

Annex 2 | *ICH Background in Kiribati*

1. Background: Kiribati, its islands and people

The Republic of Kiribati is an archipelago comprising 33 islands. Most of the islands are of coral formation with the exception of Banaba which is an island of volcanic formation. Furthermore, the archipelago consists of three main Groups of Islands: the Gilbert Group including Banaba, Phoenix Group and the Line Group. Kiritimati Island in the Line Group is the largest coral island in the world with a land area of 388 sq.km. The total land area of Kiribati is 811 sq. km.

Kiribati is scattered over an expanse of ocean equivalent in size to the continent of the United States of America. Our closest neighbor to the East is Nauru, Hawaii to the West, French Polynesia to the South and the Marshall Island to the North.

Kiribati's population is over 110,100³⁹ which is sexually overwhelmingly female when the opposite sex numbering 54,396 is taken into account.

In Kiribati 50 per cent of the population lives in the rural islands while the other half lives in the urban areas of South Tarawa including Betio in the Gilbert Group and Kiritimati Island in the Line Islands. In the rural area they reside on lands they owned, the ownership of which, unless interrupted by war and other influences, began hundreds of years ago.

Broadly speaking because the soil is not rich as in volcanic islands vegetable and food crops are very limited.

Babai - a tuber - which is more abundant in the northern part of the Gilbert Group, along with fish and imported tinned foodstuff are staple food of the islanders. In the south of the Gilbert Group however babai is kept for important feast such as wedding and therefore it does not form part of the daily food. People in the south of the Gilbert eat imported rice, local fish and imported tinned fish and tinned meats. These are staple foods throughout the rural areas of the country.

I-Kiribati whether urbanites or rural dwellers practiced their traditional culture. In the rural area subsistence economy is predominant where most dwellers maintained their traditional dwelling houses. They work daily to acquire fish, tuber (taro) or nuts for meal, although with dramatic increase on dependence on imported foodstuffs.

The only one mother tongue - the I-Kiribati language - is spoken throughout the archipelago. English is also widely spoken in the country. The two languages formed the official language of the country

I-Kiribati is people of culture sharing among them beliefs, value, customs, practices, and social behavior. From a down-to-earth point of view cultural heritage in Kiribati as in other cultures⁴⁰ is of two distinct forms.

³⁹ 2015 Population and Housing Census, Preliminary Report, National Statistics Office, MFED, Tarawa, 2016

⁴⁰ Vanuatu Field Survey Report, 2012, Port Vila.

It is (i) a “living culture” where the bulk of the people comfortably live and practice their culture on a daily basis; (ii) “intangible culture” – because it is not in written form, they are all in the form of traditional expression, and passed on from one generation to the other by words of mouth.

The nation-wide use of the Christian Bible and the education system initially by churches and later on by government expedited literacy development resulting in everyone in the country capable of writing I-Kiribati.

This lessened the power of memory of book-long traditions as possessed by our ancestors. People now write account of traditions because of their acquisition of writing skill.

Of equal importance ICH is also in the form of cultural material of organic biological formation⁴¹.

⁴¹ Father Sabatier, Ernest, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilberts_language, www.fondation-culturelle-barbier-mueller.org...tabiteuea-Kiribati;

2. Background: Early recording by Europeans

There is indeed an abundance of available data from a profusion of secondary and online sources on Kiribati's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). This is not only in the form of books, there are notes, tapes, videos and cassettes. The problem however is that the standard and quality of storage of this important information is very poor warranting appropriate measures of improvement in the administration and safekeeping of the Kiribati's ICH as a matter of urgency.

The available data includes the I-Kiribati language the alphabet of which was the creative and innovative work of the pioneer Protestant missionary Dr. Hiram Bingham⁴² of the (ABCFM) American Board of Commissioner for Foreign Mission⁴³. Dr. Bingham arrived on Abaiang in November 1857.

Over half a century later Arthur Grimble⁴⁴, later Sir Arthur (1888-1956) one of the early colonial administrative officers arrived in the then Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (GEIC) now Kiribati in 1914 (and stayed until 1939). He spent a quarter of a century in this country where he later served as Resident Commissioner (RC) – the chief administrator of the colony – accountable to the then British Western Pacific High Commission (WPHC) then based in Suva, Fiji.

Grimble was very much interested in the cultural heritage of I-Kiribati. He collected from different islands of the archipelago a significant number of wide-ranging I-Kiribati traditions that included the mythology and the cosmogony, the social groups and traditional dances⁴⁵.

