

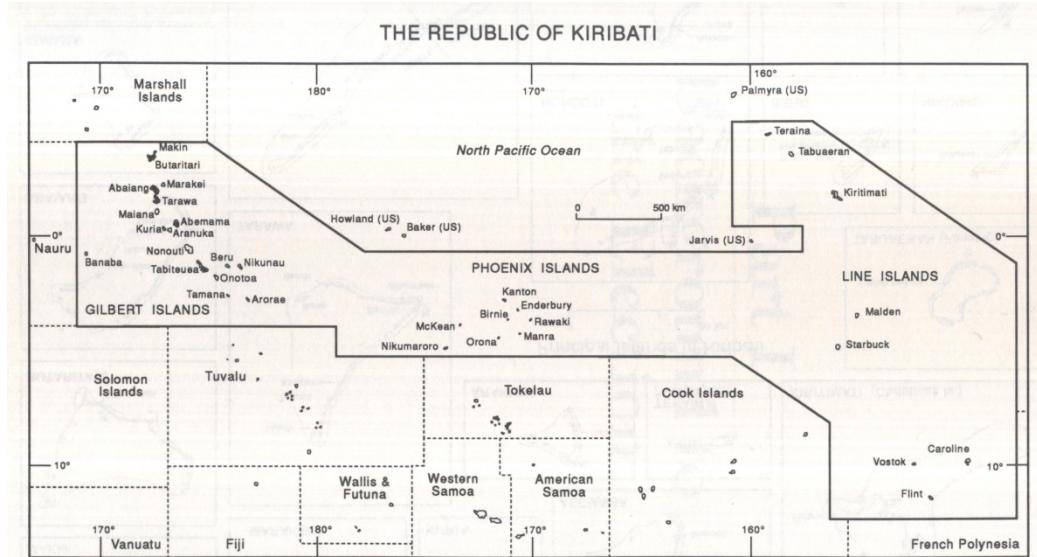
# Water Nations: Colonial Bordering, Exploitation, and Indigenous Nation-Building in Kiribati and Tuvalu

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Roniti Teiwaki (1988: 3) of Kiribati has called his country a “Nation of Water,” because its 33 islands comprise only 700 square kilometers of land compared to three million square kilometers of ocean. The concept also reminds us of Epeli Hau`ofa’s (1994) essay, “Our Sea of Islands,” in which he emphasized a history of indigenous voyaging and holistic networking in Oceania to acquire resources, thus disproving outsider views of Pacific islands as tiny, powerless dots, because they used the ocean for food and sailing routes for travel. The 1982 UN Law of the Sea, with its 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zones (EEZ) is a more legalistic maritime metaphor that empowers countries like Kiribati to negotiate with foreign fishing companies. In fact, the country’s syncretic name is itself a product of nation-building within a British framework that was known as the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony, or GEIC.

In the 1930s, British officials tried to choose a less cumbersome name for the GEIC. The Gilbert Islands were named after a British transporter of convicts to Australia, and the Ellice Islands after a British merchant and politician. Critics called the arbitrary collection of atolls scattered across the central Pacific the “Gilbert and Sullivans,” a reference to two musical comedy composers. One official offered the term Quateria, since the main inhabited archipelago extended north and south of the equator and east and west of the dateline. Indigenous names such as Tungaru and Tuvalu existed, but none of those labels encompassed the mostly uninhabited islands in the Phoenix and Line groups, or Banaba (Ocean Island), whose phosphates provided half of the GEIC’s tax revenue (PIM 7/1966). Even the Tokelau atolls were part of the colony for a decade (1916-1926), and a governor of Fiji, J.B. Thurston, once suggested adding Rotuma in order to tidy up the administration of such a vast expanse of water. In 1969, the hybrid term Tungavalu was suggested, but it masked tensions between Tungaru and Tuvalu (BMac 1982: 70, 237).

Colonial bordering often ignored indigenous identities, as rival colonizers partitioned their claims to control and tax subaltern labor pools. The *sawai* exchange system between Yap and outer atolls, for example, declined as colonial rulers redirected relations toward themselves (Alkire 1977: 52). The artificial boundaries that outsiders tried to carve in the sea also complicated decolonization, because nation-builders had to make difficult choices of inclusion and exclusion, of commemorative remembering and convenient forgetting (Danforth 1995). Nationalism often arises in opposition to perceived “others,” whether colonizers or local rivals. Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu have experienced secession attempts because of imperial bordering. The British invention of the GEIC is a case worth re-examining, because indigenous leaders struggled over collective identities and economic revenues, and their voices during decolonization can inform us about the formation of nationhood.



Map of Kiribati and its neighbors which was used in *Atoll Politics: The Republic of Kiribati*, ed. Howard Van Trease, 1993. Used with permission from the Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies, University of Canterbury.

### British Colonialism

European colonizers once imagined Pacific islanders to be living in a “state of nature” that could not enforce either positive sovereignty (resource development) or negative sovereignty (self-defense). Robert Jackson has suggested if people had “shells like turtles” they would not need states. Because of imperial expansion overseas, “By 1900 the number of sovereign states was at its lowest and the extent of their territorial control was at its greatest, enclosing the entire globe” (Jackson 1990: 55). But empires need administrative districts, for efficient taxation, labor recruiting and resource extraction, which they often justified as a “civilizing mission.” In effect, local inhabitants had to pay for their own subordination and exploitation by paternalistic outsiders, who claimed that “advanced nations” had “a sacred trust of civilization” to rule over “peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world” (Bodley 1990: 15). Yet what if such infantilized peoples “stood” on autonomous atolls and thus did not identify with the state framework imposed by colonizers? Teiwaki has argued that beneath its British imaginary, the GEIC “had its own traditional system of government... The individual islands were politically independent of each other... There was thus a noticeable absence of nationalism, but a very strong individual island patriotism, despite the general cultural similarity of the islands” (1988: 3). In effect, the GEIC was a colonial shell game, but would the indigenous “turtle” fit the framework?

