THE SINGING MAMA RUAA OF TAHITI

by

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They are commonly and collectively known as the "Mama Ruau" of Tahiti -- smiling, rotund women of a grandmotherly nature, decked out in generous mother-hubbard muumuus awash with lace and ruffles. You may see them at Puna Airpor, or at a Bastille Day celebration chanting, singing and dancing in the unique style we identify as an endearing facet of old Tahiti.

It is difficult to imagine French Polynesia without the warmth and charm of these older women, whose performances add as much life to public occasions as the throbbing tamure beat. Yet thirty years ago the term "Mama Ruau" in a conversation simply meant "grandma," and groups of colorful, entertaining grandmothers were not the order of the day. Modern Tahiti may not realize, or perhaps never acknowledge, that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints played a subtle if not vital role in reviving and developing this musical aspect of French Polynesia -- the singing Mama Ruau.

Even before the arrival of the Europeans, musical folklore had always been an integral part of French Polynesia, which includes people from the widespread area of the Society Islands, the Leeward Islands, the Tuamotu-Gambier Archipelago, the Austral Islands, and the Marquesas.

They had poetry and a sort of literature. They composed the most perplexed war chants and songs of pleasure. They also had a sort of rhythmical prose that they would repeat, resting on certain syllables which were also marked with a beat of hands, with a trampling of their feet, or with movements of their bodies....There were even legends and genealogies among which were included pieces of religious history and mythology.

With the evangelical changes brought first by the London Missionary Society and later the Catholic mission, the native forms of chanting and singing were adapted and incorporated into religious teaching sessions. Even today Protestant worshippers will gather on Sunday evenings for the "tauroi!" -- a lengthy meeting in which the congregation will "crack open and dissect a Biblical verse that the minister has chosen. As it would be too tedious to listen to commentaries and nothing else, the organizer wisely intersperses three explanations with a "himene tarava," which is made up solely of biblical words and chanted like litanyes."

Brother Tihoni Pu, now a Laie resident, says he remembers his Protestant mother going to these "singing meetings" when he was a small boy. His wife Tetua, who grew up in Tubuai, some 600 miles south of Tahiti, has childhood recollections of people gathering at night to sing the old traditional songs. "It was beautiful," she says. "But there were no performing Mama Ruau as we know them today."

We should be aware that during the Church's years of growth from 1844 to the turn of the century, the French Polynesian Mission was plagued by Protestant and Catholic opposition, misguidance from the Reorganized LDS, and always suspicious government officials. The Mormons were "tolerated uneasily by the French administration, which saw in them an American advance guard in a territory that was already open to 'Anglo-Saxon' influences."

With the many changes in lifestyle brought on by foreign influences (the Mormons included), the Tahitian people were often caught in an awkward transition from island culture to what was considered proper Christian worship. Clergymen, even early LDS leaders, forbade many native practices, especially dancing, when they felt that there was anything immoral about it.

Another damper on Tahitian culture occurred around 1901 when the government drew up local regulations requiring institutions to hold their classes in French. The Mormons, however, flourished in the Tuamotus, never even attempted to digress from the native tongue to which they owed their missionary success. They and the French Protestants agreed on this one early view:

To remain in contact with this people, to prepare the youth to play a social and religious role, to preserve above all its originality and personality, it was necessary to make broad and justifiable concessions to the Tahitian language. Mission work in a native country which did not understand that fact would inevitably fail of its own accord, at the same time as it would add to the destruction of the spirit of those whom it claimed to enlighten.

It was this kind of attitude that kept the Church growing
under the most adverse conditions. In the Tuamotus -- a scattered chain of 80 coral atolls extending more than 600 miles northwest to southeast of Tahiti -- the branch members retained the old chants and the more conservative dancing styles. Besides the hiraitaviri a tuamotu background, other types of music included: Paqu (sacred chants), laments, incantations and prayers, types of haka, putu (hand-clapping chants), teki and mereuru (love songs), work songs (also used as welcoming chants), fa'ateniti (historical chants), tuatau (used to restore courage and energy), and aparima (graceful hula-like dances).  

Bro. and Sis. Teahu Mariteragi and Bro. and Sis. Pu mentioned some additional types of song and dance: Kapa, patautau, ute, paripari, hivinua, pase, lere, mokorea, mhi. These I have yet to distinguish, but I was assured that they were all distinct and functional parts of the archipelago's musical lore and daily life.

Along with accepting this traditional music, the Mission in 1920 established the first brass band in the Tuamotus on the island of Takaroa. It was under the direction of Elder LeRoy Mallory, a talented missionary whose family generously donated the gleaming instruments to the Takaroa band. It was made up of approximately 25 young island men who eventually mastered their new toys. The group was called the "Pupu Pu Momoni." Elder Mallory also organized the women and youth into church choirs. He is highly spoken of as the person who raised the people's musical consciousness by introducing true choir concepts and, in some instances, drilling the singers' English diction so that an unsuspecting listener might think it was an American choir.

