

II . Intangible Cultural Heritage Inventory

1. National Inventory

The Inventory refers to ICH Inventory made and managed by a national and/or local government and includes database of government related organization.

With that definition there is clear indication that the Inventory does not exist in Kiribati, unsurprisingly given management of ICH is still in its fledgling stage and not in line with standards set by UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of ICH. It could also be argued that this happened probably because government paid less attention to the promotion, preservation and safeguarding of ICH.

Books of traditions, artefacts, cassettes, films and all records of traditions in different forms are kept in proper places. This indicates that there was genuine interest in the first place on the part of workers to keep safely the books and films when they were initially acquired. This interest seemed to diminish when workers felt the work was monotonous and new developments and tasks emerged resulting in the poor quality of safekeeping these important data.

Certain important work in relation to ICH seemed to be not done routinely. Tasks that are of high priority have been unattended. This justifies urgent actions to establish the National Inventory and to ensure each task in future is carried out on a routine basis.

The absence of inventory does only happen with the Government it is also the case with the non-government organization.

There is clear evidence from the survey and interview that there is much need for the establishment of a down-to-earth and modern National Inventory.

As already mentioned there is an abundance of books by numerous numbers of authors who began collecting Kiribati traditions beginning from the early part of the last century. Others followed the pioneers in this respect sometime in the

1950s and 1960s. The last wave of writers in this regard was seen prior to 1979 while others worked within the first decade of the post-independence period.

It has been mentioned earlier that there is a diverse number of audio and video of oral traditions that are lying anywhere in the C&MD without establishing a list of those items which is updated now and then.

All these diverse data constitutes the right ingredients for the establishment of a National Inventory in line with UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding of ICH. All books of traditions from the early part of the last century up to the present day along with video, cassettes, and tapes, films that are available in the C&MD, the NA and NL may need to be listed in full details with the National Inventory and updated on a regular basis.

There ought to be a National Inventory combining the C&MD, NL and NA to be set up, it would also be a good idea to set up separate database for the C&MD, focusing on the artefacts, cassettes, video, audio and tapes including books of Kiribati traditions. That a network system may be installed in the C&MD in order for all appropriate staff to have access to using their own computers.

This must also apply to NL and NA establishing their own database to which all of their staff could have access to. The focus of the database is their own data which include the books, audio, cassettes and video and films available with the NL and NA.

Finally it may be a good idea if the database with the National Inventory is accessible by the C&MD, the NL and NA so that such data is shared among the three major players in the ICH safeguarding.

2. Non-governmental Inventory

There is an absence of a non-government organization safeguarding or protecting ICH in Kiribati. However, there is no doubt that the churches namely the Catholic and Protestant had strong link with practitioners of ICH prior to the arrival of colonial government.

It would not do any harm if in any future projects of enhancing safeguarding efforts of ICH in Kiribati includes the situational analysis of ICH and the degree of its link with Catholic and Protestant churches.

This may lead to the proper understanding that the ICH in Kiribati is very much the concern of Government. It may also reveal the potential of churches playing an important role in this area.

3. Cultural Mapping of the Cultural and Museum of the Ministry of Internal Affairs

Very recently, notably in 2005 the government conducted a cultural mapping throughout the nation. The objective was to collect from elders and practitioners in modern Kiribati, every oral tradition they are knowledgeable about and wanted to talk about. Of equal importance, to check if there are traditions that might have been missed out by Europeans in the past, if any, and if none, to see if the versions of traditions already collected by the Europeans over a century ago may differ substantially from what is known today.

The majority of islands in Kiribati have been visited. Not only interview with elders and practitioners was made, visit was also paid to baangota (sacred site where the spirits were worshipped) in particular, those that were mentioned by elders and practitioners during the course of the cultural mapping.

Most all of these places are covered with overgrowth of grass and plants without proper and routine cleaning. In this situation they seemed to be deserted as if they have no cultural value. The baangota are often visited by new comers to the islands, especially, visitors who asked to see Te bangoota. It may be important that the sites are beautifully landscaped to create not only the scenic beauty of the site but also to providing strong impressions on the mind of visitors.

Te bangoota is usually formed by boulders pointed into the ground to support a bigger and larger stone placed on the two planted boulders. The length and width of the two planted stones is not the same in all sacred places. It depended on those who constructed them from time immemorial.

The planted stones in some islands are approximately 20 inches long and 10 inches wide respectively. Furthermore the two planted stones are standing about 10 inches apart. The one that is placed on the two stones is 20 inches long and about 10 inches wide. In between the two planted stones and below the one laid on them is a space of several inches deep covered with gravel where physical remains of the dead are stored.

