

EXCLUSIVE



Atataki's oldest church built c.1830

'Messengers of peace' brought near death to an entire race'

The Missionary Position 1821 The Cook Islands

The coming of the missionaries to the South Pacific brought huge changes to traditional Polynesian ways of life, changes that in earlier times had also found their way to New Zealand. Des Clarke, husband of Queen Manarangi Tutai Ariki of Aitutaki is British born. He holds very balanced observations of the history of the island and the changes brought about by its Christianisation.

"When the missionaries arrived at Aitutaki on October 26, 1821, at first the chiefs wouldn't allow them to come ashore. The ship had come from Tahiti and was called The Messenger of Peace. The mission was lead by John Williams from the London Missionary Society and history tells us that the missionaries were accepted by the chiefs on one side of the island, but not on the other. They took several years to accept the new god."

Before the arrival of the missionaries, the Cook Islands saw a lot of tribal warfare and cannibalism, with aggrieved islanders travelling to other islands, including Tonga, to gather warriors for battles. Des recounts how, during one tribal conflict, the warriors crept around a village and lifted the sleeping heads of the people. If the weight told them the person was a man, he was clubbed, if the lighter

weight denoted a woman or a child, they were left alive. With no warriors surviving, the dispute was settled. Whole villages could be wiped out in savage disputes and the vanquished eaten. This was the world the missionaries met when they arrived, a culture where traditional worship included many gods and where the relaxed lifestyle of the islanders was a world away from the strict religious edicts of the Christians.

"They came out of Georgian England and had very strict and disciplined ideas and ethics that didn't mesh with the early Polynesians. They banned dancing and placed rules like – if a man and a woman were walking down a road at night, a lamp had to be held between them to prevent inappropriate contact. Curfews were enforced, with punishment meted out by local people who were made deacons. People who didn't conform were placed in a hole to make them feel ashamed and women who were 'naughty' had their heads shaved, dragged in front of the whole congregation and chastised. They said the old Polynesian gods were pagan and tore the culture to bits, but how did they know what was in the hearts of the people? Their gods were manifestations of the god we all recognise.

In addition to this, there were many European diseases introduced, so it was not a happy time for the Polynesians." Along with the bible, diseases like chicken pox, measles and tuberculosis arrived – the latter almost wiping out the Cook Islanders. "Diseases including gonorrhoea had already arrived with sailors and whalers and had made many of the local women infertile. So the birth rate was falling while the death rate rose." "The missionaries had brought medicine with them, but they also brought diseases. A lot were infected with TB. It was so serious that it looked as though the Maori of the Cook Islands would perish as a nation. The missionaries just said 'our duty is