

Pre-annexation contacts between Banaba and the Gilbert Islands

Banaban oral tradition, much of it collected by Sir Arthur Grimble, indicates that the autochthonous inhabitants, possessing Melanesian physical characteristics, came from the west (the people of Mangati, whose descendants later formed the Te Karieta division of Tabwewa), as apparently did a second immigration at a later date (whose descendants later formed the Te Karia division of Tabwewa). The racial origin of these people is conjectural, nor is it of concern in the present issue, though I have suggested that the first were related to the earlier inhabitants of Fonape (and no doubt other islands in the Caroline Group).

These early Banabans and their descendants lived on Ocean Island for so long that they came to regard it as 'the first of all lands, the navel of the universe, the home of the first ancestors', a period, as on Nauru, sufficiently long to have developed a distinctively Banaban culture, with ancillary linguistic and possibly somatological deviations.

You will appreciate that this period was before that of the efflorescence of deep-sea voyaging, which did not commence until the Urakini Kain Tiku-aba, when a Polynesian people (the Tonga-fiti host) were defeated in, and dispersed from, Samoa and a portion reached the Gilberts about the year A.D. 1400. Gilbertese history, as contrasted with more or less conjectural reconstructions, dates from this ~~period~~ *period*.

The next known event of ethnic significance on Banaba was the arrival of haurua from Beru, bringing Nei Angi-ni-maeao, her relations and followers, who were, on geneological and other evidence, flying from the upheavals associated with the conquests of Kaitu and Uakeia in about A.D. 1650.

The Gilbertese immigrants, who evidently outnumbered the Banabans, took the four districts of Te Acoanne, Uma, Toakira, and Tabiang, leaving the fifth district of Tabwewa to the original inhabitants, together with a number of privileges which resulted, at a later date, in the Chief of Tabwewa being erroneously called by Europeans the King (or Queen) of Banaba.

As the Gilbertese majority are said to have intermarried freely with the Banabans it will be apparent that within a few generations there would have been a preponderance of Gilbertese blood in the population. This was increased over the years through drift voyages from the Gilberts. I have written elsewhere that Nauru 'was not entirely a world on its own, isolated from all contact with humanity, but rather a dead-end, a terminal point which permitted immigration from outside but from which no one who landed ashore ever returned'. Much the same could be said of Ocean Island after C.1400 A.D. and, apart from the tradition of a Banaban who married Nei Angi-ni-maeao of Beru, the Banabans appear to have been recipients of Gilbertese immigrants, and not the reverse. The reason for this was, of course, the south-east trades, the westerly season being scarcely conducive to inter-island canoe travelling.

When John Webster, the first European to leave an account of the Banabans, landed on Ocean Island in 1851 he stated (and almost certainly over-stated) the population as being between 2,000 and 3,000, but the disastrous drought of the early 1870s reduced it to about 100. Fortunately, from the 1820s whaling ships had begun to call at Ocean Island, with the discovery of the 'on-the-line grounds', followed later by a few trading, mission and other vessels; and at the height of the famine the Banabans left by every means possible for Hawaii, Tahiti, the Carolines (and no doubt other islands). Some were able to return and by 1888 the population had recovered to 300, and by 1900 to 450.

There is no traditional account known to me of a Banaban visiting any other island by canoe since about 1700 (indeed they had no sailing canoes when first described by Europeans), nor of any Gilbertese visiting Ocean, other than as the result of an accidental drift voyage, returning, if at all, by European ship. One of the twelve 'tribes' on Nauru was known as the 'iruwa', the descendants of drift voyagers, who brought the worship of Tabuariki. Ocean Island, being so much nearer to the Gilberts (although smaller and thus easier to miss), would presumably have received more, and I well remember examining the decaying hull of the last Gilbertese baurua to reach Ocean, where it lay on the foreshore terrace below Tabwewa in 1929. I have recorded elsewhere that from an estimate made in the 19th century hundreds drifted to sea each year from the Gilbert chain of islands, and to those one must add fugitives from inter-island and civil wars and the surplus population compelled by community pressure to migrate or be killed. The Banabans, unlike the Nauruans, seem to have been hospitable to all comers.

Other Gilbertese, as well as Europeans, are known to have arrived at Ocean on ships, such as the Henderson and Macfarlane trading vessel Archer which regularly called there from the Gilberts. In 1845, for instance, there were no less than 17 Europeans living ashore and in the 60s a party of Gilbertese, who moved on to Nauru during the drought period, taught the Banabans how to make sour toddy, while an Abemaman living there in the early 80s similarly taught them the rudiments of Christianity. The first professional teacher to live on the island (in 1885) was a Tabiteuean, and in 1896 his son was ordained and became head of the Ocean Island mission. Cases of intermarriage between Banabans and Gilbertese were noted in genealogies and in the course of land hearings during the land settlement of the island made by me in 1931 and 1932.

There do not appear, however, to have been very many Gilbertese living among the Banabans during the latter part of the 19th century and in 1933, when Mr P.D. Macdonald and I made a detailed cephalometric survey of Banaban adults believed to have been without any trace of Gilbertese blood up to at least the tibu mamano generation (the limits of te utu se kan) we recorded 73 (there may, of course, have been others who did not turn up or were uncertain of their genealogues). I still possess tabular statements giving their names and measurements.

As regards cultural traits I would refer you to my article on 'The Social Organization of Banaba or Ocean Island', in The Journal of the Polynesian Society, vol.41, no.1 (December 1932) pp.262-281, from which it will be, I think, clear that the Banaban social organization had, in pre-annexation times, both Gilbertese and non-Gilbertese features, this being, in fact, what one would expect from the ethno-historical reconstruction epitomized above. The picture is complicated by boti and other innovations introduced by Kaitu and Usakeia, which are naturally not to any extent reproduced in the social structures of Makin, Butaritari, Banaba or Mui. Linguistically the Banabans were speaking a dialect of Gilbertese at least in the 1850s, though even in 1931 there were words and idioms used which were not known in Gilbertese.

Banaba was not one of the 16 Gilbert Islands given by informants from Kuria and Butaritari to the ethnographer Horatio Hale in 1841 as constituting the Group, nor was it included in the list given by Captain Richard Randell, the most knowledgeable European connected with the Gilberts prior to annexation, to the Rev. L.H. Gulick in 1861. Nor was Ocean Island included among the 'Gilbert Islands' which Captain E.M. Davis was directed to declare a British Protectorate over, and it is not mentioned in the copies of related correspondence on the Gilbert Islands in my possession.

In this connexion it is perhaps pertinent to mention that while it appears from Gilbertese tradition that inter-island travel from Makin to Arorae was relatively common in the decades following the Polynesian migration of evidently skilled tani borau from Samoa in c.1400 A.D. the increase of population, and consequently of inter-island and inter-district warfare, made such voyages increasingly precarious and thus less frequent. Possibly the last of the 'grand tours' (rather like the finishing tours of the young English gentleman on the Continent during the 19th century) was made by a Chief of Kuria about 1740. But Ocean Island was not, so far as I am aware, included in the Gilbertese inter-island itineraries because, I suggest, it did not come within the navigational purview of the latter-day tia borau, who alone could have imparted the essential navigational route briefing.

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