Lifestyles and attitudes in Tabiteuea: a dam against the Pacific?

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Kiribati archipelago mythology teaches us that the world began with a crack in a rock, followed by a mixture between dry and moist matter and finally by the prolific efflorescence of a crowd of creative ancestors. Scientific facts in the western world warn that within less than 300 years, these Eastern Micronesian atolls will disappear as a result of rising sea level due to global warming. Ethnographic fieldwork demonstrates how these people of Oceania, who settled in the heart of the Pacific more than a thousand years ago, have the dignity to interpret present climate instability with remarkable philosophical intelligence. Climate change reveals the reality of this duel between the survival of so-called modern progress that continues to endanger the future of the planet on one hand, and the survival of traditional ways of living with the belief that Man evolves in a respected natural environment on the other hand. These two confronting issues will be presented at the coming Climate Conference in Paris. Is it such a utopian concept to expect the decision-makers to offer a sacrifice to Mother Nature?

FROM THE MYTH OF CREATION TO THE REALITY OF DESTRUCTION

Imagine thirty-three coral confetti, scattered on each side of the equator across a broad Pacific area as large as the European Union. This might suggest a first idea of what the Kiribati archipelago looks like. Perhaps you would rather imagine that in the Beginning the world was a closed semi spherical Rock on top of which walked an ancestral Spider, named Naareau, who was endowed with considerable magical powers. After spending some time meditating while wandering to and fro between the four cardinal points, Naareau began to crack the world's surface in order to extract two vital principles: Sand and Moisture. From the mixture of these two materials in the palm of his left hand, Naareau the Second emerged, filled with Knowledge and Science. He roused assemblies of spirits from the realms of heaven, sea, land and time, who were to assist him with the development of the World. The Moray Eel ancestor stood up to lift and stabilize the heavens, the Great-Father ancestor sacrificed his eyes to give birth to the Sun and the Moon, his arms and legs so they may bring the Seasons, his flesh so it might scatter across the Sky to form the Stars, and his intestines to fill the Land and Sea with all living species. Finally Naareau the Second created the atolls that he populated with a group of ancestors who had been, until then, perched on a mythical tree. This is how the ancestors of the present occupants of Kiribati are to have appeared.

The islander's metaphysics, conveyed by storytellers, but also, by missionaries since the introduction of writing, in the form of precious notebooks recounting their mythologies and genealogies, require a predisposition for reverie. Whoever shows an interest towards their vision of this small fragmented world, lost within the vast oceanic domain is inevitably drawn into a state of contemplation from which it is difficult to escape. There exists, however, a harsh reality that does tear one away from this state of daydreaming: "Climate Change". Bearing a warning of what the planet might experience in a few decades, the 811 km² of emerged coral atolls of the Kiribati archipelago already display scars due to the irresponsibility of post-industrial Mankind. Erosion, storms, droughts, the drying up of fresh groundwater lenses, the depletion of flora and fauna in lagoon and ocean waters, increasingly vulnerable land resources ... All these signs have spoiled the poetic interpretation of the surrounding world portrayed by the local mythology of these islands.

THE ISLAND REPUBLIC OF KIRIBATI: A FEW BENCHMARKS

Created with the association of three Oceanian archipelagos[1], the independent Republic of Kiribati presently boasts a population of over 100,000 people, the majority having settled in the former Gilbert Islands for more than a thousand years. Since its independence in 1979, it is run by a President and represented by a Parliament. At an island scale, the Island Council has a strong discretionary power and at a village level (particularly in the Southern Gilbert Islands), community affairs still animate collective debates in the traditional meeting house, called the *maneaba*.

Kiribati mainly gets its low GDP from the sale of frozen fish, copra and fishing licenses. It was classed as a SIDS and LDC[2], and relies on international aid for development issues; the same reliance holds for strategies against the effects of climate change.

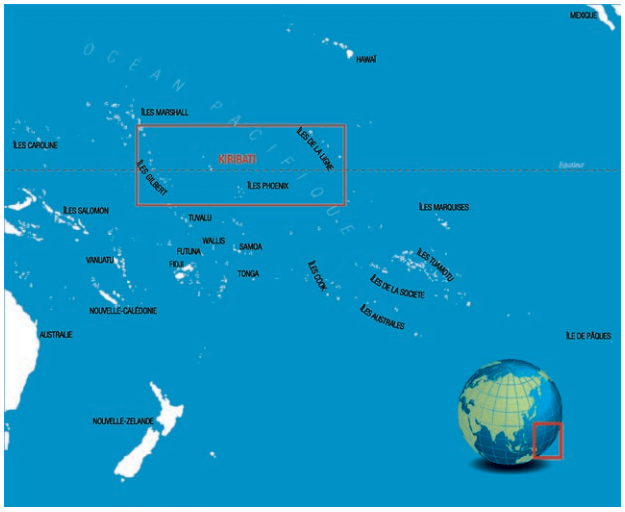

Fig.1 — The Republic of Kiribati, within the Pacific. © Fondation culturelle Musée Barbier-Mueller, Carte Helder Da Silva.