Geographically, the archipelagoes of the central Pacific had been traversed by Oceanian voyagers for several millennia before Europeans arrived. Oral traditions and archeology attest to creation stories, migrations and contestations for power in a crossroads of interaction among so-called Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia. Kambati Uriam suggests that island council houses *maneabas* were originally religious centers run by priests, but later chiefly families redirected politics and oral histories toward their own clan genealogies. Later, Christian missionaries took over the *maneabas* and introduced their own versions of “universal” truths (Uriam 1995). During encounters with European explorers, traders, labor recruiters, whalers, beachcombers, and

missionaries, some chiefs enlarged their power bases, for example on Butaritari or Abemama, but other islands favored councils of elders who worked for consensus. In 1877, the Western Pacific High Commission (WPHC), based in Fiji, cast its hegemonic net over the atolls by sending naval patrols to police islanders and foreigners and to regulate labor recruiting (Scarr 1968). But Australians and New Zealanders increasingly lobbied for annexations, and a recession in Europe in the 1880s fueled a scramble for overseas real estate in which to invest, extract raw materials, market manufactures, and garner prestige (McIntrye 2014: 12-16).

In 1886, an Anglo-German agreement partitioned the “unclaimed” central Pacific, leaving Nauru in the German sphere of influence, while Banaba and the future GEIC wound up in the British sphere of influence. When United States economic interests and labor recruiters continued to intrude, Germany persuaded the British to annex the Gilbert and Ellice Islands as two protectorates in 1892, as Germany had done with the Marshall Islands (1885) and Nauru (1888). In 1916, the British unified the GEIC as a single colony and began to disempower traditional chiefs, replacing them with appointed magistrates in the *maneabas* (Teiwaki 1988: 5). The GEIC also annexed Tokelau that year and later, various Phoenix and Line islands. But within the main inhabited archipelago, Gilbert and Ellice Islanders had “two very different cultures” (MacDonald 1982: 74). Meanwhile, Albert Ellis had discovered phosphates on both Nauru and Banaba in 1900, so the British quickly added Banaba to their resource-poor Gilbert and Ellice protectorates in 1901. Australia and New Zealand began benefiting from cheap agricultural fertilizer, and London collected royalties. In 1908, the British even shifted their administrative capital to Banaba, the economic core of the colony. Mining interests soon complained about official meddling with their land purchases and their discriminatory company store, which charged Banabans several times higher than what Europeans paid for goods. Closer government oversight brought sympathy for Banaban protests about unfairness, so the company began to pay royalties directly to the administration instead of London, making both the GEIC and WPHC accomplices in exploitation. After 1919, the British Phosphate Commission (BPC) controlled both Nauru and Banaba as an autonomous oligarchy “with resources and influence far outweighing those of the Colony.” When the GEIC capital returned to Tarawa after the chaos of World War II, the BPC reigned supreme over Banaba (MacDonald 1982: 111, Scarr 1968).

Did the GEIC have the potential to become a centralized nation-state? That was the ideal modern form of sovereignty, according to European-derived standards of statehood and nationhood. Local island sovereignty had prevailed before colonialism, and British administration linked the atolls to the central government only through appointed agents. In 1945, administrator and historian Harry Maude wrote that island leaders “had no opportunity of advising and sharing in the work of Colony administration” due to “difficulties of inter-island communication ...many of them exhibit a striking degree of public spirit in so far as their own island is concerned, [but they] have as yet developed little sense of belonging to any larger unit.” Consequently, “the main preoccupation of the administration must be to train the islanders to discharge all necessary functions for themselves.” Officials began to delegate authority and some financial responsibility to island councils, but because of poor soils and lack of economic development, the British viewed the GEIC’s self-governing potential as unpromising. In the 1940s, the colony’s total revenue (excluding the Banaban phosphates and private plantations in the Phoenix or Line groups) was less than 8000 pounds a year (Maude 1945). Most education was in the hands of church schools, but rival American and British Protestants and French Catholics also created divisive identities (MacDonald 1982).

Despite restrictive colonial bordering, a recurring theme of relocating islanders also arose in the GEIC, whether to provide cheap labor in phosphate mines on Nauru or Banaba or on commercial plantations in the Phoenix or Line islands, or to forestall over-population on atolls. Maude wrote, “from 1931 onwards we combed the Central and Eastern Pacific for suitable uninhabited islands. High islands there were a-plenty in Fiji, Tonga, and elsewhere – but the Gilbertese are one of the most highly-specialized races on earth and, even had any been available for colonization purposes, it seemed a pity to settle them on fertile volcanic islands when they would far rather live on the barren sandbanks they were accustomed to” (1968: 320). The administration resettled hundreds of Gilbertese on a few atolls in the Phoenix group, yet by 1955, due to water and food shortages and tensions over land and religion, the British relocated many of those settlers as well as new GEIC recruits to the western Solomon Islands (Knudson 177). Japanese invaders during World War II had also shifted many Banabans and Nauruans as forced laborers to other islands, before the survivors were able to return home. Then in 1945, the Banabans were relocated to Rabi island in Fiji, and the GEIC administration moved back to Tarawa (Howard 1991).

According to the United Nations, the era of “self-determination” had begun in 1945, but in British rankings of which colonies might be ready to stand on their own, the GEIC was relegated to the “never” category. Dominions in the British Commonwealth were usually white settler states such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, until India and Pakistan joined in 1947. Yet the GEIC had “special problems of a small, remote, poorly resourced country” whose only export, apart from phosphates, was copra. London considered a “mezzanine” (i.e. second class) status within a two-tier Commonwealth or federations of small colonies with larger ones. Tokelau, for example, was administered by New Zealand from Apia, Western Sāmoa, but when the latter became independent in 1962, Tokelau did not, and it still refuses to do so (Huntsman and Kilolo 2007). The British worried about their own “national standing” after two UN resolutions in 1960 reiterated the call for decolonization and specified choices including Free Association or Integration with full civil rights. The “wind of change” soon pushed Britain to withdraw “east of Suez,” so London adopted “accelerated decolonization,” through a series of step-by-step institutional reforms toward self-government. Now, according to British analysts, “the smaller dependencies of the Pacific were profitless, lacked strategic importance, and should be divested,” with perhaps a parting financial package. With help from the UN and academic advisors such as J.W. Davidson of ANU, Western Sāmoa became what London regarded as the first independent “mini-state,” the Cook Islands chose “free association” with New Zealand (1965), and Nauru became the first “micro-state” with both independence (1968) and ownership of its phosphate mine, partly because it was a UN Trust Territory. Australia and New Zealand also promoted decolonization (McIntrye 2014).