So it was that the Tuamotu saints were blessed with such diverse experiences in music. Over the course of the years, for many reasons, many LDS Tuamotu families began migrating to the main island of Tahiti, where the Mission had established headquarters in Papeete.

By 1950, the French Polynesian Mission was showing positive growth, and the Saints enjoyed gathering in Papeete or on the outer islands for conferences, where choirs were always given opportunities to display their talents.

Towards the end of 1954 the Mission was informed that Pres. David O. McKay would be visiting Tahiti. The news caused a flurry of preparation among the members. On Jan. 18, 1955, Pres. McKay, his wife and Bro. Franklin J. Murdock arrived. That evening, after the day's formalities were over, "the Polynesians prepared and served a dinner to all the missionaries, to Pres. McKay, his wife and his accompanying party. Following that, they presented a program of dances and local chants. The whole program was directed by the Saints themselves."  

President McKay's visit edified the membership, and even included a short but agreeable visit with the governor of the island. A few months later, the new mission president, President Christensen, met for 30 minutes with the governor, who politely asked that the Church not make unfavorable comparisons between the French government and that of the United States. They had a very cordial meeting, however, and the next year, the Church was allowed to bring in 20 more missionaries and to begin construction of a Mormon school in Tahiti.

Working in Papeete during 1956--a time of diplomacy--was an enthusiastic young elder named Thomas R. Stone. Blessed with a sense of knowing members' needs and simultaneously improving public relations, he began to organize and use the auxiliaries to full capacity. He saw much potential in the natural talents and energies of the local congregations, and shifted the scout program and youth choir into high gear. He also realized the need for the senior women to be involved in the action and suggested that they get together to practice songs of their heritage.

Kirita Mariteragi of Nukuera was appointed the leader of his musical segment, and she rounded up twelve faithful women, all with a Tuamotu background. This was the formal beginning of the singing Mama Ruau. They would meet in the chapel after Relief Society or in their Mormon neighborhood, open the practice with prayer, and share the old songs of their forefathers.

It should be noted that not all of the Church's women appreciated this type of music. The Tahitian dialect is different from the Tuamotu dialect (also called Fauamotu), the latter being closer to Maori or Rarotongan with its "k" consonant, "ng" nasal, and other inflectional and vocabulary differences. Besides, some regarded the Tuamotus as a "backwoods" culture. My husband, whose family is from Takaroa, says he'd fight with other boys who called Tuamotuans "amu opa'a" -- coconut eaters. But despite the in-house gossip, these women kept on, supported by their musician husbands who also joined them in certain types of songs.

That same year, 1956, the members of the Church were invited to present a welcoming show of dances and Polynesian chants for the tourists travelling on the Mariposa--one of two sister ships with the Matson line. Elder Tom Stone organized and directed the half-hour spectacular, which principally featured the youth choir.
costume-clad primary children, and, of course, the new Mama Ruau group dressed in colorful Mother-Hubbard uniforms. This program, which took place on the docked ship, was also historical in that it was the first time a Mormon program had ever been carried on the airwaves of Radio Tahiti.

With Tahiti's "coconut wireless" communication, the Church gained instant social recognition. People took notice more than ever of what the Church was doing for the youth and the native culture as well. Some of the recognition was negative, coming from the old-guard religious faction of the local population. They felt it was shameful for a church to be publicly indulging in fun festivities instead of teaching the gospel as it should. They cited some youth activities, especially ballroom dancing, as examples of deviation. Women in other circles felt that the Mama Ruau were a part of a "heathen" influence, not only because their performances were musically and culturally unusual, but because they had allied themselves with a Western influence -- the LDS Church.

Within the framework of the Church, however, the Mama Ruau enjoyed new status. Their slightly "primitive" style of song and dance were still the target of jokes, especially from the younger set, but that didn't dampen their joy in performing. They sewed new dresses, made beautiful floral crowns for their hair, received the applause, had their pictures taken. The social prestige was intoxicating and little by little more women began joining the group, whether they could speak Paumotu or not. Because the Church at Papeete now included families from all the outlying districts, women originally from far-removed Tubuai and main-island Tahiti had to learn the other dialect used by the original Mama Ruau. The group gave them a common cause for unity.

They were asked to perform himene tarava at conferences, building dedications and sacrament services. They perfected little dance routines and even composed new chants. The Mama Ruau took their talents to Orarah, a leprosy colony some 20-30 miles away from town, where they entertained the afflicted people. As a service to Tahiti's tourism department, they continued to greet the Mariposa and the Monterey with other members of the Church. Then, as now, they delighted their audiences with a spontaneous charm. At Christmas time they visited the hospitals, where they left the warmth of their performances as well as presents for the patients. With the choir, they would sail to outer island conferences on the Paraita, a small yacht owned by the Mission and used for inter-island travel by the members. The group also performed at a Grand Ball for the French Marines.

On a private level, individual members of the group were sometimes contacted by hotels such as the Belair and Travel Lodge to present Mama Ruau-style programs. Service fees given to these performers helped to pay for their instruments and uniforms.