To watch such physical remains the tour guide normally a hereditary guide, removes the stone from the top of the two planted stones when the physical remains become visible. When some of such remains are not visible immediately after removing the cover, gravels are removed as they may, probably as a result of the penetration of heavy rain into the sacred site have removed the gravel covering the physical remains. The cover must be returned to its proper place before the baangota is left at the end of the tour.

On one island the physical remains of the heroes, especially the skull that are kept in a sacred place have been removed and disappeared. This was not by sabotage but by an act of a mental patient.

No one saw the person while he was removing the skull. The place where he probably destroyed the skull was not also known.

In some other places a baangota¹¹ was usually, but not always, located on the site closest to the ocean amongst trees and bush. The baangota was a few yards square and fenced with boulders. Within the fenced area the ground was covered with gravel, and in the center there were usually one to three trees. Beneath the trees there was usually a large block of coral and beside this a clam or other shell in which offerings to the spirit were placed. It was believed that the spirit could move around, even beyond the island, but that he would come to his baangota when called by his followers.

On a related matter, the conditions of the gravesite of the famous King Binoka of Abemama has deteriorated and it is on its way to disappearing unless the gravesite is revitalized.

The most significant problems of cultural importance is the disappearance of traditional maneaba (meeting house) on most islands, except Tabiteuea where they are maintained. Makin, Butaritari, Tamana, Arorae, Banaba and islands in the Line and Phoenix Islands are not included among islands which traditionally used to have the maneaba from many years ago.

The existing maneaba throughout the archipelago are church maneaba which is not the focus of I-Kiribati culture. The sharp focus is the traditional maneaba the importance of which has been the emphasis of contributions made by the foremost authorities of Kiribati traditions, Grimble¹² and H.E Maude¹³.

The Maneaba traditions within the meaning of the writings of the two authorities stressed the need to be read in conjunction with the story of creation by Nareau and the consequent migration of Tematawarebwe from Samoa to Beru Island in Kiribati. It was on Beru that the prototype Maneaba was built by Tematawarebwe with timbers from Samoa.

¹¹ www.janeresture.com/ki33/tradition.htm

¹² H.E. Maude, *The Gilbertese Maneaba*

¹³ H.E. Maude, *The Evolution of the Gilbertese Boti: An Ethnohistorical Interpretation*, Wellington, Polynesian Society Memoir No. 35, 1963

Within the Maneaba are boti (seating places) of each different clan as allocated by Tematawarebwe and later on by his grandson Tanentoa the Great¹⁴ that reflected the status and role of people seated in such places.

One seat holder has the right to deliver the first words and the final words during the course of discussion inside the Maneaba. One has the right of Te moa Ni bee (literal meaning to stand in the foremost front of the dancing group) during a traditional dance taking place in the maneaba so as to attract attention of spectators.

The seating places are also largely related with land ownership. It is said that anyone with no seating place in the Maneaba has no land. A person with no land is referred to as “a thing” not a person. A reference of this nature according to tradition was made by Beia ma Tekai¹⁵ who came from a chiefly family on Tarawa to Uamumuri, Nanikain and Tabutoa who were serfs of Beia ma Tekai.

Furthermore a new comer from another village on the island or a visitor from another island is not allowed to enter the maneaba and sit at boti. However, if the visitor wants to take the liberty of sitting he must be able to trace his genealogy and relates it to the seat he wants to take.

Such genealogy must be masculine based right back to the time when seats were first allocated to the founding holders of the boti several centuries ago.

It has been stated by a number of Unimane during the course of the cultural mapping that the disregard of the traditional maneaba throughout the archipelago was perhaps the consequence of discontentment raised by a large number of people having a seat in the maneaba on numerous occasions. Our suspicion is that this situation began emerging when I-Kiribati began exposing to western education and monetization of the Kiribati economy probably in the 1950s.

A certain clan played a hereditary role of distributing the food contributed by all clans seated in the maneaba. In this situation all clans are obliged to contribute food as deliberated by the Unimane (elders) sitting in their boti. Each clan did not only bring the food to his own boti as its final destination before meal time. Each clan ought to carry the food to the middle of the maneaba but had to await at his own boti direction to do so.

¹⁴ The Story of Karongoa, Narrated by an Unimane (old man) of the Karongoa boti (seating place) on Nikunau in 1934, Transcribed by Tione Baraka of Taboiaki on Beru, Translated by G.H Eastman, Edited, annotated and revised by H.E. Maude, Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific, Suva, 1991. page.44

¹⁵ Ibid, page 38

One particular clan played the role of Te Tia kaota (literal meaning exhibitor of food) who, standing at his own boti, in the maneaba called initially at a particular boti or person from whom the food exhibition by tradition usually commenced.