### **Indigenous Nationalism**

But what about indigenous initiative? Historians often suggest that in the British Pacific colonies, “administrations were pushing for independence more than the islanders” (Thompson 1994: 153). But that generalization assumes that indigenous peoples identified with their colonial borders and government structures and therefore wanted to build nation-states that matched those blueprints. They already had consensus-building island councils, but as historian Barrie MacDonald wrote (1982: 222), “Strong paternal rule for half a century, and the policy of limiting advanced education to a few, meant that in the 1960s and early 1970s there was only a small

educated class which had any real interest in, or understanding of, this alien political system.” In 1970, the colony had a population of about 53,000, but only 662 students attended secondary schools, compared to 12,164 in primary schools (Thompson 1994: 162-63). Political awareness was confined mostly to Tarawa, as was the urban cash economy, which attracted a quarter of the population. Moreover, most British colonial officers did not remain in the GEIC long enough to learn a local language, so they were not always aware of indigenous political sentiments. They sometimes felt disappointed or impatient with the local council style of politely listening to a speaker and then considering the matter silently, perhaps until another meeting (McIntyre 2014: 38). That relationship would change when annual conferences in the 1950s culminated in the creation in 1964 of the first territory-wide institution in which indigenous leaders could participate, a consultative Advisory Council. It was followed by a House of Representatives and Governing Council in 1967, Legislative and Executive Councils in 1971, and a House of Assembly with a “self-governing” cabinet in 1974. National elections and growing awareness of decolonization processes elsewhere in the region pushed the GEIC to evolve “from total dependence to self-government in little more than a decade” (MacDonald 1982: 222).

By the 1960s, growing numbers of western-educated islanders worked in the civil service, the churches or in commerce. Civil servants were banned from engaging in politics, even though most council members had worked in the administration (Kirata 1980: 36). Meanwhile, a rival “national” force arose in the labor movement. In 1972, the largest union was the BKATM (*Botaki ni Karikarikean Aroia Taan Makuri*), which combined the public employees association and staff in the Wholesale Society that handled imports and exports. The new government leaders accused strikers of holding the country for ransom, disrupting communications and destroying public property, and outer islanders often agreed. In effect, the emerging national elite had inherited colonial inequalities and social class issues in the capital. Opposition leaders in the House of Assembly built followings among union members, including future president Ieremia Tabai; but after independence, Tabai would instead promote stability. Workers in the phosphate mines and plantations had also formed labor unions, but union demands for better pay and working conditions challenged the limits of the underdeveloped economy in ways that could become a problem for a small country with few resources. In 1974, the first year of internal self-government, a new industrial relations code imposed a step-by-step negotiation process and banned strikes, lockouts and boycotts, though such attempts to limit labor unrest remained a work in progress (Hince 1992, 62-63).

Governor John Smith, who arrived in the GEIC in 1973, would soon present the House of Assembly with 52 questions to think about while preparing for self-government. Based on their answers, he later admitted, “in the atolls I met my match” (McIntyre 2014: 38). The new indigenous elite showed considerable agency in seeking more information about laws, finances, economic development, and self-government. Their leader, Reuben Uatioa, was called “the first architect of Gilbertese independence,” because he rose “above the localized rivalries of island politics” (PIM 12/1977). He had been outside the fishbowl, so to speak, after being educated in mission schools, trained as a radio operator in the Phoenix Islands, joining the Fiji navy during the war, receiving further training in New Zealand, and working in the weather service. He came home in 1950, served as Colony Information Officer, and by the 1960s, he engaged in politics. Uatioa was a friend of Head Chief Hammer de Roburt of Nauru, who had family ties to Banaba, so information and ideas were circulating among indigenous nationalists. Uatioa’s travel and education experiences inspired him to end his people’s “second class” status. In 1961, he co-founded the Tungaru Association to “promote Gilbertese culture and interests,” and later the

Gilbertese National Party (Talu et al 1979: 170, PIM 12/1977, McIntyre 2014: 198). Barbera Kirata, a civil servant who became the first president of the GNP, said the party was not race-based but rather sought to “bring justice to the Colony” for the majority. Once they united, the British government listened to them (Kirata 1980: 36). As Leader of Government Business in the Legislative Council, Uatioa said that British expatriates should learn “our languages,” and government proceedings should no longer be only in English, because “this is our country” (LC 11/28/71, 22). No more silence.

But could the national vision of such leaders hold the GEIC together? Belated British decolonization had stirred up Gilbertese nationalism, which in turn would alienate the minority Ellice Islanders and the already angry, uprooted Banabans. In October 1965, the GNP became the first political party in the country’s history, partly informed by the example of activists at a regional conference in Papua New Guinea. The GNP wanted to speed up democratic constitutional development, increase participation in the government, improve employer-employee relations, raise the standard of living, preserve cultural traditions, and promote Gilbertese unity. Because of resentment toward European privileges in the colony, only Gilbertese, part-Gilbertese or non-Gilbertese who had “spent much of their lives in the Gilberts” could be party members. About 200 people attended the first public meeting on Tarawa, where people spoke of favoring locals in hiring and establishing ethnic quotas in scholarships (PIM 11/1965). “We were quite a united group,” future Chief Minister Naboua Ratieta recalled. The “old crowd” who had come up through the ranks felt that the *I-Matangs* (expatriates) discriminated against Gilbertese in the civil service, so they “wanted to be independent like everyone else from colonial paternalism” (1980: 16). An opposition Christian Democratic Party (CDP) was soon formed by Ellice islanders, part-Europeans, and Gilbertese Catholics (PIM 12/1965, MacDonald 1982: 227-28). The Australian-based *Pacific Islands Monthly* wrote, “although the Gilbert and Ellice Islands are widely scattered and just about as far off the beaten track as you can get nowadays, they too are afflicted by that much-heard-of bugaboo, racialism.” But it explained, “The root of the trouble is that the Gilbert Islands, which comprise 16 atolls straddling the Equator, are peopled by some 40,000 Micronesians, while the nine atolls of the more southerly Ellice Islands are peopled by about 6,000 Polynesians, and both groups are administered as a single entity by the British Crown” (PIM 11/1965).

