SISTER M. BAPTISTE KELLETTER

26 March 1947

1. I was much pleased to receive your letter of 20th March. The enclosed documents are interesting and I hope you will send me the photos of the church. I am pleased to know that the church is in good condition.

2. I am glad to hear that you are well and that your health is improving. I am looking forward to seeing you soon.

3. I have been thinking about the possibility of a visit to Europe. It would be a great opportunity to see some of the places we discussed earlier.

4. I received your letter of 24th March. It was a delightful surprise to hear from you. I am glad to know that you are doing well.

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Sleeping

John Cox teaches on South Tarawa. “What will you do when you leave school”, he asks his students. “Sleep”. “Eat fish, Sleep”. “Have Baby, Sleep”. Maybe the question was asked in the early afternoon. In 1841 when the United States Exploring Expedition entered the village of Uirua on South Tarawa, they thought a massacre had occurred, and that all the villagers were dead, as they saw bodies lying everywhere. Now Government buildings close from 12 to 2pm. Shops may stay open but staff are often asleep. I ask a reclining girl behind a counter the price of a T-Shirt. She raises herself on one elbow to look. “Twelve dollars” she says. “Would you take ten?” I ask. She sinks down, closing her eyes. There is no bargaining in Kiribati.
COLOPHON

Artist
Brian Gilkes

Digital Typefaces
Adobe Garamond Pro, Democritica, Frutiger

Paper
Canson Rag Photographique Duo 220gsm

Digital Printing
10 colour pigment inkjet
Brian Gilkes, Pharos Editions

Binding
George Matoulas
ENCOUNTERING
Epilogue

The Sun, the Moon and the Stars define the Sky Dome. The Land and the Ocean define the world of humans. On Earth, the ancient struggle between Bakoa and the powers of the ocean, and Tabakea and the triumph of the land, were established 750 generations ago. The metaphors of space and the rituals of seasons and subsistence have maintained the balance. Six generations of pale intruders have disturbed the old ways, but Te Katei ni Kiribati, the Spirit of Kiribati, remains the driving force on the villages on the outer islands, in the dreams of urban dwellers on South Tarawa and in the souls of the voyagers to Australia and England, Fiji and Germany, Japan and Aotearoa. In their hearts are Te Musaie, the Dance and Te Karaki, the Stories, and Te Kataki, the Songs and Chants. Knowing that Te Aba, The Land and The People, remain, means Kiribati island life, however hard, has meaning.

Something though is changing that the English or the missionaries never changed. The tides are higher. The babai pits are becoming salty. Coconut groves are being eroded and the trees are falling into the sea. The road on Betio has been moved inland. Bikemaan islet in Tarawa lagoon has disappeared.

Sister Alaima emailed to tell me the King Tides have flowed over the land at the Sweet Coconut Motel where I stayed, inundating the graves in the garden.

The sacred places are under attack.

Bakoa returns, and Tabakea, with the islands on his back, is stumbling. Te Moana, the Great Ocean, covers two thirds of the Earth's surface. The vast population of the sea has been consumed or left dying to rot. The very air has been filled with the excrement of cars and factories so that Te Taai starts to fry the flesh of all of Na Areaki's Creation. The winds have broken their lashings bringing hurricanes.

It will take all the tabunea of all the 1 Kiribati and all the 1 Matang to return strength to Tabakea.

E Kawa to aomata au ake tabunea.

It is unfortunate for him who has no magic spell.
Acknowledgements

All images by the artist with the exception of the following sources.

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charting The voyage
Well before the islands of remote Oceania were subject to the great migrations from their western rim into the rising sun, the people of the sea had perfected the art of sailing many type of craft from rafts to their most advanced maritime vessel, the double hulled canoe, that could travel vast distances with dozens of passengers and crew and tons of cargo. They had travelled from island to island to trade and fight, find wives and plunder. When at last they decided to find new lands to the East, they knew a lot about navigation. They knew the Time of Voyaging. That is called Rimwimaata. This occurs from the month we call June, when Antares (Alpha Scorpio) rises at sunset, to November, when the Pleiades rise. Rimwimaata is the season of the gentle South East Trade winds. During November Rimwimaata changes to the season of Nei Auti, with unpredictable westerly gales. It was then that the canoes were pulled up into their sheds. That there was to be a destination was as sure as the Sun by day and the stars by night. There was food enough for weeks, dried and fresh. There were fishing lines and nooses and clubs, mats to catch rain and vessels to hold water.
It was unlikely they would miss land. Its presence was known by birds at evening wheeling home, the clouds that gather together over land and the loom, that pale column of light that is reflected into the sky from a lagoon, even by starlight. There were the betia (Sea Signs), that included patterns of crossing waves and flotsam that betrayed the presence and direction of lands that were out of sight. When new lands were reached they could always find their way back. The Star Paths were remembered in story and chant. Maps were made of woven sticks and tied stones. The further they travelled the more complete and complex became the patterns of Star Paths, the number of charts, the maps. They placed great stone markers as direction finders. Even to get to a single destination there were many Paths depending on weather, the season, the size of the boat, the experience and expertise of the crew.

The passing of time and generations, adventures and events and the cosmology that made sense of it all, was re-enacted in dance and song, poem, saga and story.