Although the Church itself never sponsored a group in the July Bastille Day festivities, the Mormon Mama Ruau would practice on their own and enter the singing competitions. Here are the comments of one missionary in Papeete in the '60's:

The Mama Ruau also performed during the fete and their dances and singing were unusual and fresh. As usual they performed well and gave a good name to the Church and earned 20,000 CFP prize money.7

The Papeete Mama Ruau motivated other districts to start their own groups. It was a blessing to the activation program, as indicated by one missionary in Paea:

Our Mama Ruau group here in Paea has really improved. Hiro Mariteragi told the group they needed about 20 women. So the members went out and found 10 more women for the group, most of them inactive members.5

Another missionary on Maupiti indicated an example of the Mama Ruau's contribution to a fund-raising seiree:

This Saturday we saw a soiree at Avera. It was one of their better efforts, including some excellent Mama Ruau numbers...The pieces were a great financial success for the Avera Branch.8

In 1963, when the first Tahitian Excursion to the New Zealand Temple was organized, the Mama Ruau within that group poured out their joys in performances for the Saints in New Zealand. It was a very touching experience for these women.

By the late 1960's, Mormon Mama Ruau from Tahiti had also cut a record album and performed with touring groups at Disneyland and the Polynesian Cultural Center in Lale.

In Jan., 1966, they were an important part of the program in one of the Mission's most successful "Soiree Musicale Annuelle," where the guests of honor were the governor of Tahiti and his wife---Gov. and Madame Jean Sicuranii. Mission President Thomas R. Stone reported on the significance of the occasion:
In addition, the largest gathering of French Government officials and their wives to ever attend a Mission activity were present, along with U. S. Senator and Sister Frank E. Moss (Utah) and Senator and Mrs. Maram Fong (Hawaii) who happened to be visiting Tahiti at that time.

It was hoped that the amicable relationship of the evening was a step toward better communications between the Church, the French Government, and the United States.

For many years, other community churches eyed and criticized the "Momoi" style of fellowship and its ensuing publicity. But a number of years after President Stone's release from the Mission, they began to organize youth programs and Mama Ruau groups too. The latter gave rise to more revived folklore as well as new compositions. Today all Mama Ruau groups in Tahiti are regarded with pride and affection.

I asked Pora Mariteragi, originally from the main island of Tahiti, how she felt about being one of the first Mama Ruaua as we know them today. In translation, she said, "I was happy to learn the songs. On Rarotonga our Mama Ruau was a new thing to them. The other Saints would host us when we traveled to the outside islands. Before, most of the activities were for the youth and younger adults, although the Relief Society had quilting and handicrafts."

Tetua Pu expressed the same happiness in being able to actively participate in the Mission's growth. She said, "The old folks are happy; they can contribute. People would call the Mission if they wanted us; the Mission would call the group leaders. Some of us had never been to the outer islands. Whenever we traveled with the Mama Ruau, it was exciting. And we didn't even have to pay."

The philosophy of the church leaders in Tahiti from the turn of the century until now was summed up in this 1968 message from Elder Scott Anderson, an assistant to the Mission President at the time:

Let us build a strong mission with strong branches that can be made into stakes and wards. The first work is to strengthen members.... They will, as missionaries, bring new converts into the church. Enthused members are the keys to success here in French Polynesia. Tahitians, like everyone, want to go where the action is. If the action is taking place at the bars, or at the movie houses, that is where they will be. Let's have the action chie nous at the Mormons. The Church should be the social center for the members, and for the community. If the members are alive, if the Church is working, converts will come...."

One can see that this story of the singing Mama Ruau is simply another example of love and sensitivity toward a certain population of the Saints in a certain culture. Not only did the increased involvement of Mama Ruaua strengthen the Church, it also gave life and popularity to songs and dances. The Mama Ruaua since then have helped to perpetuate Pacific tradition up to this point. It is somewhat disturbing to realize that Tahiti's sophisticated new breed has shown little interest in learning or performing the old songs themselves.

We who believe the Polynesians to be of the House of Israel; we who believe in keeping records; we who have a Cultural Center founded on holy purposes must be sure that we do not allow the spiritual and cultural knowledge of our Mama Ruaua to slip from the grasp of future generations.

And now we'd like you to hear some of the songs of our singing Mama Ruaua.

(At this point in the presentation, Bro. and Sis. Tihoni Pu and Sis. Mahana Mo'o Pulotu delighted the audience with examples of himene taravas, kapas, and aparimas.)
NOTES

1Edmond de Bovis, Tahitian Society Before the Arrival of the Europeans, translated by Robert D. Craig (Lales, Hawaii: Institute for Polynesian Studies, 1976), pp. 28, 29.


8Ibid., p. 164.

9Ibid., p. 164.


In addition, much of my information came from a group interview with the following people on Mar. 20, 1983:

Bro. Pu Tihoni
Sis. Tetua Tihoni
Bro. Teahu Mariteragi
Sis. Poura Mariteragi
Sis. Tearo Tahauri
Bro. Etua Tahauri

and a separate interview on April 10, 1983 with:

Sis Mahana Mo'o Pulotu.