

KIRIBATI

Aspects of History



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Cover note. Kiribati became an independent sovereign nation on 12 July, 1979 incorporating within its boundaries the former Gilbert Islands, the Line Islands and the Phoenix Islands. Kiribati has been used in the title of this book. However, because the text was prepared for printing before the decision to change the name was made, the old name of Gilbert Islands has been used in the English text to refer to the country as a whole.

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Baranite Kirata, who made an impressive beginning in the workshop, had to withdraw owing to injuries in an accident during the field-work.

views of certain islands or regions more than others. Heavy reliance was placed on oral history collected specifically for the Workshop, and readers familiar with the published literature may notice points where this history differs in detail from earlier published accounts.

In the early discussions on what topics should be included in the book, the Gilbertese participants gave much the greatest emphasis to creation, early history before European times, social matters and the civil wars of last century. The expatriate staff tended to emphasise government and some other areas written about in English, French and German. Discussion and perusal of the material readily available led to the compromise reached. The importance of those topics is illustrated by the number of persons who chose to write on the first three chapters of the book, and the length of the chapter on the civil wars.

As publication was beyond the facilities then available in Tarawa, the Government of the Gilbert Islands asked the Institute of Pacific Studies to arrange publication in Suva. Six of the authors and two of the staff were by then back at the University, and were able to help other Institute and Extension personnel with various checking, proof-reading, indexing and other tasks. Publication was made possible by a generous subsidy from UNESCO.

All who gave their time so generously to the project were rewarded with the satisfaction of a team effort well done.

1

Creation

The Work of the Gods

Meika Beibure, Terika Teraku, Kunon Uriam

Stories telling the history of the Gilbert Islands were passed from mouth to mouth, and from generation to generation. On every island there were, and are, certain families known for their skills as story tellers. The story tellers do not always agree and different families and islands often have different versions of the same story. Furthermore, the myths from some islands progress systematically through the creation process while those from other islands tend to omit some details on some aspects of creation.

Despite these many differences, however, there are obvious similarities. Because of the limitations of time and travel it has not been possible to collect traditions from all the islands. The creation story that follows is based mainly on the traditions of Bernu and other islands whose legendary history is closely associated with that island.

Nareau the Creator

Long, long ago, there was Nareau. Nareau means 'the spider'. He was a god, but a god who could do human things. No one knew his origin, where he was from, or who his parents were. He was floating in space all alone, sleeping.

While he was floating, he dreamt that somebody called his name, "Nareau, why do you lie like that doing nothing?" Nareau was very surprised to hear somebody call his name. He opened his eyes to see who it was. He could not see anyone. There was nobody there. He slept again, and the same voice called his name for the second time. He awoke and looked around. He could not see anyone. There was nobody there. His name was called yet again, for the third time. He began to realise that there was no one calling his name but that it was just a dream. When he woke the third time, he began to stretch his arms and legs and yawn and sneeze.

He then said, "Who calls my name?" Nobody answered, for he was alone and no one else was there. He began to look around. He saw nothing but emptiness. When he looked down, he saw a sealed object floating below him. It was *Te Bomatemaki* (The Earth and Sky Sealed Together).

Nareau the Creator and Te Bomatemaki

When Nareau the Creator saw *Te Bomatemaki* floating far below he was very curious about it, and to satisfy his curiosity he descended and stood on it and looked at it carefully. He thought of opening it to see what it was like inside.

Taking his tail called *Kaweten bukin Nareau* (*The Barb of the Spider*), he walked about on *Te Bomatemaki* with his tail, first to the north, and chanted:

I stamp, I stamp,
Over the skies to the northward;
There are neither spirits nor men;
But only I,
The Powerful Nareau.

He repeated the same process till he had completed four rounds on *Te Bomatemaki*, first to the north, then to the south, to the east and to the west. When he had done this he noticed that nothing had happened. There was neither a crack nor an opening on the surface of *Te Bomatemaki*. He thought again, and eventually tried to slit it open. He crouched down and started to slit *Te Bomatemaki* with his tail, while chanting these words:

Dense, dense, rock, rock,
Crack of what? crack of rock,
Crack of what? crack of boulder,
Is the Powerful Nareau.
Oh! Let it crack.