The voyage is my metaphor. I sailed small distances in my mind into the past, into other people’s thinking, into the way humans communicate and understand each other and into other ways of knowing, before undertaking the journey that I perform in this book. I had to know my song before I started to sing. My destination was unknown. No expectations. No hypotheses. The signs of arrival could be recognised. Lands could be arrived at. Blunt, crude and sometimes inappropriate, I was carrying and using my tools. Sometimes I landed where no-one had been before. Other times I met strangers, some friendly, some not.

Physically, and in the world of cyberspace, I voyaged to many places in order to describe a Star Path about knowledge and understanding across time and space.

In this book I re-present some of the experiences along the Star Paths of my mind. The scattering of stars of experience – sights, events, oral and written stories, artifacts and the detritus of the past – form patterns like constellations. Patterns join to other patterns forming the webs of paths and connections that form a gigantic dome. A Sky Dome.

My experiences are not yours. I am just singing a song of them, chanting a saga. Occasionally I hope to dance a little. In watching
this performance (you may hear it too like the sea in a shell, voices on the waves, the distant sea bird in the wind) you may come with me a way.

From my time in the present I looked at encounters in the Central Western Pacific when Outlanders from Europe and North America met Islanders in the 19th and 20th centuries. In doing so I found myself back much further, before it was known for certain if men were men or spirits or gods, into Deep Time and beyond.

The experience of the past is only a reflection and a placement of convenience. It is always new, always now, always chaotic. In this book the now, the experience, is only made sense of by multivalent connections with other events and other times, perhaps in other places.

The next performance will be altered and understood differently. With more Voyages there are other Star Paths.
PLACE
THE LION AND THE FRIGATE BIRD
Sky, Water, Land

From the air Marakei appears to float on an azure sea that meets an azure sky. Where they join is unclear. A land almost imagined, not quite there, an Oceanic Avalon, under a Sky Dome.

Te Bo ma te Maki


The anti, spirits who were the ancestors of the living, were released by Na Areau, The Great Spider, by prising apart this turtle-like dome. This was the Place of Creation. The Place where Riiki, the Great Eel was called to raise the firmament.

“There are many stories of Creation”, I say to Tateti Tauma, the young Protestant minister. “The stories differ from island to island”. “Yes”, he said, “but it is only here you can see the places”.
“That is the place of Te Bo ma te Maki”. He points to an islet between North Tarawa and Abaiang: a desolate place with no trees, where birds and fishermen rest. The stretch of water between the atolls is known as the Straits of Naboika. Many generations ago Naboika swam from here to Tebontebike on Abaiang, where Mai, the ibonga (shaman), asked permission for me to enter the world of the descendants of Naboika and his wife Nie Nikuao.

King Kewe

Biribi Bwaate is a man of Buariki. I ask him about the places that can be seen. “There is King Kewe’s kitchen”, he says. “Only that remains”. And he takes me. “Kewe”, I said, “travelled to Mone, the Underworld under the ocean, on a log that was Nei Aromaeao”. “You know this?” he replies. “Only from a book by Ten Tiroba who came from this village”. “There is more”, Biribi says, “and I will take you”.

Maybe a kilometre up the beach there are other stones. We take the path Kewe walked. Biribi shows me the place where the Tree of Nei Aramaeao was cut up, thus killing her. “If you dig here”, Biribi said, “you will find blood”.
THE LION AND THE FRIGATE BIRD
Nei Aramaeao was a daughter of Bakoa, The Shark, whom we shall meet again.

The Land

The beer garden of the Otintai Hotel is a place for drinking and stories and laughter. A small quantity is tipped from each glass before we start drinking. “Tekeraoi,” we say. “To the Spirits of the Land”.

I read through the archives of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart. Many manuscripts concern land. The churches, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, spent much of their time trying to control the most important physical thing a person on Kiribati can control. Land.

Two Australians, architect and builder
Pace out the site for
Concrete and iron roofed classrooms.
Little consultation here
On how the children might feel
The ocean breeze
Or smell the flowers of the forest.
Or whether the place of learning
Faces Au of the rising sun.
Move it a bit this way
We need room
To turn a truck.

A councillor speaks to me
“We do it for the children.
Today they have nowhere to go
Tomorrow they will have hope”.

Land is very precious and tightly held and contested on
tiny crowded isolated islands. The boundary separating the
guest-house where I stay at Tebontebike from the lands of its
neighbours, is marked with sticks driven into the coral sand.
Each day representatives of the collective owners on each side
move the sticks a few centimetres. I tell this story to Bokaati
of Butaritari. “Here the land is marked with stones,” he says.
“Placed by our grandparents deep in the ground with magic;
to move the stones is to die. There are still people who know
how to place the stones”.
Cold Places

Ukiangang is a place of many anti (spirits) and many stories. I ride a bicycle along the coral road from Butaritari village to Ukiangang. There are swamps here and wild babai. Even in the blazing sun there are places that are always dark. Somewhere near here Nancy Phelan fled in fear from a cold and malevolent place.

The Maneaba of the Dead

Not far is the Maneaba of the Dead. Ten years ago a school teacher walked to the old maneaba through the forest and saw women in ridi gathering shell fish, men in mats, fishing, building. She filmed it. When the film was processed there was nothing on it. To the island of Makin, just to the north, the Tropic Bird people came perhaps 700 years ago and ate the People of the Bonito. They could not have stayed, for their gods are forgotten. When beachcomber Robert Wood the first resident I Matang was here in 1840 there were no atua (divinity), only anti. The air in Butaritari and Makin is thick with anti. People say the ghosts of the recently dead walk up the island chain to Makin. They have their own maneabas out on the lagoons. Sometimes you can see them. Sometimes I see figures out over the lagoon. Bokaati says “I do not believe in the anti, I have never seen them”. Bokaati tells me stories of the anti late into the night.

