

# Abemama

Contributed by Administrator  
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Abemama is an island in the central part of the Kiribati Group. It has an area of 16 square kilometres and an estimated population of 3,608. Abemama is well known as the island where the Declaration of a British Protectorate was made by Captain Davis of 'Royalist' on 27th May 1892. For a while, it was also the home of Robert Louis Stevenson.

Most Gilbertese (I-Kiribati) people believe that their ancestors were spirits, some created in Samoa and some in Kiribati, and that it was the movement from Samoa that populated the Kiribati Islands for the first time. Modern researchers would agree that a recent migration did probably occur from Samoa to the Gilberts about 500 to 600 years ago.

According to the legends of Beru and some other islands Te Kaintikuaba, was made from the spine of Na Atibu. It was a tree, in Samoa, which was the home of spirits who, together with Nareau the Wise, made the islands of Tungaru (the Kiribati islands). It is a legend that has many variations. As one legend goes, Nareau the Wise was in Samoa, procreating with the spirits there. One day, he decided to trace the whereabouts of his two children who left Te Kaintikuaba. He left Samoa, heading north, and on his way he created a resting place by trampling the sea and uttering powerful magic. Behold, land was formed with spirits inhabitants on it. This land is now called South Tabiteuea. Feeling satisfied with his marvellous work, he left and went further north. At last, he sighted Tarawa. He stayed on Tarawa and started his work of creating new lands. He used his power to create Makin, Butaritari, Marakei, Abaiang, Maiana, Kuria, Abemama and Aranuka. These are now referred to as the islands of North Kiribati. In most of the northern islands, there are several district leaders, each of whom lead a group of kaainga. On Abemama - Kuria - Aranuka one chief was recognised as paramount. From Nonouti southwards, the unimane (old men) dominated the communities through the maneaba and provided political leadership. Oral traditions from the northern islands suggest that a few kaainga were able, over time, to assume a dominant position over their neighbours. Sometimes this was because the dominant kaainga was acknowledged as a "parent", being the original kaainga from which the others had separated. Another factor was the ability of some kaainga to seize and hold the land of others, as warfare in pursuit of land and status was common in the northern islands. The chiefly dynasty of Abemama, Kuria and Aranuka was only consolidated after the arrival of Europeans. The heads of the kaainga were always consulted on matters affecting the community and could initiate action, but always they were obliged to seek the approval of the chief, who provided overall leadership and regulated relationships amongst the kaainga. Permanent traders established themselves in the Kiribati group during the 1850's and by the 1860's the European population in the Kiribati group had increased to about 50. They traded European manufactured goods for such products as coconut oil and turtle shell. The making of coconut oil and the preservation of turtle shell were not new skills to the Gilbertese. To acquire the desired European goods, they merely had to spend more time doing routine activities. Because of the greater fertility and larger rainfall in the northern islands greater production was possible there. This, plus the fact that the best anchorage in the group were at Tarawa, Abemama and Butaritari made the northern Gilberts the centre of the coconut oil trade. The first resident traders in the Gilberts were Randell and Durant. Both landed at Tikurere, an islet of Butaritari in 1846. Randell remained there but Durant soon left for Makin. Randell and Durant set themselves up as independent traders - however, the prize they received for the coconut oil was many times what was returned to the Gilbertese in trade goods. Another reason for Randell's success as a trader on Butaritari was his ability to adapt to and understand the Gilbertese way of life. Randell was typical of many European traders. He adopted into his way of life those things from Gilbertese culture which he liked, and rejected those things which were not acceptable to him. Randell married four Gilbertese women and is said to have fathered over forty children. It should be mentioned that not all trading agents were foreigners. At Abemama, Binoka acted as a trading agent and handled all the coconut oil trade with this island. British warships began frequenting the islands from the mid 1800's until the hoisting of the flag in Abemama in 1892. The British government came to the islands with a totally different view to that of the traders and missionaries. The British came to rule. They stopped civil disturbances, set up a system of government, which included traditional leaders at least for a time, established law and order, and protected the interest of foreigners residing in the islands. Later, educational and medical facilities were also developed. The chain of command that was established had at the top the Resident Commissioner, who sent most of his time at Tarawa. There were also a number of district officers, one of which was based on Abemama. On each island the government was headed by a magistrate who was in charge of local affairs and responsible for carrying out the orders of the district officer, helped by the councillors and other officials. The first British Resident Commissioner was C.R. Swayne who was appointed in 1893. To rule such a scattered empire, which included the Ellice Islands at a time of very poor shipping was a near impossibility. The Resident Commissioner therefore started to appoint island officials. These officers were chosen by the people and were the magistrates, councillors, village police and warders. In the northern islands, the high chief was made head of the island government. In Abemama, officials were automatically chosen from the chiefly family. source <http://www.janeresture.com/abemama/index.htm>