He repeated the same process three times. As a result, a crack appeared on *Te Bomatemaki*, and he forced it open with his tail: the 'Barb'.

After he had pulled out his tail there remained a hole on *Te Bomatemaki*. He put his right hand into the hole and felt sand. He picked it up. Then he put it in his left hand and felt water. Having looked at these, he took sand and water and combined them to form stone. He put the stone back into the hole and said "You will stay there as Na Aitbu (stone). Lie with Nei Teakea (Emptiness) and bear Nareau *Tekikiteia* (Nareau the Wise)." From the union with Na Aitbu, Nei Teakea became pregnant and gave birth to Nareau the Wise, in accordance with the instructions of Nareau the Creator.

Nareau the Creator was on *Te Bomatemaki* while Nareau the Wise was inside it. Now they could talk to each other. Nareau the Creator commanded Nareau the Wise to stay on his father, the Stone (Na Aitbu).

As time passed, Nareau the Wise asked Nareau the Creator, "What can I do inside here? It is too low and I cannot move about." In reply, Nareau the Creator said, "Ah! You are right. You had better lift it.

up a little." Then Nareau the Creator left to Nareau the Wise the responsibility for completing the task of creation.

Separating the Earth and The Sky

When Nareau the Wise had lifted the upper portion of *Te Bomatemaki* a little higher, he was aware of himself and his surroundings. When he looked around he saw stiff bodies lying beneath the cover he had raised. They were spirits just as he was. He called this cover *Robungini Karawa* or (The Darkened Image of Sky).

The first task which Nareau the Wise had to do was to raise the cover even higher. So he went to the stiff bodies lying inside and broke parts of them to make them flexible so that they could move. He also noticed that they could not speak, so he chanted these words:

Why lying, why lying,
Crowd-of-spirits (*bunanti*)
Within *Te Bomatemaki*
Arise for we'll converse
Speak for we'll speak

When they began to converse, Nareau the Wise knew that these spirits had life in them. Therefore, he gave them names that he thought suited them. Some of these names were:

Uka (blowing — the essence of moving air)
Nabawe (antiquity — the essence of age)
Karitoto (push into heap — the essence of energy)
Kanaweawe (lofty — the essence of dimension)
Ngkangkoa (long, long ago — the essence of time)
Riiki (coming into existence, growing — the essence of procreation)

Auritaria (rising, coming from afar — the essence of light).
Nei Kika (the octopus)
Nei Tituabine (the sting ray, the cockroach)
Nei Tewenei (the comet)

There were many others.

After Nareau the Wise had given them names, he went to Nareau the Creator to seek advice as to how to separate the earth and the sky. He was advised to try alone, at first using his power of magic. Nareau the Wise returned to the inside of *Te Bomatemaki* and began his work. He then chanted this prophecy:

Speak of the sky and move it.
Speak of the sky and lift it.
Rest it on its pillar, *Te Kamtikubaba* (The Tree of Life)
May fruits of this, my sceptre, come forth.
Speak Riiki, speak Nei Tituabine,
For Samoa the first land,
And Beru the second land.

There are different versions of which was the first land and which was the second. Those from Benu and Nikunau have Samoa as the first of all lands and then *their* respective islands as the second. Those from Tarawa and Tabiteuea say that *their* island was the first to be created. The actual creation of lands is explained in the next chapter about the Tree of Life.

After Nareau had chanted those words the upper portion of *Te Bomatemaki* lifted a little, and the crowd of spirits, who by then could speak and understand, were able to move. Nareau the Wise told them that they should co-operate with him to lift it further, thus separating the sky and the earth. They agreed, and pushed upwards while together they shouted encouragement, "Let's push together, oh!"

During this process, some were chopping at roots of the cover which were stuck onto what was to become the earth. Others held *Te Bomatemaki* in shape as it started to expand.

When most of the people inside had reached as high as they could and were unable to raise the skies any further, Nareau the Wise called one named Kanaweawe (lofty) and asked him to lift it by himself. When he had reached his full height and could not raise it any higher, Nareau the Wise called Riiki (who had the power to grow) and who was lying on his stomach near by. Riiki replied that he was hungry. So Nareau went to Nei Kika (the octopus) who had ten legs and took off two of them (thus leaving her with eight) and gave them to Riiki to eat. Nareau the Wise tapped on Riiki's chest while he was eating.

