

PREFACE

This is a study of Gilbertese history through oral tradition. It originated from my desire to seek the true identity of the Gilbertese people. This study, then, is but one of the preliminary stages necessary to make such a search possible and successful because one cannot look for a people and their identity outside their own history. History is vital for the understanding of a people - who they were that makes them what they are today.

For any history or reconstruction of the past to be possible, one has to have sources that provide the best access to 'historic' significant incidents that determine the identity of the people. This is where the oral traditions of the elders are important. My argument in this book is that the oral traditions contain a close approximation of the past as lived, experienced and understood *in the people's own words* long before the coming of the Europeans to our shores.

Gilbertese oral tradition is a collection of stories about the ancestors as remembered and understood by the chroniclers and the people. These stories for generations have been transmitted by word of mouth. Although their verbal nature makes them intangible and conceivably therefore unreliable, many are authentic when tested and compared with written or other 'hard' facts.

The chroniclers of oral tradition were *unimane* and *unaine*. Usually they were members of ruling families or from leading *boti* of the district. On most islands they were members of the clan or *boti* Karongoa. The earliest Gilbertese stories contain accounts of the activities of the ancestors before they came to the Gilberts. Many are accounts of Gilbertese ancestors who sojourned in Samoa. Some contain stories of ancestors who were not related to that group. Most were preserved in the form of songs or chants.

The stories existed first as independent units belonging to various groups and it was only later that they were woven together to form long historical narratives. The first of the attempts to compile, edit, and put the stories together into organised historical prose began at the time of the entry and establishment of the Karongoa clan in the islands. The work lasted for several generations and was completed and sealed in the time of Teinai II. Because the compilers and editors of this history were selective, many of the local traditions of the islands never formed part of that history.

On Beru there emerged a canon of tradition which became known as *karakini Karongoa* or *karakin Tabontebike*, because of its intrinsic connection with Tabontebike *maneaba* and the various *boti* within that type of *maneaba*. From Beru this canon was carried to Nikunau and later to the rest of the southern Gilberts. Its dominant theme was the ascendancy of Karongoa and its god Auriaria. Tamoā (Samoa) and the breaking of the tree Kaintikuaba was the focal point of its primeval period: the clan and the *maneaba* were the focus for the latter part.

After the wars of Kaitu and Uakeia from Beru and Nikunau about A.D 1550 and the establishment of the Tabontebike-type *maneaba* on all the islands except Makin, Butaritari and Banaba, the Tabontebike-Karongoa tradition became the sole and official tradition of the islands. As the tradition gradually became accepted by communities throughout the Gilberts, its original theme shifted from Karongoa and Auriaria to the *maneaba* and the people in the islands. By the time ruling dynasties emerged, mainly in the central and northern islands, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the essence of the Karongoa tradition had already become accepted as *the tradition* of the islands, with local events grafted onto it to continue the story.

But however intelligible and consistent a number of these stories are, many do not agree with our modern understanding of historical stories. This is because in our understanding what is historical should be clear and have a genuine historical referent that actually existed and happened, a prerequisite not usually apparent in Gilbertese oral tradition. Nevertheless, though many Gilbertese oral traditions may not be clear, many do have genuine historical referents. As for the unclear and unintelligible, many were constructed to be just that, to confuse and conceal esoteric and important knowledge about the past from others.

And so the stories, from the time of the gods to the emergence of the first *acomata*, must always be read with caution and against the background of the Gilbertese world-view, history, and culture. To reach the real subjects and characters in most, one has to look beyond the literal meaning of their words and even behind the themes they tell. Whatever 'wie eigentlich gewesen' means, Ranke's famous phrase is far more complex than Ranke himself conceived and many historians claim to understand and employ in their historical quest. History, as an interpreting exercise, where the historian struggles to establish his facts, is but a reconstruction of the most reasonable possibilities of 'what actually happened'. Like a judge, confronted with the dilemma of

deciding between the various possible interpretations, the historian has to make a choice.

The same decision was made by the Gilbertese greybeards, only for them 'what actually happened' is the story about the people and the islands from the gods and creation to the settlement of the Gilberts by the ancestors; hence their narration from the very beginning of things, from creation, for that is where time began, where history started. History or knowledge of the past can never be known absolutely, as the past can never be repeated, and the chroniclers knew this quite well. Nevertheless, what they have reconstructed and transmitted is what they and the people believed to be possible, the most plausible within the context of their culture and environment.

A good command of the language, knowledge of the customs and manners of the people, as well as of the environment, is crucial to the understanding of these oral reconstructions. Because good and reliable reconstructions are not easily attainable, one should know where to go and be open-minded and receptive to all that may be imparted. One should not judge the traditions nor edit them.

Travelling and visiting the islands and talking with informants, I realised that one can grow up in one's own place and know many things, but a lot more can still be learnt. In collecting the stories, one is privileged to learn many new things or incidents of the past which are very much a part of one's family heritage and which contribute to its present state and position in one's island community. In many ways it gives one pride in being what one is because of one's forefathers. If there is a hope I wish to convey in the following pages, it is that the Gilbertese people will take pride in being I-Kiribati and treasure with all jealousy the wisdom and knowledge of their ancestors as found in the traditions.

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