Normally the person or clan called to carry his contribution to the Tia Kaota, delivered it into the hands of Tia Kaota who immediately after receiving the food raised it above his head.

While the food was over his head, and especially when he was satisfied that the food was of high quality and in this way satisfied the rules and requirements of the maneaba, declared loudly his satisfaction as such for everyone in the maneaba to hear. This was indeed a praise of the person concerned.

Te Tia Kaota was likewise required by custom especially when he was not satisfied with the food to disgrace loudly, the concerned clan on failing to produce the food according to protocol.

At the completion of the exhibition the Tia Kaota began performing another important task. He distributed the food to all clans and it was this function that has probably become a cause of discontentment by those who felt the food was unfairly distributed. By custom from the very old days the matter was not subject to dispute, it was entirely a matter for the Tia Kaota to decide.

On such occasion, normally, the food was, among others, Te beeki (roasted or boiled pork), Te moimoto (green coconut fruits), babai (tuber) and other local foods. If the roasted pork was to be delivered to Te Tia Kaota not the whole pork was required to be handed over to him, only the head of pig that has been boiled was required for exhibition. All other types of food were delivered in their entirety.

Visitors from other islands to the Maneaba normally bring Te mweaka or Te moanei (literal meaning a gift to all those who are seated in the Maneaba to get the blessing of the deities in the Maneaba). This is always in the form of several sticks of tobacco. Te Tia Kaota ought to receive Te Mweaka from visitors. He was at liberty to distribute the tobacco to the clans seated in their boti if he considered the quantity was adequate for sharing. He may choose not to if he considered fit. This was also probably a cause of concern.

The Maneaba which was made of local materials needed periodical maintenance of approximately one in five years. Maintenance focused largely on Te rau (thatch) which determines the conditions of other materials of the maneaba. An old rau

could not prevent rain water from wetting the timbers with which Te rau was tightened. In this way the quality of the timbers became deteriorated spreading the decay to many timbers the resultant of which was the need for maintenance of the timbers as well which made the renovation time consuming and expensive. Te rau therefore ought to be regularly maintained to avoid deterioration of the timbers.

Each boti holder ought to provide new rau and new kora for the Maneaba. Tradition said each holder of boti provided Te rau for the roof under which their boti is situated. No boti is allowed to provide Te rau and Te kora for other boti.

This perhaps became the opportunity for the aggrieving clans to translate their discontentment into reality. The discontentment was not expressly stated. It was done covertly. They just did not provide Te rau and Te kora claiming they were not available at that point in time.

The conditions of the timbers of the Maneaba deteriorated very quickly as a result leading to their collapse. This was the cause of disappearance of this very important artefact of the I-Kiribati culture throughout the archipelago. They have not been revitalized. The exception is Tabiteuea North where the people are very conservative in terms of culture hence they managed to have their Maneaba remained intact.

Perhaps, the days have gone when I-Kiribati were always keen to comply with the protocols of the maneaba regardless of what stood before them. This avoided undermining the cultural significance of the Maneaba. Furthermore, there were mutual obligations on the part of different clans. A few played predominant role in the maneaba. Others played subservient role. Despite all these different roles and positions everyone in the past was happy.

The new generation which is more progressive and better educated felt restrictions of behavior in the maneaba should be questioned. Only old-men are allowed to talk. Preparation of food and their presentation in the maneaba ought to follow protocol and failing to comply brought shame on the clan concerned. The maintenance of inherited status and practices in the view of some people was only of benefit to a few.

This cultural situation is vulnerable to surrender where there is an alternative of converging the community on a regular basis without traditional restrictions and taboo.

The alternative is the church maneaba. Church members built their new maneaba. Boti no longer relates to the past, land ownership and other traditional rights. Boti in the new maneaba relates to church groups. Church members decided where each group member sits. The group members themselves chose their sitting places in the area of the maneaba where it is convenient to them. Nothing is inherited from the past in the church maneaba.

The departure from traditions was perhaps justified. This explained the reason of people deserting the traditional maneaba and its complete disappearance.

Nevertheless, efforts to revitalize this centerpiece of the Kiribati culture are a worthwhile exercise. Perhaps, appropriate measures must be taken to study in very many details the issues that led to the disappearance of the maneaba and to address them seriously to see how best the issues in question could be addressed. Only when the problem is addressed adequately with the full participation and support of the community that the revival of the maneaba could be translated into reality.