With the tapping he chanted these words:

The taps for Riiki's breast:

To implant courage,

And to make him stand.

Firm be his hands,

Firm be his feet,

Firm be his body,

We shall strengthen him.

Lift the sky,

Lift the sky,

Lift higher and higher still.

Let's all lift together, oh!

As Riiki lifted the upper portion of *Te Bomatemaki*, Nareau the Wise ran below to the north and assisted him by chanting:

Lift yourself Riiki and lift,

Let there be a tail,

Oh! Let there be a tallest.

I shall run under the skies to the south.

I think I will meet northerly wind,

She shall bear my children.

A crowd of spirits in the north,

Let there be north.

When Nareau the Wise stopped running northwards, Riiki shouted from above to him, "How is it?" Nareau replied, "Raise it higher." Riiki obeyed. Again Nareau resumed running; this time in the opposite direction, chanting:

Lift yourself Riiki and lift,

Let there be a tail,

Oh! Let there be a tallest.

I shall run under the skies to the north,

I think I will meet southerly wind,

She shall bear my children.

A crowd of spirits in the south,

Let there be south.

Riiki again shouted from above, "How is it?" Nareau replied, "Raise it higher," and Riiki continued. Nareau now ran in a westerly direction and then to the east chanting the same words. Thus, he created North, South, West and East, and *Bunani* or the Crowd of Spirits.

Now the Crowd of Spirits could move freely, although Riiki had not yet reached his maximum height. The only thing which was lacking was light. There was a weak light produced once *Te Bomatemaki* was raised, but it was not bright enough to see easily and it would not have been sufficient even if Riiki had raised himself higher.

Therefore Nareau the Wise appealed to Nareau the Creator, who was above *Te Bomatemaki*, and was ordered to slay Na Atibu, his father, from whose body sufficient light could be created.

The Sun, the Moon and the Stars

Nareau the Wise slew Na Atibu, his own father, and laid him down with his head towards the east. He pulled out his father's right eye and threw it to the eastern portion of the sky and it became the sun. He pulled the left eye and threw it into the western sky and it became the moon and its task was to help the sun to give light. He took the ribs and threw them into the midst of the sky. They shattered into minute particles which became stars. The myths of some islands, such as Nikunau, suggest the stars were created from Na Atibu's head.

The Weather

Nareau the Wise then took his father's right hand and threw it northward and said, "Go and become the northerly wind, and you shall be associated with strong winds, rain and bad weather." He then pulled off the left hand and threw it southward and said, "Go

Migration

From Samoa and Beyond

Moarerei T. Kirion, Bureiela Karaiti

and become the southerly wind, and you shall be associated with light winds and calm days. These will be days to labour for food."

Then he tore off the right leg of his father, Na Atibu, and threw it westward and said, "Go and become the westerly wind, and you shall be associated with rough and stormy weather." He then tore off the left leg and threw it eastward and said, "Go and become the easterly wind, and you will be associated with fine days for navigation."

Nareau the Wise gathered all the intestines and threw them upwards and they later became people. The spine, and the remnants of flesh and skin, remained to become *Te Kaintiukuaba* and Samoa, the first of all lands, respectively.

Nareau the Wise went back to Riiki and asked him to raise the sky as high as he could. As Riiki tried to do this, Nareau the Wise stamped hard on his tail, Riiki jerked with pain and carried the upper portion of *Te Bomatemaki* to its present height and he stayed there in the sky as *Aiabu* (The Great Milky Way).

The earth, the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars and the weather had all been created by Nareau the Creator and Nareau the Wise, and their world was inhabited by spirits. Now we turn to the creation of lands and people.

These stories of the creation emphasise the Samoan migration, which has come to dominate the traditions today. This is to be expected as that migration came more recently and brought new ideas and ways of life. Other stories, particularly in the northern islands, tell of connections with the Marshallese and other Micronesians with whom the Gilbertese have older common origins of language, biology and culture.

According to the legends of Berru and some other islands, *Te Kaintiukuaba* was made from the spine of Na Atibu. It was a tree, in Samoa, which was the home of spirits who, together with Nareau the Wise, made the islands of Tungaru (the Gilbert Islands). They and their spirit descendants became inhabitants of these islands. *Te Kaintiukuaba* can therefore be translated as 'The Tree of Life'. This is one of many versions.