In the GEIC Advisory Council, Tebaau Tiba asked what the British had gained by grouping “two different races, Polynesian and Micronesian” into one colony. He explained that “racialism” in the colony arose on Tarawa from Gilbertese resentment toward relatively better-educated Ellice Islanders, whose mission schools had not had to close in World War II when the Japanese occupied the Gilberts. “An Ellice Islander new to the Gilberts” Tiba said, “could not understand a word in Gilbertese. The same was true of a Gilbertese visiting the Ellice. Some had overcome the problem and now there were those Gilbertese and Ellice who could converse in either vernacular. As regards racial differences, these were marked and caused tension. The Ellice population in the Gilberts created a bad impression. They considered themselves cleverer and superior to the Gilbertese as a race. Favoritism was another factor. They behaved as though they owned the whole Colony.” Tiba gave examples of reputed favoritism, such as hiring policies for public works projects, in which Gilbertese were the last hired and first laid off, and in school admissions, as Ellice headmasters favored their own group (GEIC AC, 4<sup>th</sup> meeting, 4 June 1965). In another meeting, Tiba said he was a representative of the GNP, so why were the party’s activities prohibited from being broadcast on the radio? Uatioa, then Broadcasting Officer, explained that the policy decision resulted from concern over his own earlier attempt to

broadcast party news, which a British official claimed had risked causing “racial disharmony.” Tiba complained that the new House of Representatives, although it would be elected, still could not make laws, and it did not allocate enough seats to Tarawa. He wanted the government to consider proposals for constitutional changes from his party, the GNP (GEIC AC, 5<sup>th</sup> meeting, 12-19 November 1965).

In contrast, Ellice Islander Iosia Taomia warned against rapid constitutional development, because the Banaban phosphates were expected to last fifteen more years. He compared democratic progress to “the growth of a child to maturity and said that just as a handicapped child depended on its parents, an under-developed territory like the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, with few resources, needed to depend on the United Kingdom Government for continuing support.” Decolonization in other colonies was backed by viable economies. Although there was “a powerful spirit of nationalism and a feeling for independence in the Pacific area, [Taomia] hoped that this would not induce the people of the Colony into rushing rashly into self-government which they might not be able to finance and maintain, and which might concentrate power in the hands of a few ambitious individuals.” That argument reflected rising GNP-CDP tensions over the pace of constitutional change, choosing a new collective name, and ethnic rights. Regarding the proposed name change, Taomia warned that it would be “meaningless if the people of the Colony continued to voice racial prejudices and to maintain parochial island outlooks.” Ellice Islander Temete Tebetaio added his concern that the new electoral districts “did not provide for minority racial groups” and in fact would “preclude racial minorities seeking free election,” so “multi-racial alliances should be appointed” (GEIC AC Ibid.). Ellice Islanders also expressed concern over a few incidents of violence by Gilbertese against Ellice migrants and even toward a British official. Most of the economic development proposals focused on Tarawa, where Gilbertese were a demographic and electoral majority, so the new government might be ethnically discriminatory (Tuvalu 1983: 159-160).

By 1970, Ellice Islander Sione Tui Kleis complained that Gilbertese numerical superiority “could cause Ellice Islanders to lose confidence in their race’s ability and pride, especially racial pride [and] would only mean suppression, annihilation and enslaving of the Ellice people. Would anyone in their capacity as rational beings allow democracy to punish and victimize a minority?” He said the two peoples had never agreed to be unified into a single colony, so “Racialism was an inevitable reality” (GEIC HR, 3<sup>rd</sup> session, 1<sup>st</sup> meeting, 3 March 1970). But Ratieta of the GNP argued that they were one people and each island would have equal representation, so the Ellice people should not selfishly promote “dangerous racial fanaticism” to delay the constitutional progress of the country, of which they were the southern province (Ibid.). Gilbertese complained that the highest and best-paid positions in the civil service and the phosphate mining commission were held by Ellice Islanders because British officials favored them, whereas Gilbertese produced more copra per capita than the Ellice Islanders, who ate green coconuts! (Talu et al 1979: 174). Such unhappy inter-ethnic gibes reflected the legacy of colonial bordering and uneven economic development, which pushed islanders to compete for what amounted to the crumbs of extractive modernity. But some *I-Matang* attributed the tension stereotypically to “age-old prejudice” and dismissed talk of separatism as “Ellice in Wonderland” (PIM 8/1966, 12). Yet Isakala Paeniu, an Ellice Islander who held ministerial positions in the GEIC government, opposed separation, arguing that the Tungaru and Tuvalu peoples shared a need to regain confidence in their own skills and values, because their histories were not being taught in local mission or government schools. They should “choose the kind of life and the kind of society they think best for themselves without

outside interference.” Because urban labor unions were causing disruptions, he said government leaders needed to restore the status of rural producers. People should support import substitution efforts, practice self-control in consumption, and regain self-respect: “Subsistence living is something we can claim to be our own heritage,” and so was egalitarian communalism (Paeniu 1974, 81-90).

### Two Secession Attempts

In 1970, British Resident Commissioner John Field warned the House of Representatives that a “violent economic storm” was approaching, because the phosphate income, of which 85% of the royalties went to the GEIC Reserve Fund, would soon end. He recommended “belt-tightening” to make economic self-sufficiency possible and promoted a new Development Plan that sought to maintain the current living standard through agriculture, fishing, better education (including training sailors to work on foreign ships and send home remittances), and family planning. Britain would provide \$750,000 to expand government services and projects. Chief Elected Member Uatioa asked for more development on the outer islands and empowerment of local councils, as well as internal air service and more overseas scholarships. Some colonial officers, he said, ignored the “cries” of the outer islands and acted “downright uncooperative.” Uatioa said he wanted more local people trained and hired for development projects, more government ordinances translated into indigenous languages, faster constitutional progress, and greater unity in addressing the needs of the people. When he and other members suggested selling Banaban phosphates to Japan to get better prices than Australia or New Zealand paid, an official replied, “you can only get so much blood out of a stone” (GEIC HR, 3<sup>rd</sup> session, 1<sup>st</sup> meeting, 26 February to 2 March 1970). In short, the existing British monopoly would continue.