According to Grimble I-Kiribati have their own Gods⁴⁶ who made the universe, their islands, the sun, moon and stars. Those gods to name a few are Nareau I, Nareau II, Riki and others. These are the few Gods, notably superior to the rest, who created our universe with Nareau II playing a leading and dominant role.

I-Kiribati also claimed that they have heroes subservient to Nareau II, such as Tematawarebwe, Akau, Taburitongoun, Kirata, Tanentoa, Beia ma Tekai, Mwea, Kaitu and Uakeia, Rairaeana, Rakentai, Karotu and Binoka to name a few. According to Grimble and Maude, I-Kiribati traditions said some of these men were those who began peopling these islands, seized lands from the conquered, imposed their own cultural values and disseminated them to the rest of the archi-

⁴² Kiribati Bible (Gilbertese Bible), 19th Bible Society of the South Pacific

⁴³ Rene S,J, In search of Soul, The Cultural Interaction between Hiram Bingham, Jr., the Hawaiian and the Gilbertese through mission contact 1856 – 1903, a thesis submitted in complete fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Australian National University, 1985;

⁴⁴ Arthur Grimble, The migration of the Pandanus People as traced from a preliminary study of food, food traditions and food rituals in the Gilbert Islands, Wellington: Polynesian Society Memoir No. 12 1933-34;

⁴⁵ -----, Myths from the Gilbert Islands' Folklore, XXII (1922), 91-112

⁴⁶ Grimble, Rosemary, Migration, Myth and Magic from the Gilbert Islands: Early writings of Sir Arthur Grimble, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972

pelago. Wherever they went to, they inherited chiefly families. Their values and norms notably the maneaba system they brought to those islands were accepted and upheld up to these days.

Grimble managed to produce a profusion of notes of Kiribati traditions and used the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in England and Canada⁴⁷ to broadcast a number of those traditions, his experience and love of the natives. There was much interest in his radio broadcast by millions of listeners in England and Canada. He also published some of his collections while the bulk of the traditions he collected were left in the capable hands of Mr. Maude, the district officer and later RC of the then GEIC. Rosemary Grimble⁴⁸, the daughter of Sir Arthur also continued some of the work of her father.

Mr. H.E Maude⁴⁹ (1906-2006) in his own rights made collections of Kiribati traditions from his own informants he considered knowledgeable, reputable and distinct from people with whom his predecessor Mr. Grimble worked. Like Grimble before him and other authors he also studied both the mythology and cosmogony that are largely related to Karongoa n Uea, a ruling and dominant clan in the Kiribati society before the arrival of Christianity and the colonial rules.

Kiribati was fortunate that Mr. H.E. Maude was able to publish his own notes and collections besides editing and connoting the collections and the unfinished work of Mr. Grimble.

Father Ernest Sabatier⁵⁰ (1886-1965) also took very much interest in the I-Kiribati vernacular and was considered an authority of the language besides Dr. Bingham⁵¹. He was also interested in other aspects of life of the I-Kiribati people and wrote an interesting account in this area. The Priest talked about I-Kiribati tools they made from coral limestone, building canoes that could travel across the Pacific and constructing dwelling houses with such limestone tools, climbing trees the trunk of which are rough to gather coconut, digging the tuber (babai) bit down to water level with a hand size shovel made of flakes of a giant clam shell, the fishing techniques, planting of tuber and others.

⁴⁷ Sir Arthur Grimble, *We choose the Islands, A six year Adventure in the Gilbert*, William Morrow & Company, New York, 1952.

⁴⁸ Grimble, Rosemary, *Migration, Myth and Magic from the Gilbert Islands: Early Writings of Sir Arthur Grimble*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972.

⁴⁹ Maude, H.E, *An Anthology of Gilbertese Oral Tradition, From the Grimble Paper*, Translated by A.F. Grimble and Reid Cowell, Edited by H.C. and H.E. Maude, Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, Suva, 1994

⁵⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilbertese_Language, www.fondation-culturelle-barbier-mueller.org./tabiteuea-kiribati. The Gilbertese oral tradition, privileged mode of communication is a great myths of each island, which is ethnologist such as Father Sabatier (1886-1965) especially regarding the way Gilbertese define their identify and culture

⁵¹ Rennie, S.J, *In search of soul, The Cultural Interaction between Hiram Bingham, JR., the Hawaiians and the Gilbertese through Mission Contact 1856 – 1903*, a thesis submitted in complete fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the Australian National University, Canberra, 1985.

Of equal importance the Rev Reid Cowell and Rev. G.H. Eastman of the London Missionary Society (LMS) played important role in cultural preservation as well by helping Sir Arthur and Mr. Maude respectively in translating into English important collections of Gilbertese traditions.

