Gods and the manifestation of their power were part of daily life in the Polynesian islands. **Lissant Bolton** reflects on these societies

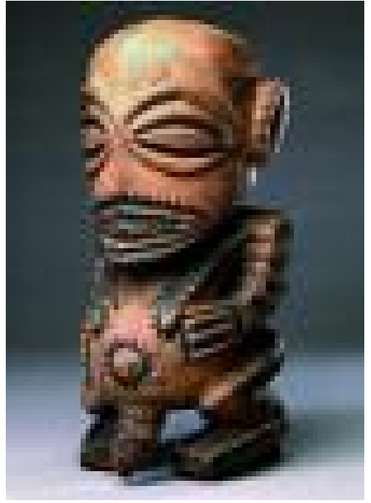
Power of the gods

Below: Maori doorlintel from Aotearoa, New Zealand, early 19th century; above right: 'Fisherman god' from the Cook Islands, late 18th/early 19th century; right: *A View of Point Venus and Matavai Bay, Looking East, August 1773*, by William Hodges (©National Maritime Museum)

The Pacific Ocean is so large that it takes up one whole face of the globe: the islands scattered across it are so small they appear like a few stars in an empty corner of the night sky. Those islands were settled by highly skilled navigators, who crossed the ocean in canoes, setting their course by the wind and the stars, and by reading the clouds and the patterns of the waves. They arrived in the eastern Pacific about 1,200 years ago, bringing with them a common language and culture from their homeland in the west of the ocean. Their gods – gods of the sea, forests, agriculture and war, among many others – travelled with them. For people in this region, known as Polynesians, the gods were always potentially present and dangerously powerful, equally capable of bringing blessing and harm.

We tend to understand other cultures through ideas or concepts that are already familiar to us. It is the stories of the early European voyagers, especially Captain James Cook, that most people refer to when they think about the Pacific. But these first European visitors were not focused on their own achievement, they were amazed and impressed by the societies they encountered. Cook's voyages were scientific expeditions: the scholars, artists and sailors who participated in them recorded what they saw in diaries and logs, in paintings and drawings, and by collecting objects. Artists like William Hodges, who joined Captain Cook's second voyage to the Pacific from 1772, made images of both landscape (below right) and people, which fired people's imagination when they were exhibited in England. Hodges' paintings of Tahiti, in particular, encouraged the idea that it was an earthly paradise, as indeed it perhaps seemed to him. With the materials collected and recorded by early settlers, including members of the London Missionary Society, these early impressions and reports provide a rich resource of information about the societies which both visitors and settlers irretrievably altered and diminished.

Power & Taboo, exhibiting part of the British Museum's unparalleled collection from the region, brings together remarkable early artefacts from the eastern Pacific (especially Hawaii, Aotearoa (New Zealand), the Society Islands and the Marquesas) with information gathered and images made in the early period of European settlement, between 1760 and 1860. The exhibition gives a sense of place and people, of the islands and the societies settled there during this period and explores several central Polynesian concepts. The islanders did not treat religious belief as something separate from everyday life but rather saw the gods as constantly present, especially in creative actions like food production, carving and tattooing. Two



ideas were critical to their understanding of the world and the role of the gods within it. One was the idea of the gods' power, known in most Polynesian languages as *mana*, the other is the idea expressed in the word *tapu*. *Tapu* (*kapu* in some languages) is the source from which the word 'taboo' comes: a word which has since contributed significantly to European thought, notably through its use in psychoanalysis. The Polynesian meaning is much more complex, relating to the presence of the power of the gods and to strategies used to manage that power. The exhibition looks at the original Polynesian meanings of these terms.

Polynesians recognised many different kinds of gods. The term *atua* covers beings which in English might be distinguished as major and minor deities, spirits and deified ancestors. In this region there was no clear distinction between gods and people: divinity and humanity were shaded together. Chiefs were descended from the gods, and chiefs as well as priests could embody gods at certain times. In many parts of the region people recognised two remote and original deities – the earth mother and the sky father. These two deities were originally locked in a close embrace. Crushed in the darkness between them lay their many children, yearning to be free. Eventually one son, Tane, succeeded in separating them, by standing on his mother and pushing against his father's chest. A door lintel from Aotearoa (left), depicts this moment of separation – light floods between three figures as they push earth and sky apart.