Uatioa demanded that the civil service be increasingly localized until expatriates were no longer needed. He asked why the colony paid \$10,000 a year to the WPHC for services, so the GEIC separated from the WPHC in 1971. He asked Britain for assurances of ongoing financial support and suggested nationalizing Fanning Island’s plantations (which would later happen). He explained that the Line islands belonged to the colony and had better agricultural potential than the Phoenix Islands. He asked for more financial details about the Wholesale Society cooperative, but he was told that it was hard to get exact figures (GEIC Ibid.). When Ellice Islanders and Banabans expressed demands to separate and become independent countries, he tried to shut down “racial” talk in the Legislative Council and urged them all to “work together” (GEIC LC, 30 July 1971). Uatioa compared Ellice separation to Katanga trying to secede from the Congo and proposed using the “Pacific Way” of consensus. Constitutional progress, he said, was only happening “because we, the people of this Colony, are pushing for it. No doubt about that.” As for economics, “What development has been made for our country?” He argued that it was mainly *I-Matang* on Tarawa whose housing was being improved, by building homes that were too fancy for local people’s needs; meanwhile, workers and outer islands were neglected (GEIC LC, 28 May 1973). Uatioa lost his seat in the 1974 election, ironically because the BKATM union regarded him as an administrative collaborator. His downfall led Ellice Islander Tito Isala to conclude, “The father of modern day I-Kiribati nationalism, who was not prepared to share a future independent government with Ellice Islanders, was forced out of national politics” (1983b: 27). Uatioa would pass away before his dream of independence was fulfilled (PIM 12/1977, 14). Secondary school graduate Naboua Ratieta became Chief Minister under the internal self-government constitution, but he said, “We had no precedents to follow. We were a

government of trial and error. We had to look at other countries for guidance on how a minister should act and how to solve problems. Perhaps it is a reflection of the education we received under the British that we often asked ourselves what Gladstone or Disraeli might have said or done” (1980: 16). Gaining self-government was not the same as running the new state.

Tarawa was far more developed than the Ellice atolls, where voters felt neglected and feared that united self-government would replace their British masters with the Gilbertese. For their part, the British thought creating a separate Ellice state was too expensive, and they worried that the partition might create a precedent for further fragmentation in the region. But to avoid instability, London finally decided to allow a referendum on separation in the Ellice Islands. A UN Decolonization Committee visiting mission called for consultation to “promote national identity and preserve national unity” and self-determination “as an unbroken whole” but it was too late. They did ask a perceptive question, however: why had the GEIC not used the Banaban phosphates to make its own islands more fertile? (McIntyre 2014: 208). In the GEIC legislative elections of 1974, Ellice candidates won very few seats, because voters of both ethnic groups now regarded that poll as more of a Gilbertese affair. Later that same year, in their own referendum, 92% of Ellice voters favored separation. Some leaders complained about a lack of other options, such as federation. But the testimony in GEIC councils and the referendum vote revealed that categories such as Gilbertese/Micronesian or Ellice/Polynesian had become markers in ethnic tensions, and the latter minority wanted to preserve their own identity as a people (MacDonald 1982: 254-255). In 1978, after a four year transition, they received independence as Tuvalu in the British Commonwealth, with one secondary school, two university graduates, one boat, a modest British aid grant, and a reduction in government jobs. The British flatly rejected Tuvaluan requests for a share of the GEIC Reserve Fund royalties and for some islands in the Phoenix or Line groups. Isala wrote, “Tuvalu was virtually bankrupt on separation” (1983b: 33, 42). On Independence Day in Funafuti, a royal commissioner told the Tuvaluans they had always been “independent” at the local level. But in a *maneaba* farewell ceremony, one elder said, “The British government did not urge us into independence, and we do not particularly want it ourselves. But we are simply following what other countries are doing and doing what we are told we should do” (McIntyre 2014: 215). Kiribati thus lost eight islands.

Gilbertese nationalists admired Nauru for gaining its independence in 1968, and several knew its president personally. The displaced Banabans on Rabi also had ties with Nauru, but they admired it in a different way: they wanted independence from the GEIC, in association with Fiji, whose Prime Minister Ratu Sir Kamasese Mara was supportive of their protests. Back in 1965, GEIC Advisory Council and GNP member Amara Makaea had asked, with obvious irony, “How could the people regard phosphate and Ocean Island [Banaba] as part of this Colony?” He expressed surprise that Banaba’s phosphates were so important to the GEIC, providing half the colony’s revenue, because they did not belong to the country “in the same way as copra did.” The colonial government collected taxes and other fees, but the BPC controlled Banaba’s mining royalties. Makaea said he heard those phosphates were the “cheapest in the world,” but he did not want the colony to “subsidize” rich countries (GEIC AC, 5<sup>th</sup> meeting, 31 May 1965). In 1968, Uatioa had testified to the UN against a Banaban petition for independence, calling them “absentee landlords” who might delay independence for the rest of the GEIC (PIM 6/1968). He wanted Banaba to remain part of the country and to be rehabilitated to relieve population pressure. When it came to dividing up BPC royalties between the resource-poor GEIC and the Banabans on Rabi, he said one partner “had need, the other had only greed.” He believed the Banabans were lucky, with phosphate royalties and a much larger and more fertile island than

Banaba. They had more opportunities and less responsibility, he felt, and through hard work they could probably become “millionaires” (GEIC AC, 1<sup>st</sup> session, 1<sup>st</sup> meeting, 12 December 1967). Uatioa also asked London about “the prospects for resettlement or employment overseas if population growth continued?” (McIntyre 2014: 198). British officials wanted “to avoid a position where we shall be attacked on the grounds that the United Kingdom had no interest in the Gilberts other than the phosphate mining on Banaba, and that only on its exhaustion in 1979 had we been prepared to give independence, and [thus] had denied them any long-term viability” (*Ibid.* 228). In reality, however, that is exactly what happened.

Banabans had been dissatisfied about their relationship with the phosphate miners ever since 1900, when Albert Ellis talked two chiefs into signing a 999-year lease contract at a rate of 50 pounds a year in return for an estimated 12 million tons of phosphate. It was considered “blatant theft, even by the standards of the day” (Howard 1991: 195; MacDonald 1982: 95-96). Even the first GEIC governors regarded the arrangement as “a very raw deal for the Banabans” (Teaiwa 2015: 123). In 1928, Resident Commissioner and ethnographer Arthur Grimble had intimidated them into accepting low royalties, by insisting that they should not demand increases that would “shame the Important Chief, the Chief of the Empire” (King George V). He said they had to choose between “life and death,” i.e. protection or oblivion (Teaiwa 2015: 134-35). On both Nauru and Banaba, the phosphate company employed outside laborers from the GEIC, Japan and Hong Kong, but working conditions were so bad they went on strike and sometimes fought each other. Banaban men also worked for the company, but landowners resisted the ever-widening destruction of their ancestral land and asked for higher royalties, which in 1913 were six pence a ton (Howard 1991).