Nareau the Wise saw that the branches of *Te Kaintiukuaba* grew well on Samoa and were covered with spirits of all kinds and shapes. Those spirits did nothing but laze in their places all day. The topmost was Tetaake, the first branch facing north was Baretoka's place. Tekuma, Tekoroangutungutu, Tekai and Nei Moaine were on the branch facing south, Matang East was on the eastern branch, Matang West on the western and Kairo was in the centre of the tree. Nei Boto was at the trunk, Uruha and Teuriubaba at ground level, Akau and Nei Tira at the roots, Teimone and Matenang at the tap-root, and others were on the ground in the shadows of the tree.

The first spirit to migrate was Baretoka, who took his branch with him. He went northwards. On his way, he met Nei Batauea, a female spirit, who had originally come from the intestines of Na Atibu, Nareau the Wise's father, whom he had killed in *Te Bomatemaki*. Baretoka anchored Batauea's canoe, using his branch to prevent it from moving any further. When Batauea's canoe was stopped so abruptly, it swung around him, stretching into a curved shape. It was called Tereaa or Tareaa, which was the original name of Tarawa. Those two spirits lived on this newly formed island and had four children; Tearkintarawa, Kirabukentarawa, Taorobantarawa and Nei Arivei.

The second spirit to leave was Tetaake, who also flew north, to Berru looking for a place to live. Unfortunately, he had to fly elsewhere because Tabuariki, the deity of the people living in the Gilberts before the Samoan migration, beat him cruelly. So he went further north and landed at Beberiki, in the extreme north of the

The body was left in the centre of the *maneaba* while it decomposed, and as the flesh fell away it was carefully wiped off the bones. While this was taking place the elderly relatives of the dead persons would usually keep a vigil beside the body. Sometimes the near relatives expressed their sorrow by mixing some of the liquid which dripped out of the body with their food before eating it. After all the flesh had been removed from the bones, these were placed in a burial ground near the *kainga*. In some cases the skull would be kept separate and displayed in the house.

The Gilbertese people believed that at death the spirit left the body and proceeded northwards to the place where Nakaa waited making nets. Some spirits were trapped and others were able to return, eventually, to hover near their ancestral lands.