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outside the earth and separate from it, but rather were its very substance. They were constantly present in the world and there were countless numbers of them. They were particularly present in certain activities, in certain objects and in certain people. Dangerously powerful, capable of bringing benefit and causing harm, their presence was a mixed blessing. The term *tapu* refers to the presence of the power of the gods and to the strategies people used to manage that power. Any person or thing that was *tapu* – that was inhabited by the power of the gods – should be kept separate from contexts that were *noa* or free and clear of the gods' dangerous power. For example, in Aotearoa, New Zealand, people involved in an activity where the god's power was present – such as tattooing – needed to be kept apart from cooked food, which neutralises such power. Such people were fed, sometimes using special feeding funnels (far right), to prevent them from touching the food.

Just as the gods were ranked in hierarchies of importance, so Polynesian society was hierarchical – with chiefs, nobles, commoners, and with specialist priests, warriors and craftspeople. Chiefs and their families were actually descended from the gods, and those gods could inhabit the chiefs at certain moments. This is the basis of the social hierarchies which were expressed in appearance: clothes, ornaments and deportment revealed a person's status. This is particularly evident in a remarkable series of portraits produced by visitors to the Marquesas Islands between 1774 and 1846. Many of the portraits depict members of the extended family of one chief, Chief Keatonui. The riches of the BM's collection enable us to display the fans, clubs and ornaments depicted in these works alongside the portraits themselves. Thus the 1804 drawing of the warrior Mouwatie (right), Keatonui's son-in-law, shows the full-body tattoos, fan and staff that were the badges of his rank.

Images of the gods were both naturalistic and abstract. Images of major gods were kept in the temple precinct, or *marae*, images of lesser gods were owned by clans or even by individuals. As a god could inhabit a person, so a god could inhabit such an image. One strategy for containing and absorbing that power was to wrap either the image or the person in barkcloth, coconut fibre cord and feathers. In the Society Islands, god images called *to'o* comprised a wooden shaft bound with coconut fibre (left). *To'o* were kept in bamboo tubes or other special housings called *fare atua* – the houses of the gods. The bodies of several important gods were originally covered in red and yellow feathers: feathers were charged with the presence of the gods. In Hawaii, members of the highest ranking families were allowed to wear cloaks, helmets and ornaments covered in red and

Left: *To'o* god image figure from Society island; right: detail from *Tereoboo [Kalani'opu'u], King of Owhyhee bringing presents to Captain Cook*, engraving by B.T. Pouncey after a drawing by John Webber, 1779 (©National Library of Australia)

Left: 'Mouwatie warrior, an inhabitant of the Island of Nukuhiva', engraving by J. Storer of 1813, after Georg Heinrich von Langsdorff, 1804 (©British Library); below: Feeding funnels

yellow feathers, signalling their connection to the gods. These garments were worn on ceremonial occasions, and in battle where the folds of the cloaks and the strength of the basketry helmets provided physical as well as spiritual protection. The vast numbers of feathers required to make these objects were gathered by commoners and offered as a tribute to chiefs, who oversaw the making of the great ritual objects. Some god images were also covered in feathers: basketry heads, covered in feathers, were made to be inhabited by the major god of war, Ku, and possibly also by Lono, the god of rain and agriculture. These god heads were sometimes given bodies, wooden staffs wrapped in great quantities of barkcloth, and they were also sometimes dressed in feather cloaks. They were carried into battle, or in procession, and sometimes they were offered human sacrifices. A drawing by John Webber (left) of Kalani'opu'u bringing presents to Captain Cook, shows three such heads, with their barkcloth bodies, lying in the canoe that is carrying them to the *Resolution*.

The European incursion into the Pacific brought tremendous, sometimes devastating, changes to Polynesian societies – changes brought about by new material culture, disease, social disruption, the introduction of Christianity, and later the imposition of colonial governments. Polynesians welcomed some of these changes, eager for new objects, new ideas and even, in some cases, a new god. Although much has been lost, much also remains and, especially in Hawaii and Aotearoa, some Polynesians are now taking hold more strongly of the traditions and insights which have been handed down through the generations.

In our narratives the skill and sophistication of Polynesians – their navigational, artistic and philosophic achievements – are sometimes secondary in importance to the achievements of Cook and others. This exhibition sets out to recognise something of the significance of the remarkable, complex, civilised societies of 18th-century Polynesia in and of themselves, and to acknowledge what we may be privileged to gain from them.

'Power & Taboo: Sacred objects from the Pacific' is on view in Room 5 to 7 January. Many of the works exhibited are included in this year's publication, 'Pacific Encounters: Art and Divinity in Polynesia 1760–1860', by Steven Hooper (BMPress, £25; ISBN 0–7141–2575–X).