Videos and other records of the cultural mapping are presently kept in the C&MD of the MIA waiting compiling a full report of the cultural exercise. It is now more than ten years since the cultural mapping was carried out yet the full report of it has not been able to see the light of the day¹⁶.

There is good reason to believe that the slow process of compiling the report is largely due to the inadequate number of staff engaged in the exercise. The total number of islands covered in the cultural mapping was twenty. Two staffs are engaged in making those twenty reports. Given their involvement in other routine tasks of the C&MD the two officers have been tasked to accomplish four reports covering four islands in a period of twelve months¹⁷. This indicates that the production of the report in its entirety would take about five years to accomplish the whole twenty islands.

Coupled with that is another important task of the two cultural officers. They are required to identify the element of the traditions presented in the cultural mapping and to determine which domain those traditions belonged to.

¹⁶ Personal Conversation, Ms. Pelea Tehumu Takaria, Senior Cultural Officer, Tarawa, Kiribati 2016

¹⁷ Personal Conversation, the Cultural Officer, MS Eera, Cultural and Museum Division, Bikenibeu

The tasks in 1.54 and 1.55 if accomplished seemed to be equivalent to the concepts expressed in Article 11 (b)¹⁸ of UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding ICH, given the participation of the community per the audiotapes and films.

It has been indicated that perhaps additional resources, technical and scientific input in accordance with Article 19¹⁹ are needed to translate in a faster way into reality the completion of the report in its entirety.

Having said the above it is imperative and important to stress that the I-Kiribati of today have been able to interweave the ICH of the past and that of the present with significant modification.

Our language for example as initially developed by Dr. Bingham in word form almost two centuries ago has evolved continuously in line with the development of our society. Kiribati language is spoken²⁰ as a mother tongue by over 100,000 people in Kiribati, 8,000 in Fiji, especially in Rabi Island, 5,000 in Solomon Islands, and in particular the islands of Manra, Wagina and nearby islands where I-Kiribati originally from the Phoenix Islands were resettled; approximately 1,000 in Tuvalu, especially on the island of Nui. Given the significant scope in which the I-Kiribati language is spoken I-Kiribati is one of the languages that is strongly preserved.

Local dancing is still performed by people in the three countries with the exception of Tuvalu. Rituals of first mensuration of a girl are practiced to a large extent in Kiribati and to a lesser degree in the other countries. Canoes are still present for fishing and cultural materials related to fishing are still common in all the three countries.

¹⁸ **Role of States Parties**

Each State Party shall:

- (a) take the necessary measures to ensure the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage present in its territory;
- (b) among the safeguarding measures referred to in Article 2, paragraph 3, identify and define the various elements of the intangible cultural heritage present in its territory, with the participation of communities, groups and relevant non-governmental organizations.

¹⁹ **Cooperation**

- 1. For the purposes of this Convention, international cooperation includes, inter alia, the exchange of information and experience, joint initiatives, and the establishment of a mechanism of assistance to States Parties in their efforts to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage.
- 2. Without prejudice to the provisions of their national legislation and customary law and practices, the States Parties recognize that the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage is of general interest to humanity, and to that end undertake to cooperate at the bilateral, subregional, regional and international levels.

²⁰ www.theinfolist.com/php/SummaryGet.php?Findgo=Gilbertese%Language

In this way, I-Kiribati have been able to retain their identity. However, they did it under pressure to adapt and modify in line with the environment and new technologies surrounding them. This caused some departure from the origins of ICH as seen by people like Grimble, Maude, Father Sabatier and Dr. Koch.

Language, tools, knives, clothing, canoes, traditional dance, traditional costumes, traditional skill for example that related to calling of porpoise²¹ to the shore have all lost their origins or undesirably wiped out completely from Kiribati. They have been modified in response to environmental and technological pressure. Some have changed to the detriment of ICH and undermines the cultural heritage of Kiribati.

Lack of interest and lack of resources to preserve and safeguard them has been a matter of concern. Furthermore, climate change has put some of our important cultural heritage that is situated close to the sea at risk. In the course of time unless appropriate actions are taken to safeguard it Kiribati may regret if more may have gone.

Kiribati plays a low profile in preserving and safeguarding this area of our development. However, the present effort by UNESCO to promote the safeguarding of ICH within the meaning of UNESCO Convention and in the form of the National Workshop of 2011 will contribute substantially to the promotion and safeguarding of ICH in Kiribati by the Government of Kiribati in the very future.

²¹ Grimble, Return to the Islands, School Edition, John Murray (Publisher), London, (reprinted) 1966.