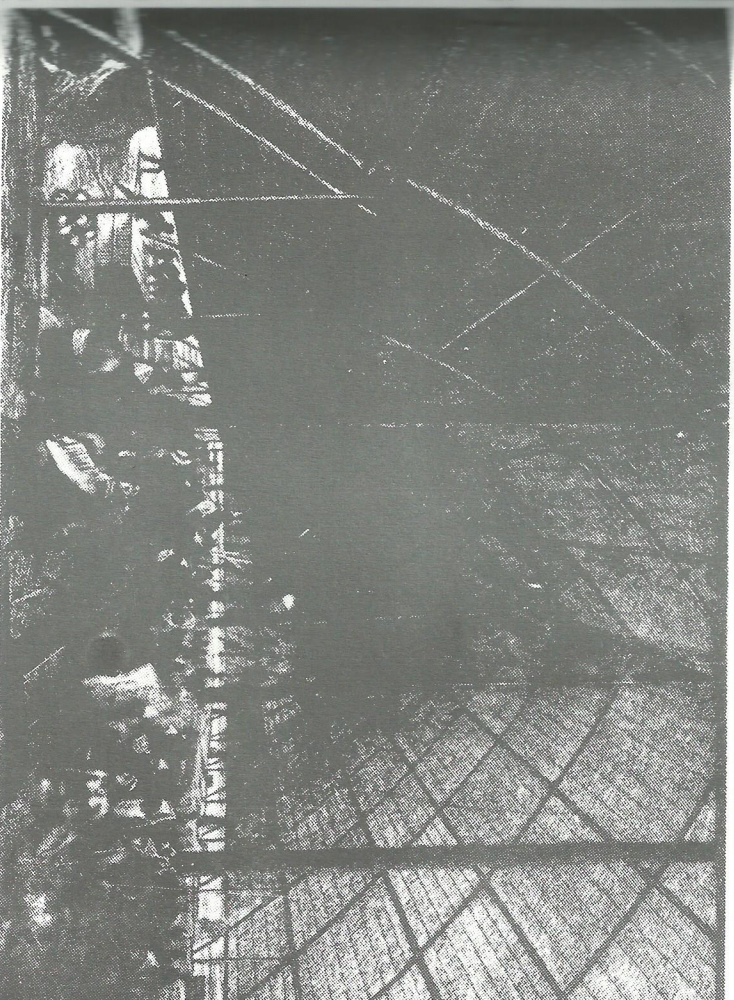
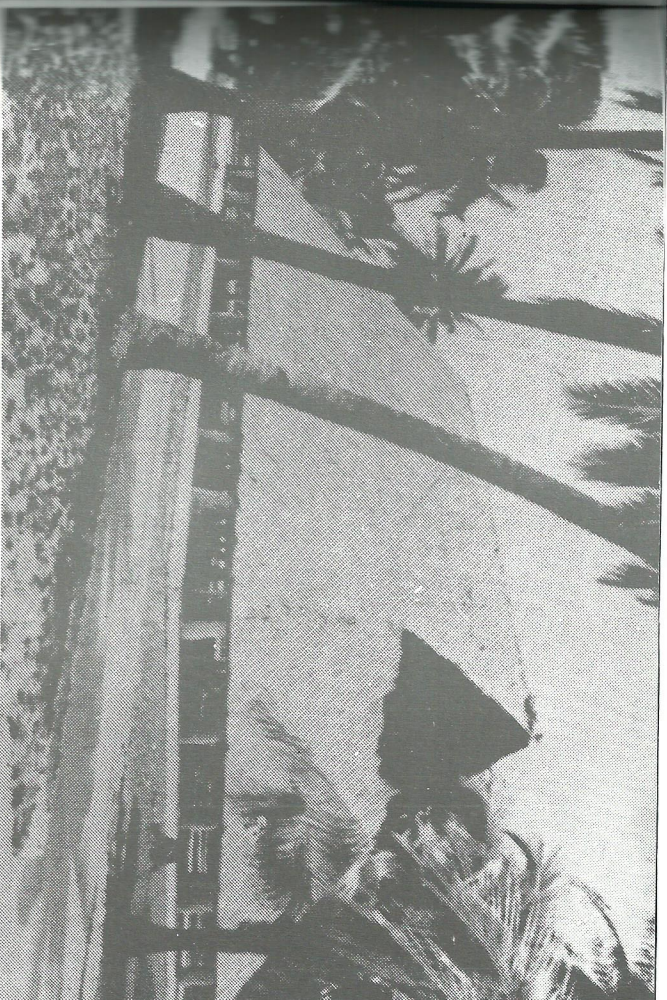
Religious Beliefs

Nareau was the god who was credited with creating the earth, the sky, the sun, the moon and the stars. After Nareau came an era of spirits (*anti*), then an era when the inhabitants of the earth were half-spirit, half-human (*anti ma aomata*) and humans evolved from them. The spirits — Auritaria, Tabuariki, Taburimai, Terakunene, Kaobunang, Nei Tituabine and Temamang — were the most important figures in Gilbertese worship. Each *kainga* would worship one of these spirits. On some islands all *kainga* worshipped the same spirit, and on others a number of spirits were recognised. Sometimes the same spirit was given different names on different islands. A totem — the shark, turtle, stingray, black noddly or various other kinds of fish and birds — was recognised by each group of worshippers, who were forbidden to kill or eat their totem.

The relative importance of the various spirits differed from island to island and from *kainga* to *kainga*. Often, one spirit would be the principal subject of a *kainga's* worship while others would be regarded as lesser gods associated with more specialised functions, for example with fishing, fighting, strength, love affairs, or predicting the future.