Wars of the Gods

Even on South Tarawa there are places no one will build. Even in Betio. Strange places, with strange light. It is not only I Kiribati ghosts that stalk Betio. From 23rd to 26th of November 1943, over 3000 American troops were killed or wounded in the Battle of Tarawa on Betio islet. Japanese deaths are estimated at 4690. The area of Betio was 113 hectares.
SISTER M. BAPTISTE KELHETTER

Sister Alaima’s 30th Oct 1916

My dear Alaima,

I have received your letter on the subject of Sister Baptist, and my dear sister, I have seen the letter of the 6th October, and I have the same sentiments as you. I have also received a letter of which I enclose a copy given me by the Rev. Father. I suggest that Sister Baptist should remain at the Island, in charge of the hospital for a while, so that she may recover her health. The Rev. Father also suggests that she may return to her sister in her own country. I hope you have received the letter of the Rev. Father.

I have the honor to remain,

Sister M. Baptist

P.S.: This cemetery was quite small when I first came here. Sister Alaima told me at Tahwara that it was much larger now. 

Sister Alaima
Hardly a tree was left standing.

By the beach nuns buy fish
Women weave baskets for the babai
That grows in brackish pits.
For the nights feast
A squealing pig
A crowing rooster.
The swish of a broom
Sweeping the leaves
Off white coral paths.

Shopping

It is Sunday. I ask the receptionist where I can buy a stamp. “Down the road towards the airport – in the little shop by the bend”. I know the place. “They are open Monday to Friday”. “They will be open tomorrow then”? “Maybe”. There is no word in the Kiribati language for ‘late’.
Sleeping

John Cox teaches on South Tarawa. “What will you do when you leave school”, he asks his students. “Sleep”. “Eat fish, Sleep”. “Have Baby, Sleep”. Maybe the question was asked in the early afternoon. In 1841 when the United States Exploring Expedition entered the village of Utiroa on South Tabiteuea they thought a massacre had occurred, and that all the villagers were dead, as they saw bodies lying everywhere. Now Government buildings close from 12 to 2pm. Shops may stay open but staff are often asleep. I ask a reclining girl behind a counter the price of a T Shirt. She raises herself on one elbow to look. “Twelve dollars” she says. “Would you take ten?” I ask. She sinks down, closing her eyes. There is no bargaining in Kiribati.
Drifting

I am in a ferry attempting the crossing of the Straits of Naboika from Abaiang to Tarawa. The motor has cut out. The engineer, puffing on his cigarette, is pouring petrol into the carburettor. The deck is covered with sleeping bodies. If we continue to drift, we should hit the Solomons in about six weeks. Recently a fisherman on the edge of the shelf forty miles out to sea, where the tuna schools swim over a five mile deep chasm, found his motor would not start. He had food for a couple of days and three litres of water. He quickly ate all the food, forced down his entire water supply and started fishing. He has just been returned from the Solomons. If you have no water you can eat the eyes of fish.

A few more hours pass. The motor shudders into life. The ferry swings back towards Tarawa. The captain moves the throttle to full. We must try to enter the dangerous break in the Tarawa reef while there is still light. The bodies all come to life. The sea is rushing in huge waves by the ferry now. Men cast heavy fishing lines into the ocean. A young Mormon missionary stands sullenly against the railing. He wears a black suit with his shining metal nameplate on it. Someone hands him a baby. It takes a few minutes to bring a threshing fish, perhaps 15kg, over the side. The crowd cheers. The second line jerks and the performance is repeated. More cheering. I catch the face of the missionary. He is holding the baby, covered in spray. His face beams with pure delight. The sky and the waves are red and gold.
THE LION AND THE FRIGATE BIRD
9. ILES GILBERT — L'Exercice à l'Ecole
THE LION AND THE FRIGATE BIRD

LOOKING FORWARD.
OCEAN ISLAND
1999.
The Maneaba

A smudge becomes a line, then a row of coconuts and pandanus. The whole white beach starts to glint. A vast building appears, as high as the coconut trees. This is the maneaba, a meeting house, a place of refuge, but more than that. The maneaba is a sacred space.

The Roof of Voyaging

The roof of the maneaba is the Sky Dome, Te Uma ni Borau - The Roof of Voyaging. It’s timbers are so placed that the positions of the stars can be determined at any time of the year. Apprentice navigators could spend each day for 15 years staring at this Sky Dome until they could recite the Star Paths perfectly. Only then could they enter the baurua, the Great Voyaging Canoe.

The Boti

There are different places underneath the inaki, the thatching pieces, where when the times are right, each clan, the boti, sits. Not in the centre, where one feasts, or dances, or speaks, or is judged.

The Law

John Thurston is a voyager too. He follows the Baha’i path. He has a trimaran for voyaging, and a strip of land on Abaiang that stretches from the lagoon to the ocean. “You must visit the great maneabas of the South”, he says. “When I was inside I could feel the power of the unimane, the old men, sitting there with their straight backs and the long beards they wore in the South, when they were in their power. I felt a shiver go down my spine.”