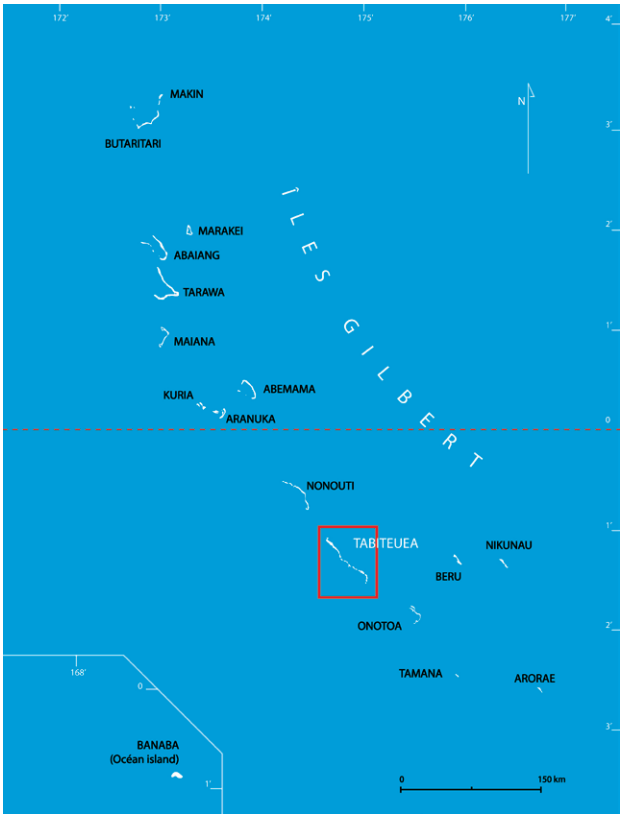

Fig.2 — Tabiteuea belongs to the Gilbert Islands, which is part of the Republic of Kiribati (with the Phoenix and the Line Islands). © Fondation culturelle Musée Barbier-Mueller, Carte Helder Da Silva.

1 The archipelago of Kiribati consists of 31 flat coral atolls and two raised atolls (Banaba and Kiritimati) covering a maritime zone of 5 million km², of which 3.5 million km² of EEZ.

2 SIDS: Small Island Developing States, LDCs: Least Developed Countries.

THE FRAGILITY OF AN ISLAND

Amongst the thirty-three atolls of the archipelago, twenty-one are occupied and all - except for the raised Banaba and Kiritimati atolls - are hardly emerged from the surface of the water.

Tabiteuea, the largest island, stretches out over 70 km long like a coral snake beneath the equator. Apart from a road, a short runway and a barely operational hospital, infrastructure on the atoll is virtually inexistent. Its 5,000 inhabitants cover an area of about 40 km², crossed from north to south by a sandy road that sometimes extends into the lagoon to connect certain motus[3].

As in all the Southern Islands, temperatures are hottest from April to November[4]. This climate constrains and shapes the diversity of trees and crop plants. In addition there is the geological drawback of a sterile soil as it is essentially composed of limestone and almost bereft of humus. Coconut, pandanus, breadfruit and swamp taro are the major food sources for the local population of Tabiteuea who exploits these resources and manages the food stocks with care, caution and anticipation. This controlled management of the environment by the islanders demonstrates their willingness to preserve, at all costs and in consideration of the modernity they are acquainted with[5], a conservative traditional lifestyle, which they refer to in English as "a simple life, with a simple food". This way of life involves a strong reliance on endemic plants and marine resources. It gives them a sense of pride and self-satisfaction, especially towards the *I-Matang*, or " White People", but also towards the highly urbanized capital atoll, Tarawa, where imported products have replaced local products. Nonetheless, today they have to admit that, in recent years, unstable weather events have gained intensity and are becoming more frequent, thus threatening their way of life based on self-sufficiency.

The long-term droughts and the observed increase in air temperature weaken the canopy: coconuts are smaller, swamp taro pits are drying up and their compost is rotting. This heat also dissuades the people from working and fishing as long as before during the day.

Erratic rainfall is altering the renewal of fresh water in the Ghyben-Herzberg underground lens. Not only is salt seeping in but the drinking water is becoming unhealthy and causing diseases (the number of cases of dysentery is currently rising throughout the archipelago). On some motu, the depletion of this lens is forcing people to move to other islets so as to have access to drinking water.