Local council and church leader Rotan Tito stood up for Banaban rights, even when he was beaten during the Japanese occupation in World War II. In addition to their eviction to Rabi after the war, they resented the GEIC for receiving over five times as much revenue from their homeland as they did. Lack of educational opportunities and mounting debts made them feel deprived and neglected, so they became more militant. In 1965, several hundred armed men marched to the council hall on Rabi and threatened to kill anyone who collaborated with the British, but the District Officer dissuaded them. Tito’s son Tebuke Rotan invited *Pacific Islands Monthly* to write a series of articles to show how Banabans were “being cheated by the British government.” He said that people in Fiji imagined they were lazy and spoiled, but while 300,000 tons of phosphate left their home island each year, “our people have nothing.” The British had purchased Rabi for them with their own money, and they had to pay the salary of the official advisor on Rabi. With a budget of 50,000 pounds for 2000 residents, the council distributed annuities of 8 pounds a year to adults and 4 to children, while the rest went for public works and salaries. Their royalties were only two shillings, eight pence per ton, whereas the GEIC received 23 shillings per ton. On Nauru, the royalties to landowners were 17/6 a ton, and they were moving toward self-government (PIM 9-11/1965). The Banabans hired the same law firm to help them that Nauru used, and spoke of independence.

In 1967, Makaea of the GEIC Advisory Council responded to the pro-Banaban *PIM* publicity by writing back that Banabans “get the best of two worlds.” He said both the GEIC and the Banabans had a right to the phosphate revenues, and the smaller share of the Banabans was appropriate: “The amount that the landowner receives for quarrying on his land is very rarely a high percentage of the total price per ton.” He heard that landowners on Bougainville in PNG received only a small part of the royalties from the Panguna copper mine, and Britain had just agreed to pay Banabans an additional lump sum of \$200,000 as well as technical assistance in

developing Rabi, so “they should now live far better than most GEIC people.” They had also agreed not to return to Banaba to live, which he said “indicates that living conditions on Rabi are more favorable than in the Colony.” In contrast, the GEIC’s “atoll islands are too overcrowded and too infertile to raise economic crops other than copra,” so most residents “live close to poverty and malnutrition, but they are working very hard and being taxed hard to better themselves and their islands.” With the phosphates running out soon, “the GEIC is heading towards a rather gloomy future,” so “the people of Rabi have no cause for complaint.” Banaba was part of the GEIC, so its government “has a right in this matter [which] has been exercised with fairness” (PIM 7/1967).

In London, William Whitlock, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, agreed: “The Banabans in Fiji are lucky to be residing in a territory which, by Pacific standards, enjoys modest prosperity and has a stable social background” (PIM 3/1969). Similar language appeared in a pamphlet disseminated by the GEIC government in 1975, which stressed the common heritage and language of Gilbertese and Banabans, the spatial and social disruptions caused by 19<sup>th</sup> century labor recruiting and forced migrations in World War II, intermarriage with GEIC migrant phosphate workers on Banaba, and the need of the GEIC for the mining royalties. The essay said that the Ellice separation was due to racial difference, so it was not really a precedent for Banabans, who were simply one small but wealthy group out of a larger and now-homogeneous indigenous nation. The text cited a motion passed by the GEIC House of Assembly in 1974, which held “the firm belief that Ocean Island is an integral part of the Gilbert Islands.” Therefore, it made no sense to remove “a national asset which cannot be replaced” and transfer it “from 60,000 people to 2,000 and from a democratically elected indigenous Government with development plans to implement for a nation of over twenty islands to that of a council of elders for a single village” that was located in Fiji (GEIC Pamphlet 1975).

This possessive discourse also hints at the recurring migration theme, of which Banabans were seen as another diaspora. Ancient voyagers had traveled widely, ship and plantation workers had been recruited or kidnapped in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Japan had relocated people in World War II, GEIC settlers had gone to the Phoenix or Line Islands in the 1930s and then on to the Solomon Islands in the 1950s, and since the early 1900s fluctuating waves of GEIC workers had gone back and forth between Nauru and Banaba phosphate mines, copra plantations on Washington or Fanning Islands, and local cash-cropping in the Gilbert or Ellice Islands, depending on changing prices, wages and policies, while one fourth of the inhabitants had migrated to Tarawa (Munro and Bedford 1992). The British had separated the three Polynesian atolls of Tokelau from the GEIC in 1925 and handed them over to New Zealand, which by the mid-1960s was trying to resettle Tokelauans in New Zealand (PIM 2/1966, Huntsman and Kalolo 2007, 13-14). Even the Nauruans had considered relocating to Curtis Island off Queensland, Australia, but then changed their minds when they were expected to become Australian citizens without a sovereign status that would preserve their identity. Instead, they decided to rehabilitate their homeland (PIM 9/1964, Viviani 1970). There was also talk of resettling GEIC migrants in Australia in the 1960s (PIM 9/1967), and in the 1980s, after independence, the government resettled several thousand people from its crowded atolls to northern Line Islands that had plantations or fishing resorts (Langston 1993).

Nevertheless, Banaban leaders went to New York to petition the UN Decolonization Committee for help in becoming independent like Nauru, although it had been a UN Trust Territory and the UN promoted maintaining territorial integrity. The Banabans also took the

British government and the BPC to court in London for compensation, and consulted with members of the South Pacific Forum (PIM 6/1968, 8/1975, 10/1977). In 1974, GEIC Chief Minister Ratieta “objected strongly to one of its islands seeking to break away simply and solely to enjoy all the wealth which rightly belonged to the nation as a whole.” He said Ellice Islanders were not Micronesians, but the Banabans were Gilbertese, and their home island was only 200 miles from Tarawa (PIM 7/1974). Later, he actually justified his idea of creating a small defense force by saying it could help to construct airfields and other projects the way the Royal Engineers did, and it could also be “an insurance against acts of violence” by disruptive labor strikes or Banaban “demonstrations” (1980: 18). That last statement referred to a 1979 “war party” of 154 paid militants sent to Banaba. They fire-bombed the phosphate plant and brawled with Gilbertese police; 35 Banabans were arrested and convicted of arson (Teaiwa 2015: 148, McIntyre 2014: 233). Ratu Mara of Fiji pleaded for a “Pacific Way” negotiation, so Ratieta offered guarantees to Rotan, including “belonger” status for Banabans in Kiribati (similar to what Gilbertese in the Solomons had) and two seats in the legislature. Britain, Australia and New Zealand finally paid the Banabans A\$ 10 million in so-called “blackmail” for all that cut-rate phosphate (McIntyre 2014: 218-222). *Pacific Islands Monthly* called the Banabans “heroic little South Sea island Davids” and reported that Tebuke Rotan, normally “mild-mannered and soft-spoken, gentle and generous as he can be, flares at...the Gilbertese claim that ‘Ocean island is one of our islands.’ In his eyes – and in the eyes of all the 3,000 Banabans – Ocean Island was never part of the Gilberts until Britain made it so and Britain had no right to it” (PIM 4/1977, 30-33). The Banaban council on Rabi would later adopt the motto “Our God Help Us” (Teaiwa 2015, 118, 149). But Banaba remained part of independent Kiribati in 1979, despite the glaring facts that the island was ruined and its people lived in exile.