David Lambourne is a lawyer who has made his life and home in Kiribati. He tells me “The British legal system is always adversarial. There can be one appeal after another, each to a higher court. The law is different here. There is no appeal against the maneaba”.
THE LION AND THE FRIGATE BIRD
Descendants of the Sun

They are building a maneaba at Buariki. Floating the logs in from the ocean side where the forests are thickest. The logs are lashed with sennit made from coconut fibre, rolled on the thighs of women. There are no nails or steel bolts in a maneaba.

The instructions for the building of the maneaba were given by Bue, who obtained them from his father, Te Taai, The Sun. The clans of Maerua and Ababou are the descendants of Bue. They are the custodians of the knowledge.

John Hockings told me of a new maneaba built in the 1990s, not traditionally, but *aki akaka*, anyhow, and people started to die. There was a meeting and the traditional builders were bought in. The correct traditions were followed and the dying stopped. “All the knowledge is still there”, John said. “The maneabas of the South have been repaired with the correct rituals and methods and perfectly maintained for over six hundred and fifty years”.

In the maneaba in Buariki on North Tarawa there is to be a ceremony. I am ushered to a place on the western side, to the north of the central *boua*, one of the columns that support the roof. Much later I realise it is the *boti* of Maerua and Ababou, where visitors also may sit.
Women’s Knowledge

Cait Wait taught for four years at Steven Whitmee High School. She explains to me how her art teaching helps the girls.

“The girls think in two dimensions. It is represented in the mats they weave. Unlike the boys they never see the world from above, from a coconut tree, or from outside in a fishing canoe”.

The knowledge missionaries attempted to destroy was the knowledge of men. They ignored the mats, and the decorations women made, which also contained and preserved karaki (stories) and the sacred metaphors.
Sacred Stones

The early missionaries thought standing stones were idols, that they were the gods of darkness themselves. They smashed what they could find, but never touched the supports of the maneabas that are the most powerful conduits to the gods. People are nervous if you lean against one of these boua.

The missionaries called the time in the islands before their presence the Time of Darkness. They gave the I Kiribati a word they did not possess. It was the word for nakedness, and it was Tiatin, which is pronounced Satan.

Te Taai

Girls move gently in a dance of dedication
To the first Christian.
Aba ri Ringa
The Land of white beaches
and
The God of the I Matang
are joined.
With the white flowers on their heads.
It is Sunday.
The names of the days are forgotten references
To more ancient worship
Sunday, Moonday, Tiwesdæg, Wodnesdæg,
Frïgedæg, Saturnsday

Independence Day, Bairiki.
There are other headdresses here.
Rayed. Clipped a little
They speak of omnipresent power
Shielded in the dim churches
In the village close to
Protestant Steven Whitmee High School
I Matang teacher Cait Wait paints a ceremony
The leader wears a spiked headdress
It reaches out a metre.
No clipping,
Sharp as the Sun
Or a shark’s tooth sword.
Its name is the same as the Sun.
Te Taai.
The Headresses of Power

“Te Taai is in the Maneaba”

“Te Taai has risen,” says a young man as a pretty girl passes. “Go sit on an outrigger,” she replies sweetly and walks on. It is a much different intonation when the master builder says on the completion of a maneaba, “Te Taai is in the Maneaba.”

The missionaries did not desecrate the maneaba. They competed with its power. They built their own vast buildings with their own ceremonies and rituals and supernatural presences. “They impoverished whole communities,” Henry Schultz tells me, “manipulating competitive urges to build the biggest church, lest the village be shamed.”
Auriaria

On the wall of the shop in Butaritari village, marks have been made. “Tenekaar”, “Star Girl” and “Bauniti”, “Star Boy”. One word stands alone. Twice. ‘Auriaria. Auriaria’. The red haired Atua of power, who with his sister - lover Nei Tituabine, the beautiful one, whose eyes flashed like lightning, may have been actual leaders of the first red skinned ancestors from the west perhaps three thousand years ago. They were atua by the time the I Kiribati returned from Samoa thirty generations ago. They were atua by the time the I Kiribati returned from Samoa thirty generations ago. The waiter at the Otintaai Hotel tells me of a dream where he was fighting Auriaria, who was a giant. To defeat him he needed a magic rope around his waist that would enable him to fly. The missionaries do not believe in magic rope. The missionairies do not believe in magic rope. Mention Auriaria in the beer garden at the Otintaai and the place falls silent.

Anti

9pm and night had fallen over the Pearl Shell, Butaritari. A light comes up the path. “Don’t worry,” a voice calls out. It is Ioanna who with her husband Bokaati owns the guest house. “It’s just me,” she says, “It’s not the anti”.

Butaritari and Makin are the atolls in the Gilbert Group known for anti. Insanity is caused by the anti. A deranged man is seen walking along the road. The ibonga says “There are three anti with him. I see them now”. Not everyone can see the anti. Most can hear them when they speak in the Whistling Speech. It is said the anti come to torment the living who have followed the missionaries advice to forget the anti and not believe in them. It is also said this is not so, as the anti tormented the living before the coming of the I Matang.
The temperature is never below 25 degrees in Kiribati. It is usually 30 to 33. Some places are suddenly cold though. That is normal the I Kiribati tell me. It is the anti.

Atua

There is no word for God or gods in Kiribati. ‘Atua’ are powerful anti, ancestral spirits. Some like Nareau and his company are no longer powerful. Others control flies on the west wind or the storms beyond the reefs. Some come to whisper in the night. Some cause madness. Missionaries had to name their god. They revived an old Jewish God, Jehovah. Some I Kiribati called him Tioba and carved a cross in his honour covered in red feathers.