Although rainwater remains an acceptable source of water, storage processes also present sanitary issues. The large filter tanks are reserved for churches, schools and clinics. As for family groups, their only solution is to collect rainwater running through makeshift gutters from corrugated iron roofs into homemade tanks. These reconditioned oil drums, cracker boxes or plastic containers most often sit open in the sun, undergoing contamination by insects, dust and other wind-blown debris.

The coastlines are being eroded by increasingly invasive waves related to the rising frequency of extreme spring tides (a doubling has been observed this year) as well as to increasingly violent storm events. Along the lagoon, many homes face the threat of having to migrate inland. This should be perfectly feasible given the removable nature of the plant architecture; however a forced reduction in the size of individual or family land holdings remains an issue.

To date, mangrove swamps and seawalls remain the only solution to fight against erosion and partial flooding caused by waves and swells. Mangrove planting attempts have failed because of disputes relating to the choice of villages that would benefit from them, but also because of the questioning of the legitimacy

3 The stretches of road across the lagoon are built of concrete and covered with sand.
4 Life in the Kiribati archipelago swings between the dry and wet seasons.
5 As in all the outer islands of Kiribati, products of foreign origin (Australia, Fiji, Asia) are imported by cargo ship; they are essentially composed of rice, flour, fuel, clothing, and plastic objects for household use.

of people having volunteered for the job. The Tabiteuean society promotes an egalitarian rule that severely limits the differentiation of individuals demonstrating personal initiatives. As for the construction of seawalls, although they provide a sense of protection over a short term, they are not without consequence on the natural circulation of currents and on sedimentation in the lagoon.

Finally, the observed increase in lagoon water temperature has been associated with the reduction in the size of giant clams, with the depletion or disappearance of certain species of fish and turtles, as well as the suffocation of entire schools of fish. As for the large pelagic organisms in the ocean, they tend to retreat further away from the coast. This forces fishermen to venture farther offshore, thus increasing the risk of disappearance at sea.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF KIRIBATI: A RESPONSE TO THE DEGRADATION OF WORLD ORDER

Although the intensification of climate disturbance as well as its impact on their environment has been acknowledged, the people of Tabiteuea continue untroubled and as they have always done, to exploit their natural resources along with a form of ecological awareness that involves caution and respect for nature. These precautionary principles, being the best weapons against environmental changes, are by no means applied due to the present-day necessity of adaptation to climate change. Instead, they are rather employed to maintain the honour granted by the preservation of this "simple life", based on a minimal dependence upon import products and environmentally damaging infrastructures.

Even if the islanders have inevitably heard about climate change on the radio and how it worries the "White people", they don't feel the urge to establish causal links between the scientific determinants of climate change (as defined by Western science) and their consequences. Although they do suffer on a daily basis from these consequences, plans to avoid danger, the reduction of risk to zero or the deployment of protection strategies against the risk of flooding, are concerns that lie far from the islander's notions of life.

Some call it fatalism, unconsciousness, indifference or even inertia. It is nothing of the sort, but rather what one can describe as a " philosophy of the event": A climate event, absorbed by a society, that is capable of reaching out irreversibly towards its own essence and that prefers to keep a distance from the discontent of Western civilization. The frantic wearing-out of our planet, which is so dominant a subject in modern-day preoccupations, is not considered as an event for local discourse. This reflects, in our view, a capacity of absorption towards the unexpected and a true intellectual plasticity and physical force against the disruption of world order; a force that deserves a stronger admiration and respect from our side of the planet.

Fig.3 — Woman from the village of Kabuna, keeper of the mythical cave of Tebweka.

BEYOND ALTERITY

Today, the tricky question is how long this virtuous circle of conservatism, so particular to Tabiteuea, will be able to withstand the changes in the world. It is heart-breaking to imagine that, according to forecasts of specialists, its inhabitants will soon have to give up a part of themselves to contribute to closing our holes in the ozone layer. It is unacceptable to listen to the industrial powers invite the people of Kiribati - and all the other small populations of the Ocean, to 'adapt' and to be 'resilient', while, predicting the weather, they keep striving to destroy hundreds of millions of years of geological strata. Once more, it is amazing to realize that the impassivity of life in Tabiteuea certainly illustrates how much the islanders understand human nature, enough to feel that there is not much to hope for.

This article results from two oral statements: a presentation of the results of a survey conducted in Kiribati for the French Development Agency (AFD) June 25th 2015 (Papeete, Tahiti), and a lecture given during the symposium: Polynesia Against Climate Threats (PACT) June 30th 2015 (Papeete, Tahiti).

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