



Tepaeru-ariki: The Mother of the Word of God [1796-1881]

(A Bicentenary Legacy Project by the Cook Islands Christian Church Bicentennial Celebrations Unit and the Descendants of Tepaeru-ariki)

To God be the Glory and Praise. Here lies Tepaeru-ariki, highly esteemed daughter of Rupe Toa Te Aia O Makea (aka Taurira-ariki-o-Makea) the warlord and noted warrior of the Chiefly Makea Tribe of Te-au-o-Tonga and his wife Ngamata a Taramai-te-tonga. This resourceful grand-daughter of Makea Pini Ariki by his third wife Ngamarama-a-Apai Tururangi was a lady who walked with a very majestic step and was described by early London Missionary Society missionaries as a woman of great energy and intrepid character. She was affectionately referred to during her adult life as the "warm friend of the missionary" and more respectfully as the "Mother of the Word of God". The Rev. Wyatt Gill in 1881 declared her as one of the most remarkable women of the South Pacific. Her history is the story of a race emerging from darkness and cruelty into the light and peace of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This plaque was unveiled on 25 July 2014 in recognition of the invaluable contributions of Tepaeru-ariki through her power and influence to the successful establishment of Christianity in Rarotonga on 25 July 1823 and its ongoing growth thereafter.

Historical records indicate that on 12 August 1814, the 18 year old Tepaeru-ariki was kidnapped along with her niece Mata Kavau (youngest daughter of Kainuku Tamoko-o-te-Rangi and wife Putaerere-a-Pa-Ariki) and a seaman, Kupauta, by the mischievous crew of the "Cumberland" under the command of an atrocious Captain Phillip Goodenough who wanted revenge for the killing of some of his crew by Rupe. However, to avoid prosecution in Sydney, Australia under a Government and General Order issued by Governor Macquarie on 1 December 1813 requiring a good behaviour bond of £1,000 from all vessels trading in the Pacific Islands, to be forfeited on commission of a number of stated acts, including the taking from their islands of any male natives without their consent and that of their chiefs, or of female natives without the additional prior consent in writing of the Governor of New South Wales, Goodenough stopped by at Aitutaki on 14 August 1814 and sent the feisty Tepaeru-ariki and Mata Kavau ashore while Kupauta was taken to Ponape in the Caroline Islands and left there. This incident was to play a major role in the introduction of the gospel to Rarotonga nine years later. In 1821, Reverend John Williams sailed from Ra'iatea to Aitutaki arriving on 26 October 1821. He left two Tahitian preachers named Papehia and Vahapata to convert the island to christianity. Tepaeru-ariki was still in Aitutaki at that time with other Rarotongans (Tairi and Te Iro from Ngatangia and their wives and another woman) who had drifted to the island by canoe some years earlier and were converted to Christianity. History has it that Rupe, the eldest son of Tepaeru-ariki grew up to become an Orometua in the LMS Church. The union of Tepaeru-ariki in Aitutaki with Poona Ngaro-o-Pouananga-ki-Iva who was the holder of the traditional title Kivao Rangatira begot a son, Taiava. A further union with Te-po-ave of Rarotonga begot a son, Itaaka. These family lines continue to this day.



Tepaeru-ariki

"But for Tepaeru,
we should not have
been alive this
morning."

*Tahitian Teachers,
26 July 1823,
telling John
Williams about their
tale of woe in
Avarua on the night
of 25 July 1823.*

When Williams returned to Aitutaki in July 1823 to find the island fully converted to Christianity, he was spurred on to take the gospel to the rest of the Southern Group islands. When Williams departed Aitutaki on this particular voyage bound for Rarotonga he took on board, Tepaeru-ariki and the other Rarotongans. They arrived in Rarotonga on 25 July 1823 (after visiting Mangaia, Atiu, Mitiaro and Mauke) and were warmly welcomed by Makea Ariki of Te-Au-o-Tonga. But things did not work out smoothly on the night of 25 July 1823 due to savage treatment of the visitors by the ferocious natives so Rev. Williams and party departed Avarua the following day leaving Papehia to continue the formidable task of evangelizing the island on his own. Tepaeru-ariki ensured the safety of Papehia by commending him to Makea Ariki as her friend. As a founding member of the LMS Church in Te-Au-o-Tonga, she served as Papehia's devoted helper and protector. With her great influence over the people of Te-Au-o-Tonga, the strict disciplinarian aided the missionaries and gospel teachers of Rarotonga in many ways, proving herself a valuable auxiliary, as well as a dependable member of the LMS Church at Te-Au-o-Tonga till her death on 19 February 1881, aged 85. On her deathbed in February 1881, Tepaeru-ariki uttered to the LMS Missionary Rev. Wyatt Gill, "Do not detain me with your prayers and kind wishes. Let me go quickly to the Saviour whom I have loved so long." At her request, her grave was dug at the base to the cenotaph erected to the memory of the martyr Rev. John Williams.

"...and to her alone,
under God, may we
attribute the
deliverance on that
trying occasion."

*John Williams, 1837,
writing about
Tepaeru-ariki's role in
protecting the
missionaries and their
wives on the night of
25 July 1823.*