairn in the history of Pacific mission literature, surprisingly there has been little or no analysis of the origins, nature or practice of Christianity there, past or present. There is a similar lack of consideration of the Pitcairner community on Norfolk Island as other than an orthodox Christian community. The spiritual dimensions to their 1856 colonisation of a new island, and one with a decidedly dark and obvious immediate prior history resulting from its use as a convict punishment station, needs to be explored. However, there are many hints (e.g. Nash, 2013; Hendery et al., 2015) that this island also presented its new colonists with a spirit population whose presence echoes through into the present.

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all of the members of the 1999 Pitcairn expedition including Nigel Erskine, Peter Veth, Mike Nash and Jon Carpenter. The Pitcairners resident on the island during our visit were endlessly hospitable and we are grateful to Nola and Reynold Warren, Daphne Warren, as well as Dave and 'Nig' Brown for a party at Pulau. Also, our thanks to the late Warren and Tom Christian, as well as to Betty and Darlene Darlene Christian.

The epigram which opens this paper was also used in Neal Gaiman's acclaimed 2001 novel *American Gods* as the fulcrum for exploring how people encounter the spirit world in a new landscape, and especially how they might transport and adapt older forms.

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Public domain 1814 portrait of Vice-Admiral William Bligh by Alexander Huey.