### Kiribati and Tuvalu: Facing Sovereignty and Development

Gilbertese nationalism succeeded in gaining independence and the preservation of Tungaru’s identity. The GNP movement had alienated the Tuvaluans but also taken over their jobs on Tarawa and did not have to share the Reserve Fund with them. Kiribati kept Banaba until the phosphates ran out and thus gained for the Reserve Fund an additional A\$50 million. It then lost about 500 jobs for workers on Banaba, but other I-Kiribati still worked on Nauru and brought in about A\$1 million a year, while copra, fishing or working on foreign ships generated revenue, along with grants from Britain and the Asian Development Bank (PIM 9/1979). Kiribati also retained the Phoenix and Line Islands, which brought plantation islands and an enormous E.E.Z., and it created a “home-grown” constitution that required extensive consultation between the central government and the outer island councils before important laws could be passed (PIM 8/1977). That arrangement, Teiwaki explained, was because outer islanders distrusted the central government. Customary elders from outer islands, not young educated national leaders, had dominated the constitutional convention, so there was also a recall provision if voters did not like an elected official’s performance (1977: 6-8).

Teiwaki argued that the concept of independence in Kiribati, or *inaomata*, “meant more than political autonomy. It also implied a sense of individual liberty, without being constrained by the formality and legality inherited from the colonial period.” President Jeremia Tabai did away with the defense force idea and offered greater support to the outer islands councils in a decentralization of authority. Despite another destructive BKATM labor strike in 1980, the Tabai regime maintained the flow of goods and services by using the only government ship to reach the

outer islands, whose inhabitants responded favorably in “a rare expression of nationalism.” Tabai also negotiated an agreement with New Zealand to accept a quota of I-Kiribati migrants with skills, which Teiwaki called “a significant breakthrough for Kiribati in alleviating its overpopulation and economic problems.” Teiwaki hoped for “a restoration of Gilbertese cultural values of industry, hard work, patience and dedication” (1988: 16-17, 31, 34).

Maunaa Itaia, a divinity student in Fiji, argued in his thesis that Gilbertese had syncretized Christian teachings with their own interpretations and perspectives, for example when in the 1930s, an indigenous prophet on Onotoa started a millenarian movement, the Swords of Gabriel (Itaia 1973). In 1973, Itaia published two poems in *Mana*, the creative arts journal of University of the South Pacific (USP) students in Fiji. The first expressed his anger at the missionaries who had pushed his people to abandon ancestor worship and adopt a new religion, thereby crushing “the skulls of my father and fathers’ fathers of the ages.” The second regretted the alienation caused by his western education, which led his mother to weep when he arrived home again amid white friends getting off the airplane: “he is educated, he lives a foreign life, he denies his mother, his own mother” (*Mana*, 1973, 10 and 31). Six years later, when the country was self-governing, Itaia argued that the Gilbertese way of life survived colonialism: “Let us develop, improve, and uphold what is good for our nation.... Gilbertese are still Gilbertese. We are proud of our identity.” Despite many changes, “our relations with other men are more important than time. We value highly our kinship ties and social obligations, we treasure our genealogies.” The *maneaba* “is now a symbol of our Gilbertese identity,” and the constitution had combined British-style democracy with consulting the local *maneabas*, creating a syncretism of consensus and voting. He warned that modernity’s individualism and money-mindedness were not all they claimed to be, so the nation should respect traditions and seek self-sufficiency, through consumer restraint and favoring local cultural skills, instead of depending too much on neo-colonial trade and aid (1979, 181-90). Itaia wrote an account of the rise of Gilbertese nationalism, emphasizing shared clan ownership of land, the indigenization of Christianity, ongoing group survival in a challenging environment, and self-sufficient, egalitarian island councils. He praised Uatioa, who stood up to British paternalism, and Tabai, who respected the people’s will in not accepting a Governor-General under the British monarch and who espoused national unity and self-sufficiency, not dependency and class or denominational divisiveness within the nation (Itaia 1985).

In a retrospective interview in 2012, former president Tabai (1979-1991) said he was one of only a handful of leaders in Kiribati who had a university degree at independence. His was in accounting, so he worked in the Ministry of Finance, after his lonely, money-poor days as a student in New Zealand had taught him “to be careful with resources.” When he returned home in the mid-1970s, he found that the British were “very keen to leave us.” He felt proud of how different the country’s constitution was from others in the region: the presidency gave more stability than votes of no confidence in the Westminster system. The president also had a maximum term limit of 12 years, and the legislature had to consult with local councils. Although he would have preferred not to separate from Tuvalu, in order to have more clout among other nation-states, he was glad the split went peacefully and that their relations today are amicable. He had no regrets about keeping Banaba in Kiribati, calling the “Banaban chapter” in the constitution a unique compromise (rights and representation in Kiribati while owning their home island and living in Fiji). He was glad to have the Kiribati Reserve Fund derived from phosphate revenues, “which is the main income earner for the government.” Yet, considering how much “Britain, Australia and New Zealand benefited from cheap phosphate and sold it below the world

price,” he said, “the residuals that came to us were very low.” Tabai relied on Australia and New Zealand for defense, kept essential government services going with aid from Britain, and negotiated a fishing treaty with the Soviet Union in 1985 while nurturing a small local fishing industry. He still believed in self-reliance, but population growth was becoming a problem, so he hoped that “New Zealand’s initiative to expand the work scheme will go ahead” (Johnstone and Powles 2012: 186-195).