Sorcery and Magic

The missionaries teach that the powers do not exist or that they are all evil and really the work of Satan and that they are the powers of darkness that prevailed before they came, bringing The Light. Their practice is often different. A lay Catholic teacher on Abaiang warns me to hide or burn nail and hair cuttings, less the ibonga find them and use them against me.

Father Sabatier who spent a lifetime on Abemama, tells many stories of the power of the anti. His holy water prevails over possession by the anti. He hears the sounds of their footsteps. His tabunea are his exorcisms. I speak to a nun who remembers him, standing in his long black woollen coat in the tropical heat. I see him as not unhappy in his world of gods and spirits and ghosts.
Eel Spells

Ioabo Tekaai is my nextdoor neighbour in the village of Tebontebike on Abaiang.

I wake before dawn to the voices of the toddy singers and rise quickly to get my camera. Ioabo has risen before me. He is kneeling, facing east as the sun rises, his eel trap is as described by Horatio Hale in 1841. A cube on the outside, a funnel on the inside, made with woven sticks. In each hand he holds a small fish. He moves them over each other and in figures of eight. He is speaking quietly, quickly. The tabunea of attraction are placed on the bait before it is placed in the trap.

At sunset I watch a canoe returning from near the lagoon entrance, the trap visible across the bows. Later I watch two huge conger eels being hauled out. Ioabo has seven children. One boy is named Moamauri. My translation is ‘May the chook be blessed’.
COLOPHON

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The Lion and the Frigate Bird
VOL II
The Mad Woman

The minibus is crowded
Stops at the hospital
For one more passenger
She’s mad
Staring, Glaring, Scorning
Everyone smiles at her
A few kilometres
The bus stops
They know where she lives
She shakes her fist
The fare collector smiles
Her tin empty

Bubuti

Very early in my field work I learned that on an outer island a coconut is worth 50 cents. This is what I gave a young man who had climbed a tree to get me a drinking coconut. As he walked away I saw him throw the coin into the bush. More a drop than a throw. Money may be necessary for diesel for the generator, canned goods from the stores. There
is very little money on an outer island and wages are low on South Tarawa. Average income is under $750 AUD a year. The Chief Justice earns $12,000 AUD. There is another way services are paid for. I met Minnie Simonet on Butaritari when she lived in Ukiangang village, which is regarded as “very traditional”. Surprised to see her at the Otintaai, I asked what brought her there. “I’ve been bubutied”, she said, “to conduct a course here at the hotel”. Bubuti is a form of reciprocity. You can be bubuti for goods or services and it would not be wise to refuse. After complying you will be owed an equivalent. It will always be paid.

Theft

“It is better to be a killer than a thief” Roniti Teiwaki tells me. “Theft is like lunacy, the name for thief and rat is the same, kimoa.”

The stigma of a thief is never lost. It is passed on from one generation to the next. David Lambourne puts it. “A descendant of a thief cannot avoid the disgrace of their forefathers.”
Poverty

To be in a position to give much is a form of status, not richness. In the year the United Nations called the “Year of Alleviation of Poverty” Leonie Smiley, asked a group of I Kiribati what does “Poverty” mean. There were four answers. “No Children.” “No Family.” “No Land.” “Illness”.

There is no I Kiribati word for ‘poor’. There is something that Smiley’s respondents may have omitted. To be aomata, truly human, Kumbati Uriam reminds, is to have a skill with the knowledge of the accompanying spells. “Like land or a canoe, magical spells and skills are considered property; therefore he who has no skill is a rang (fool) as well, for he is a hopeless being, kibana, (shiftless) and a kaueana (a scavenger who is good for nothing).”

In the Otintaai Hotel I am talking to an I Kiribati politician who has just returned from the United Nations. He tells me he has been told his country is among the seven poorest on Earth. “What do you think of that?” I ask. “By the categories of the UN we are very poor. By our categories we are very rich”.

PERFORMING
A Mission School

Near the coral air strip
The Catholic Mission School.
Over a century of sun
Faded pinks and blues
On European bricks.
The stations of the cross
Are in coconut groves
Palestine as atoll.

Flag Raising

In the village of Buariki
There is another clearing.
There is a mound in the centre
A low pyramid
Of worn stones.
A flag flutters on the pole
Showing a frigate bird
Above an ocean.
Here Captain Davis
Of HMS Royalist raised a British Flag.
THE LION AND THE FRIGATE BIRD
Recording the moment in a photograph
Marines firing into the air
In 1892.

I Kiribati police parade here
Blue uniforms and bare feet.
Performances of identity and power.

The Warrior

I hire a car on South Tarawa.
“If you hit someone drive straight to the police station.
Don’t stop or you will be killed”.
“In the South”, I am told, “people are more vengeful. They
are quick with the blade or the giant ray barb”,
“If your woman is unfaithful you can bite off her nose”

Independence Day, Butaritari
I watch games of skill and courage in stifling heat.
Wrestling and uni-waka, the island joust for men.
Women hurl balls like rocks at each other.
Sands of Bakoa

Before the spirits of the sea were informed of my coming to Tebontebike, Nei Mai, the *ibonga* requested I take some sand from the beach and place it on my cheeks. The dancers place sand on their face before the competition. The sand is known as Bakoa. The word also means The Shark. The Shark is metaphor for the force of the ocean that the I Kiribati triumphed over to come onto the land of Tungaru.

Bakoa invokes the memory and power of Deep Time.