3. Writing of more recent times

In the 1960s German and French authorities in Gilbertese culture and traditions Dr. Gerd Koch⁵² and Jean-Paul Latouche⁵³ also did their own work separately. Dr. Koch made a comprehensive study of the cultural materials of Kiribati. This ranged from the daily dressing of men and women made of leaves of coconut tree, weaving of different baskets for torch fishing, frame net, fisherman's torch, hand net used by women for fishing on the reef, hand net used by men for fishing on the reef, netting needles, fishing of sand worm, catching moray eels with traps and the making of those traps, different method of fishing in deep sea, lagoon and the reef, materials used in the ritual of first mensuration of a girl, including the lying-in-belt for women immediately after giving birth and the belt for celebrating the first mensuration, the different kind of baskets for keeping smoking utensils, the ingredients of food, the cooking and method of producing foods and other cultural materials of Kiribati. Dr. Koch made a comprehensive video for different martial arts in Kiribati all of which are available with the Cultural and Museum Division (C&MD) of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA). This work coupled with the work of Father Sabatier presented a comprehensive study of activities carried out by an I-Kiribati at home, in the bush, at sea and in their leisure.

Jean-Paul Latouche⁵⁴ made a comprehensive study of the Maneaba traditions on the islands of Beru and Nikunau. He studied the different seating places in those maneaba and recorded the names of the hereditary holders as well as the names of the seating places. He also talked about stories of creation and a large number of other oral traditions that could be found largely in the Maude books and papers. Jean-Paul's study, is a very important contribution to the preservation of seating places that were first allocated to the descendants of the present holders over 600⁵⁵ years ago.

Dr. Kambati Uriam⁵⁶ in the 1990s considered by Maude as another authority on I-Kiribati traditions did his own work as part of his PHD thesis with the Australian National University (ANU). John Garret⁵⁷ gave account of the role of the churches

⁵² The Material Cultural of Kiribati Gerd Koch, English Translation by Guy Slatter, Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, Suva, 1986.

⁵³ Jean-Paul Latouche, *Mythistoire Tungaru, Cosmologies Et Genealogies*, Aux Iles Gilbert, SELAF, Societe D'etudes Linguisitiques Et Anthropologiques De France, Paris, 1984.

⁵⁴ Jean-Paul Latouche, *Mythistoire, Cosmologies Et Genealogies*, Societe D'etudes Linguisitiques Et Anthropologiques De France, Paris, 1984

⁵⁵ Sister Talu, Alaima, et al, *Kiribati Aspects of History*, Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific, Suva, 1979

⁵⁶ Uriam, K, *In their own words, History and Society in Gilbertese Tradition*, the Journal of Pacific History, Canberra, 1995.

⁵⁷ Garrett, J, *Where Nets were cast*, Institute of Pacific of Studies, University of the South Pacific, Suva, 1997

in Kiribati. Others such as Barry McDonald⁵⁸ and Sandra Joy Renie⁵⁹ did their PhD thesis in relation to Kiribati as well.

4. Writing by I-Kiribati

Given the history of Kiribati have been written in the past largely by foreigners using their own perceptions the Kiribati government prior to Independence⁶⁰ in 1979 decided that the history of Kiribati must be written by a group of local writers based on their local views. The assistance of experts in this important exercise included no other than the only authority who survived the early years of the last century H.E Maude. He worked with young experts in their own right Howard Van Trease, Barry McDonald, Assela Ravuvu and Marjorie Tusinekore Crocombe renowned experts in Pacific history. Assistance for this important exercise was secured through the help provided by the University of the South Pacific (USP) in collaboration with UNESCO.

In this regard a group of 21 young I-Kiribati women and men most of whom at that point in time were students and graduates of the USP were selected for the purpose. Following a series of workshops on the exercise, field work and write up the book: *Kiribati Aspects of History* combining different writings on different stories by that number of authors was published in I-Kiribati and English. This important milestone took place before Kiribati attained nationhood on 12th July 1979. The founding President of the new nation of Kiribati Ieremia Tabai⁶¹ proudly wrote a foreword of that book.

⁵⁸ Macdonald, Barry, *Cinderellas of the Empire*, Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific, *Towards a history of Kiribati and Tuvalu*, Suva, 2001;

⁵⁹ Rennie, S,J, *In search of soul, The Cultural Interaction between Hiram Bingham, JR., the Hawaiians and the Gilbertese through Mission Contact 1856 – 1903*, a thesis submitted in complete fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the Australian National University, Canberra, 1985.

⁶⁰ Sister Talu, Alaima, et al, *Kiribati Aspects of History*, Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific, Suva, 1979

⁶¹ *Ibid*, P ix