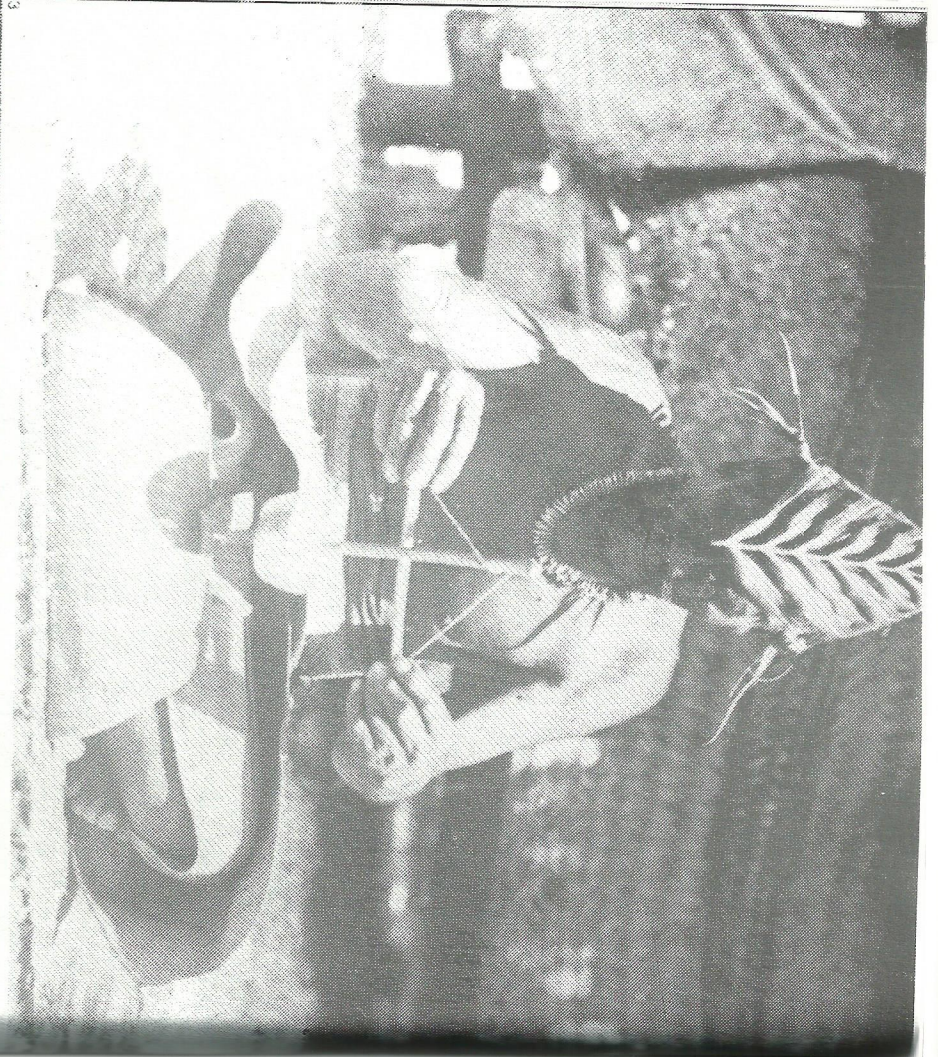
The main objectives of Gilbertese worship were to obtain assistance from the spirits for special occasions like fighting, as well as for day-to-day matters, and to obtain protection from the anger of the spirits or from spells cast by enemies or rivals. It was believed that misfortunes and death were often the result of failure to behave properly towards the gods.

Each *kainga* usually had a *baangota* where the spirits were worshipped. It was usually, but not always, located on the side of the *kainga* 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 centre there was



Top: Traditional Gilbertese *maneaba*.

Bottom: Inside the *maneaba* at Uiroa, Tabiteuea, 1841.