The *boti* Bakoa is an ancient one, older than when the warrior priests of Rongo came from Samoa. The maneaba is built so the western *tatanga* (ridge plate) of the *boti* Bakoa is longer than the eastern *tatanga* that rests on the *boua*, of Tabakea, The Turtle. The I Kiribati say this is “*tautauna Bakoa*,” to keep Bakoa buried,” and to suppress his powerful magic. The ancestor of Bakoa is Tabuariki, the Thunderer.

Bakoa Dances

Bakoa was a dancer who wore the teeth of porpoises, whales and humans. He gives power to the dancers that wear his sand. The most powerful sand floats, The Shark that even suppresses the oceans.

Tabakea was also a dancer, who wore garlands of flowers and the things of the land.
Bakoa liked the fragrance of the flowers and swapped costumes with Tabakea. The flowers wilted and so did their maka. Tabakea now wore the sand and the shells and the things of permanence.

In coming on to dry land, Tabakea triumphs over Bakoa. The metaphors of the maneaba aim to keep it that way.

To wear the floating sand is powerful magic. I didn’t know this, standing on the lagoon beach, facing east, sand on my face, as Nei Mai threw my gift into the sea.

Katholische Kirche in Butaritari (Gilbert Inseln)
Nakaa & the Tree of Death

The invoking of the opposing forces of good and evil was very familiar before the coming of the missionaries. Te Aba do not need the missionary to tell them of good and evil. Long before the coming of the I Matang, a story came from Banaba of the Tree of Life whose name is Tarakaaimaiu and another whose fruit was forbidden by Nakaa, The Old One. The innocence of the people was lost, when the men played with the forbidden tree, which was Tarakaimaie, the Tree of Women. When Nakaa discovered them he cursed them with grey hairs, rotting teeth, the staff of old age, the wandering of the wits and death. The mechanisms of invoking good and evil are the mechanisms of tabunea (spells), and the invoking of powers of the anti and atua.

Nakaa waits, a little to the north of Makin. He makes nets and questions the souls of the dead. Those who can satisfactorily pass his tests can go on the homelands in the west or towards Samoa or may hover over the land they had in life. Those who fail are entangled in his nets forever.

The Death Magic

The most feared magic is the wawai, the death magic. I ask Bokaati if it still exists. “No” he replies “It is from the Old Time and is forgotten. Furthermore I will not teach it to my children for they might misuse it”.

Bokaati knows how the knowledge is transmitted. In the early morning particularly in the families of ibonga, the
children are woken from 3 to 5am, the stories that carry the magic are told. Children learn best in the early morning. After 5 they sleep again but later in the day they may be seen walking alone, murmuring to themselves. Only a little of the story is revealed at a time. “What happens if the teller dies before all the story is told?” I ask. “The anti will come in the night and will reveal the rest”, he said. “That way nothing is lost”
Spells

The sea laps quietly against the hull. Abaiang is receding. An I Matang passes the time telling me of another inter island crossing. One passenger is a girl who is escaping an unwanted relationship. Suddenly she screams at the captain that the boat must turn back. He refuses and she dives into the ocean and strikes out for her home island. Some months later the I Matang returns to that island and finds the girl happily married to the man she was running from. The answer was simple. The young man had gone to an ibonga who cast a love spell on the girl. No one knows to what distance a tabunea is effective. Some say from one end of the atoll chain to the other. Maybe further.
Gathering Toddy

Voices call at dusk
From the tree tops
*Tė Katake*
The Old Songs of Tungaru
Kiribati before Europeans
Songs of Aba-ri-ringa
The Land of Blinding Sunlight
In ancient tongues
Words forgotten, changed
The toddy gatherers
Sing
Clues of vanished
Pasts
Wars, old gods, voyages, love lost.

There is nothing like the song of the toddy men, wailing, heavy, soaring snippets of ancient sagas and love songs that gust out on the trade wind.
From the base of a tree comes laughter. A father, mother, a teenage girl and three small children are running in circles on the white coral sand. A few meters back into the village the
cooking fires are smoking. Women squat effortlessly, fanning the fires of coconut husks freed of their meat by the copra collections. The faint smell of smoke is sweet and acrid at the same time, mixing with that of grilled reef fish.

I asked my neighbour if she would write down the song being sung in a nearby coconut tree. This was the song of Mwanatu.

She wrote:

Samanoma ma finan ea nga Maneu arei bati n tangiria ngai
Kona trangai te kawai are nako bwa n nako riri mwina ngai
E taetae te karo na kou nating
Kona buti naaap n otan namkaina
Kona butimauiu n tainki in tingkoi
Boni iai an karaki ae n na tuangko
Te Karakiae Kana novakawaki

Later I had this song translated by the receptionist at the Otintaai Hotel.

The Father told his son one day,
Meet me tonight when the moon is full
And I will tell you a story
A very very sad story –

The Flying Canoe of Makin

Manuao Kauriri is an unimane, an Old Man of Power. He is a story-teller from Ukiangang. We sit in Bokaati’s little shelter near my house. I want to hear about how the I Kiribati felt when the I Matang made their lands a Protectorate of the British Empire. “Have you stories of Captain Davis,” I ask. “Who is Captain Davis?” Manuao replies. “The Captain of The Royalist who took possession of Kiribati by making speeches and raising flags and firing guns,” I said. “I have not heard this story”, he said, “but I know the story of the Flying Canoe of Makin”.