Tuvalu became a sovereign dominion in the British Commonwealth in 1978, with a consultation process between the legislature and local councils, as in Kiribati (Isala 1983a: 172-73, Larmour and Qalo 1985: 206). In a retrospective interview, former prime minister Bikenibeu Paeniu (1989-1993 and 1996-1999) felt his government was managing their Trust Fund very well. It was created in 1987 by New Zealand, Australia, Britain, Japan and South Korea, after the first prime minister had almost lost the national treasury on a land scam in Texas. Tuvalu also makes money from stamp sales, its internet domain “dot-tv” (which he initiated), and from migrants and sailors who send home money as in Kiribati. “Tuvalu is far better off in terms of education,” Paeniu said. He was one of only two university graduates at independence, with a Masters in agricultural economics: “We’ve tried over the years to build a knowledge-based economy in a way that we are among the highest per-capita qualified and well-educated people in terms of population.” Regarding separation from the GEIC, he remembered the GNP as an “underground movement” by nationalists who feared Tuvaluan domination. He had not actually supported separation, but because people felt strongly about the need to preserve their identity, and the “Brits” had created the problem in the first place by grouping them together, he now thinks the “elders made the right decision” at the time. He noted that Tokelau, which was Polynesian and had “the same language, the same culture” as Tuvalu, had once been part of the GEIC, until the British gave those three atolls to New Zealand. Today, he said, Tuvaluans were the “forgotten Polynesians,” because “All the other Polynesian countries have formal ties [with New Zealand]; they are citizens of New Zealand, like Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau [and] Samoa has a treaty.” Each of the eight islands of Tuvalu had their own traditional polity, so “We were inventing our own nation.” Without a share of the phosphate royalties and only one ship: “we parted with nothing.” They had only two years after separation from Kiribati to prepare for independence, “no time for nation-building, for proper planning at all.” A written constitution, he said, is a “Western ideal,” so “it’s a culture imposed on another culture.” But Tuvalu was able to adapt it to local needs. Now climate change is a problem, so “we need the support of countries like New Zealand [and] Australia in allowing our people to come in [as] climate change refugees.... I’m now coming to accept that probably in my grandchildren’s lifetime, maybe even earlier, they may not have a nation to live in” (Paeniu 2012, 166-176).

### **Navigating Climate Changes**

According to Pacific constitution specialist Yash Ghai, “The emergence of the ‘national’ state in the Pacific was the result of colonialism,” but islanders could mobilize custom to criticize the state. During decolonization, formulating constitutions became contested ground as “the ideology of development” expanded the state apparatus and trapped westernized elites in “a larger economic system” that was “neo-colonial” (1983: 62-63). The UN still rates Kiribati and Tuvalu as Least Developed Countries (LDCs), but both countries have seats in the UN, and their constitutions grant a degree of autonomy to local island councils. They also belong to regional organizations such as the Pacific Community, which provides aid for development projects such

as their Marine Training Institutes. Local seamen are unionized, send home remittances, and make up 15% of the male workforce. Both countries participate in USP and the Pacific Islands Forum, which banned nuclear testing, established its own shipping line, and collectively negotiates fishing treaties. Despite the name-calling before separation and their limited economic resources, Kiribati and Tuvalu have remained stable democracies with “strong friendship ties” (Talu et al Kiribati 1979: 176). Meanwhile, Nauru’s phosphates ran out in 2011, so apart from investing their trust funds, receiving compensation payments from Australia and New Zealand, and being paid by Australia to confine Asian refugees for “processing,” the country is facing increasing challenges (PIR 3/29/16, 4/13/16). As for the Banabans on Rabi, by the 1980s most of the income from their trust funds was being spent on their own autonomous administration, and they were perceived as “among the poorest people in Fiji” (Howard 1991: 208). Displacement from their ancestral homeland and financial dependency on trust fund payments have taken a toll on their community, but their dance performances recall for their younger generations the living past of exploitation and exile (Cantieri 2015, Teaiwa 2014).

Today Kiribati and Tuvalu, and neighboring countries, are lobbying industrial powers for reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, in order to limit sea level rise and droughts that threaten their limited land and fresh water supplies. World leaders are hearing calls for preparing for “resilience” in coastal and island communities, including relocation, disaster relief and compensation. President Anote Tong of Kiribati and Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga have played prominent roles in global warming conferences and declarations, such as the COP 21 Paris Agreement and its recent signing by 175 UN member states (H. S-A 1/31/16, 4/23/16). Kiribati and Tuvalu have argued that they “represent the most vulnerable countries in the world and are at the frontline of the impacts of climate change.” Sopoaga has said, “we are, in fact, pioneers and trailblazers in restoring balance to our earth” (PIR 9/8/15). With New Zealand’s help, Tuvalu has embarked on a quest for 100% clean energy by converting to solar and wind power, in order to save money on fuel imports and also to set a symbolic example for the industrial polluters (PIR 9/19/2013). In 2014, Pacific Islanders from a dozen countries participated in canoe and kayak protests to block ships in Australia’s main coal exporting harbor, because coal alone accounts for 44% of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Logoitala Monise of Tuvalu, who joined the protesters, said that high tides, coastal erosion and drought were devastating her homeland as a direct result of climate change. People from Kiribati and Tuvalu have recently claimed “climate change refugee” status to migrate to New Zealand (Common Dreams.org: 10/21/2014). Both countries are using foreign financing and technical aid in engineering projects, such as creating artificial, floating or fortified islands or pumping sand from lagoons build up their remaining land surface. Yet Kiribati has also purchased land in Fiji and hopes to prepare people in coming years for “migration with dignity” (ABC.net.au/news, 2/17/16, PIR 2/16/16, 3/21/16).

The concept of “climate refugees” has reframed recurring discussions of migration. The heritage of Oceania’s “water nations” includes not only subsistence living on ancestral atolls but also creating mobile sovereignties through survival networks of diasporic archipelagoes. Their leaders, while accepting some colonial borders and aspects of modern states, have also worked to syncretize those alien frameworks with indigenous values and customs. Today, however, atoll nations are faced with global modernity’s “most unkindest cut of all” (as Shakespeare once called Brutus’s deadly betrayal of Julius Caesar): industrial pollution now exacerbates global warming, sea level rise and severe droughts. Modernity, we now know, has limits, due to finite resources and unsustainable consumption. Someday we might all become like Banabans, Nauruans, I-Kiribati and Tuvaluans. A prefabricated version of the modern nation-state has

voyaged around the world like an ark, promoting a European-derived model as universal. That model, however, has produced two devastating World Wars, the Great Depression and the Great Recession of 2008. So the neo-colonizers (and UN) have in effect proclaimed, “we’ve have a lot of trouble with this leaky ship, so see what you can do with it -- and if you sink, it’s your own fault!” But traditional atoll dwellers, who had to *produce* everything they needed, learned to plan ahead. As Itaia wrote, “Pure water flows freely to all directions under the clear sunshine, moon and stars...This deep is not bound and the water is all free...From ocean’s wealth pour...the people of the sea” (Mana 1973: 10).

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