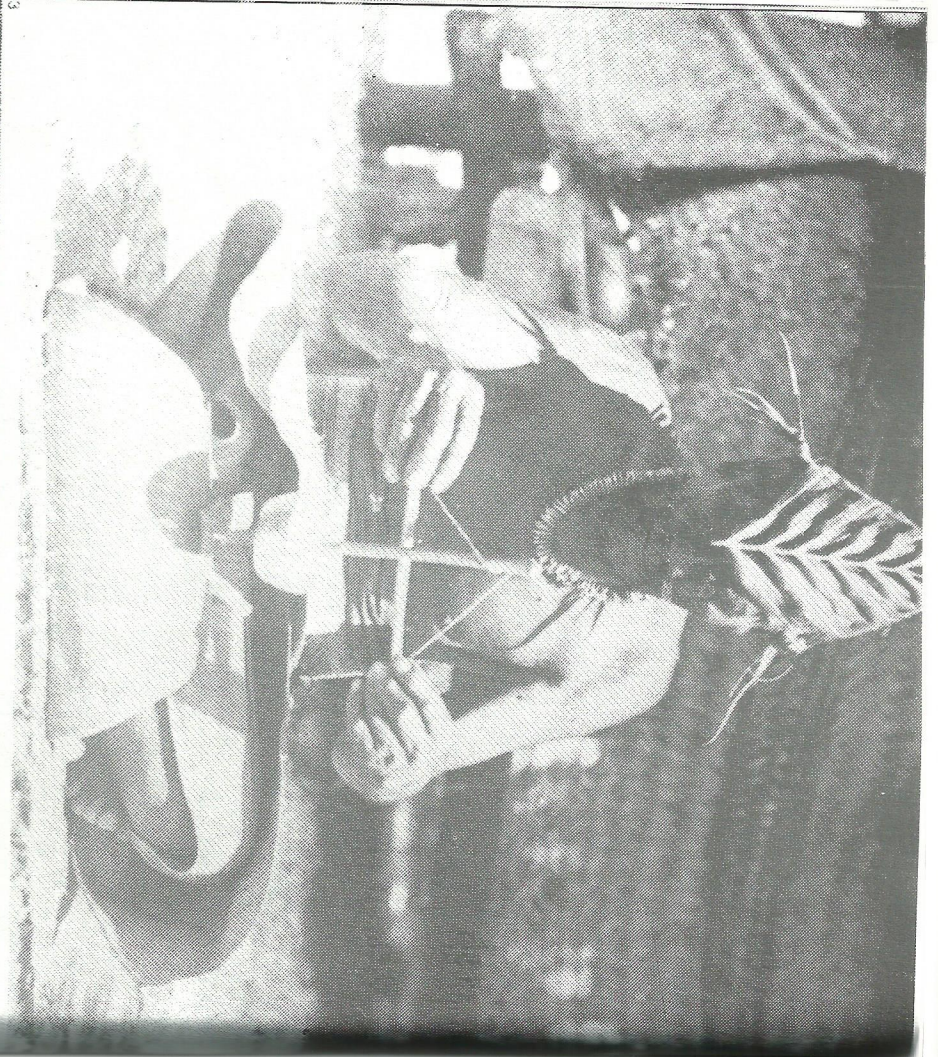
Top: Drilling on upturned *kumete* with traditional pump drill.
 Bottom: Navigation stones, *Arorae*.

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.

There was one main *ibonga* or priest, responsible for each *baangota*. Other members of the *kainga*, usually chosen from the *ibonga's* family, might become his helpers. This practice ensured the continuation of the priest's art and knowledge. Early in the morning and in the evening, and on special occasions, determined by the phases of the moon, the *ibonga* and his followers would gather in the *baangota* to worship. At most ceremonies there would be offerings to the spirits — usually valued foods like *te korokoro* (a special type of food made from *kabubu* mixed with *kamainai*). In more recent times this was supplemented or replaced by tobacco. The *ibonga* would call the spirit and, after he had made contact with him, would make requests for the people. The spirit would make his instructions known by signs — especially in weather changes, movements of leaves or dreams — which only the *ibonga* could interpret. At the end of the worship the *ibonga* would collect the offerings, place a small amount under the large stone, and either distribute the rest or keep it for his own use.

Belief in *tabunea*, or sorcery, was universal. The general purpose of spells and incantations was to obtain the support and protection of the supernatural in matters not covered by the usual worship at the *baangota*. When spells were directed against another person, any misfortune which befell him would be attributed to them, but if the person was unaffected it would be assumed that his own magic had made him immune. Examples of Gilbertese magic include saying incantations over a boy by one of his older male relatives, associated with exercises designed to strengthen his body. This combination of physical training and magical rituals would make him grow into a powerful warrior and a strong worker for his *kainga*.

There was also magic used by both males and females to win the heart of a loved one. The name of the person desired would be recited as part of the incantation, and the magical power made to reach him or her in a number of ways. The most common was to say the spell over some object or food that would be worn, touched or eaten by the person concerned. If two people were directing spells at the same loved one, and this became known, each would try to eliminate the other by magic. There was magic for composing too, and one who wanted to compose a love song, or a song for mourning or for a special occasion, sought supernatural help. Finally, there was magic for killing an enemy or a rival (especially for love or power). The person cursed was expected to suffer from an accident or a disease. If the magic failed to kill the rival, it was believed that he was pro-



Top: Drilling on upturned *kumete* with traditional pump drill.
 Bottom: Navigation stones, *Arorae*.