The Rev. Dr. Kumbati Uriam reminds me much later “To the I Kiribati, the I Matang are irrelevant, they are accidents of history that have no meaning”.

Father and Mother tell me where my sister has gone (to)
Tell me where she went so I can get in touch with her.

Strangers have come and gone before.
Next day I am sitting in Manuo’s *bata* (house), in the forest near Ukiangang. We face each other cross legged. “Tell me the story of the Flying Canoe of Makin”, I asked. He recites for four hours without a break.

“Manuo knows many spells,” says Bokaati later. “He used the dancing spells on his sister’s daughter so she would win the dancing competition”.
Queen of Buatari

King Februnamo, Queen, army, artillery and national colours. Fato in front of the Palace. Butaritari.
Betio

There are 24 people with luggage in the minibus, which is a small Toyota van. Everyone smiles and holds children, luggage and excess passengers on their knees. The tape player blasts out “Who Let the Dogs Out” and “The Macarena”. This is Betio, one of the most heavily populated places on the planet. Forty people may live in one room. Most are unemployed. Many houses are made of concrete bricks with poor air circulation. Like the forbidding stone gaols and barbed wire asylums, they are another legacy of the civilising and mercantile ambitions of the British Empire. There is one murder every month. Cholera and typhoid may break out at any time. The lagoon beach is choked with plastic bags and rusting cans. On the ocean side sometimes needles and used bandages wash in from the hospital. We pass the Paradise Club, besser bricked and grilled. Here on a Friday night men look for women and women look for a man who might take them away from Betio forever.

Tooti

I am about to photograph orthopaedic operations. Tooti is seven years old. He broke a bone in his arm that has not healed. His father sits with him. His mother watches from a window. She has never been inside such a building. She is afraid.

The Hospital

Patients from outer islands are flown in with a carer to the hospital on South Tarawa. The carers bring meals and embroidered pillows. An old man sits gasping in an iron bed. An old lady holds an oxygen mask to his face. I ask could I take a photograph. She gives me a huge smile. My eyes are watery. Lucky I have auto focus. I thank them and walk away. The old man nods.
ENCOUNTERING THE LION AND THE FRIGATE BIRD
Globalisation

The bus crosses the causeway to Bairiki, the administrative headquarters. The causeway was paid for by Japan. It prevents the tide from flushing out the lagoon. Another time I walk into water and feel human excrement squeezing up between my toes. Women stand by the road selling undersized tuna, brushing aside the flies. Piles of mission clothing are for sale in the little market in front of the Bank of Kiribati and the National Archives where I spend so much time.

The women in the bus smile and talk. They wear the missionary inspired embroidered blouses that replaced the Mother Hubbards. As the bus stops to let me out at the Otintaai Hotel, the tape player is blasting 20 Finger’s “Don’t want no short dick man”.
ENCOUNTERING THE LION AND THE FRIGATE BIRD

The Plumber

I am staying in the grounds of the Steven Whitmee High School on Abaiang. I have a sleeping hut near the ocean from where I see the moon rise.


Two days later I am to leave, and have been asked to go to the maneaba. I may have to make a speech I am told. I will meet the chief. I duck under the low eave, holding my sticks of tobacco. Inside it is dim. I sense there are many people here, though I see only shadows. I make my way to the table at the front where I know the chief will be. There are rows of silent dark faces on either side of me.

“The maneaba welcomes you,” a voice says. My eyes are becoming accustomed to the low light. The face in front of me becomes clear. It is the plumber.
The Spider

I sit watching races at Sports Day at the Steven Whitmee High School on Abaiang. Beside me a row of school girls. I slap at something crawling inside my shirt and pull out a spider as big as the palm of my hand. I show the schoolgirls. They look darkly. “It will not hurt you,” one girl says.

Before the Beginning a Great Spider walked in the Darkness.

North I go and tread heaven underfoot
South I go and tread heaven underfoot
You know nothing of darkness and cleaving together
Spirits do not exist
Nor are there men or any other things
There is only myself
The Giant
Na Areau
At Home

Ioabo invites me into his family compound. There is a sleeping hut, an eating hut with an open fire, places for food and utensils, places to sit in the shade, areas where mats and thatch are woven, a drying rack for fish. Places almost identical to this are described in I Matang books on traditional Kiribati material culture. The past tense is used. This is not the past, it is now. I sit in the eating place. Grandparents, parents, children around me, pulling fish off the fire. Eating without forks. The buckets are plastic. The family’s clothes are made in China.

The Chinese Ship

Not long ago some Chinese came to Butaritari. There are fish in the lagoon that are particularly prized in China. “Are there many of these fish?” the Chinese asked. “Yes, plenty”, the villagers answered. “Would you help us catch these fish?” asked the Chinese. The villagers agreed and a large ship moved into the lagoon. They placed nets over the side to keep the caught fish alive. After several months there were only a few fish in the nets.
ENCOUNTERING

THE LION AND THE FRIGATE BIRD
“We thought you said there were plenty of these fish,” the Chinese said. “Oh yes, plenty for the fisherman, plenty for the family, plenty for the village to eat, plenty to dry for the Season of the Wind”. There were not plenty for the Chinese. The nets broke and what fish that were there swam away. The Chinese ship left and has not returned.

The Otintaai Hotel

In the bar at the Otintaai I buy a cold beer. There is little beer and less refrigeration on the outer islands. You can meet anyone at the Otintaai. Some drunk. Some sober. There are ship’s captains, volunteers, young men from villages, politicians, salesmen. The bar fills at dusk. Chinese consuls sit at one table. American consuls at another. They do not speak to each other. In the breezeway between the bar and the restaurant there are stories of spies and intrigues.

Tourists

There is a dancing performance and a feast tomorrow night says the waiter. You can pay to go there. A journalist accompanies me. Some Japanese from the hotel are there too.

A teenage girl in a plastic ridi dances for perhaps five minutes to a ghetto blaster. A large population of the village are here including the chief. Baskets of babai and a large, very slimy raw octopus are placed on a platform. The village watches as I try to swallow babai and the Japanese attack the octopus. The villagers invite us to dance and they do The Twist. After an hour the chief announces the night is over. I make a speech and hand him a pound of tobacco. He drops it on the ground. I hand him $50 and he beams. The villagers cheer. We walk back to the hotel past besser brick cottages, their windows covered in rusty iron grilles. Dogs snarl at us.
Beer is cold at the Otintai Hotel
Chairs creak
Looking across the lagoon
Turquoise, Limpid
In the distance
A sail
Triangular
Like the ones in the photos
Seventy years old
I reach for my camera
The sail disappears in the haze.
 ENCOUNTERING THE LION AND THE FRIGATE BIRD

The Spirit of Kiribati

Roniti Teiwaki owns the Lagoon Breeze Guest House. He majored in British History and was once Minister for Education and Culture. “Culture is a check and balance,” he tells me. “A safety net. In a spiritless culture you have no place in the society. You are in a room with blank walls, you are in an asylum, you have no active place within the society. The canoe represents the spirit, the formation of the culture. Stories hold the culture together”.

He tells me of travelling from Makin to Butaritari in a canoe. As a non-swimmer he was afraid, but the canoe cut through the high seas and he felt the Spirit of Kiribati in his breast. All the fear went. The Spirit took over and he was at peace. Later he travelled the same journey in a motorised canoe. It was a terrible trip. The spirit was not there.

Next morning 3am.
In the distance there is lightning on the horizon and the low rumbling of Tabuariki, The Thunderer rolls across the lagoon.
Sister Margaret

Sister Margaret is a Nun who wears a fisherman’s hat. She left Australia in 1954.

“The missionaries didn’t have much success in stopping dancing,” Sister Margaret tells me. “They learn to dance as soon as they can walk”.

The Wind of the Dance

Wed 15th July 2001, Suva, Fiji
Leonie Smilie from the South Pacific Commission talks about the Dance. “Dance is the heart of culture. There is the Wind of the Dance when you become part of the song and the drumming and you feel the wind. In the songs and dances of the canoe voyages the wind is in the sails. It stops and then picks up again. It is an allegory for the spiritual journey. You can lose your way, then the strength of the spirit picks you up and carries you”.

“They just collapse,” I am told. “One minute they are dancing, then they just fall unconscious – it’s the Wind of the Dance that blows them over”.

Katerina Teaiwa – Honiara,
“When I dance (the traditional dances) my fingers move like the feathers of the Frigate Bird. They become feathers. I am a Frigate Bird flying over the ocean”.

100
Bonriki airport is crowded. Many of the people come just to see the big jet land. The airport fence has holes in it so the pigs can rush to safety as the plane roars in. Dianne is with me. Later she tells me about an old man who sat briefly beside her. He had come to meet a friend he told her. She thought he was one of the most impressive people she had ever met. Straight and with the aura of one who was very powerful, yet wise, gentle and gracious. He was like no-one we had met on Kiribati. She remembers his fingernails. They were very, very long. She can’t remember him arriving or leaving. I never saw him at all.
Epilogue

The Sun, the Moon and the Stars define the Sky Dome. The Land and the Ocean define the world of humans. On Earth, the ancient struggle between Bakoa and the powers of the ocean, and Tabakea and the triumph of the land, were established 750 generations ago. The metaphors of space and the rituals of seasons and subsistence have maintained the balance. Six generations of pale intruders have disturbed the old ways, but Te Katei ni Kiribati, the Spirit of Kiribati, remains the driving force on the islands in the dreams of urban dwellers on South Tarawa and in the souls of the voyagers to Australia and England, Fiji and Germany, Japan and Aotearoa. In their hearts are Te Mwaie, the Dance and Te Karaki, the Stories, and Te Kataki, the Songs and Chants. Knowing that Te Aba, The Land and The People, remain, means Kiribati island life, however hard, has meaning.

Something though is changing that the English or the missionaries never changed. The tides are higher. The babai pits are becoming salty. Coconut groves are being eroded and the trees are falling into the sea. The road on Betio has been moved inland. Bikemaan islet in Tarawa lagoon has disappeared.

Sister Alaima emailed to tell me the King Tides have flowed over the land at the Sweet Coconut Motel where I stayed, inundating the graves in the garden.

The sacred places are under attack.

Bakoa returns, and Tabakea, with the islands on his back, is stumbling. Te Moana, the Great Ocean, covers two thirds of the Earth’s surface. The vast population of the sea has been consumed or left dying to rot. The very air has been filled with the excrement of cars and factories so that Te Taai starts to fry the flesh of all of Na Areau’s Creation. The winds have broken their lashings bringing hurricanes.

It will take all the tabunea of all the I Kiribati and all the I Matang to return strength to Tabakea.

E Kawa to aomata au akea tabunea.
It is unfortunate for him who has no magic spell.