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ected by more powerful magic. This type of magic was often used by politically ambitious men in an attempt to overcome their rivals for leadership.

Resources and Economy

Nature endowed these islands with limited resources, but the Gilbertese were content and developed ways of making the best possible use of them. There was a limit to the number of people the islands could support, so population control was commonly practised. The sandy coral soil of the atolls contains very limited nutriment for plant growth. Consequently, there were very few indigenous plants and those that grew well were used to the full.

The coconut was the most important. It was a natural store, providing almost every need. The milk from the green nuts (*moimoto*) was sometimes used for drinking but in the drier southern islands using the nut in this way was regarded as shameful because of the waste involved. The flesh of the mature nut could be used in a multitude of ways. It could be eaten as it was, or grated for use in cooking; it could also be grated and then squeezed and boiled to make oil for cooking and lighting. This oil could be refined further and made fragrant for use on the body as protection against the weather or for ceremonial anointing. The fibre from the husk was used to make string for fishing lines or the construction of houses, canoes, or *maneba*. In addition, the spathe of the coconut palm could be bound and cut and the sap, called sweet toddy or *karewe*, was collected in a coconut shell. *Karewe* could, if necessary, substitute for breast milk for feeding young children and was commonly used as a drink by people of all ages. The *karewe* could be boiled to make a syrup (*kamainai*) which could also be mixed with water for drinking and cooking. In post-European times the art of fermenting *karewe* to make *kackioiki* (sour toddy), an intoxicating drink, was learned. Coconut timber was used for housebuilding and for making weapons. The roots and parts of the young leaves had medicinal uses as well.

The pandanus was also exploited to the full. The ripe fruit was used to make *kabubu* and *tuae* — both foods for either immediate consumption, or to store for future needs, especially in times of drought and special occasions. Pandanus leaves were used for making mats, for thatch, for making the *kabae*, a mat worn by men. Its timber was particularly important in *maneba* construction. It also had medicinal qualities and was used for making dyes. The other important food crops were *babai*, not unlike a coarse type of taro, which had to be cultivated in pits dug down to the water table and took several years to mature, and the *bero*, a tree which produces small fig-like fruit.

There are no mineral resources, apart from the phosphate rock which is found on Banaba (Ocean Island). In fact, the most important natural resources in the Gilbert Islands were the land and the sea, which together satisfied the subsistence requirements of the inhabitants.

Land

Land, to a Gilbertese, is of high value and far-reaching importance. Apart from being the basis of subsistence, it also has social, political and legal significance.

Land everywhere indicated wealth, prestige and social security, but this attitude was particularly marked in the chiefly societies of the central and northern Gilbert Islands. Politically, land was an underlying factor in all levels of warfare prior to the arrival of the British Government. Fighting might be caused by a party wishing to consolidate its landholdings, while the other defended and secured its rights. Despite differences in social and political systems, such conflict was common.

The confiscation of land in the traditional Gilbertese legal system was a punishment for murder and other offences. *Te aba n nenebo* was a compensatory land claimed by one or more relatives of the deceased and transferred to his estate from the possessions of the killer.

The *kainga* was originally the major land-holding group. The land of the *kainga* was further distributed among separate families within the *kainga*. The same lands were again further sub-divided into lands held collectively by groups of brothers and those held by individuals. This principle was common to all these islands irrespective of their political and social organisation.

The Gilbertese held various rights to lands, *babai* pits, fish traps and fishing areas by virtue of their membership in a particular *kainga* or *utu*. Where property was distributed outside the *kainga*, this usually involved the creation of new relationships either through marriage or adoption or as compensation for offences.

Members of the *kainga* in those days had to be on the alert to defend their property from unexpected aggression or encroachment from other *kainga*. A landgrabber would sometimes lead his *kainga*. A landgrabber would sometimes lead his *kainga* members to the land he intended to acquire, clear it as if it were his own, and then wait. When the rightful owner showed up, there would be fighting until one party was defeated. The victors would then take or retain the land. But if anyone from either side was killed, the others would have to give the *nenebo*.

Both men and women could inherit land rights, and from both