

Cultural Identity of Banabans

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ABSTRACT

Who really are the Banabans and where do they come from have puzzled scientists for many decades since phosphate was discovered by Ellis in 1900 on Ocean Island. Many reports have documented the origins of the Banabans as being an integral part of I-Kiribati race, which have formed the current status quo of the Banaban people socially and politically today. This notion of identity has been further strengthened by works of academics and colonial administrators on the islands such as Cheyne and Andrew (1852), Grimble and Maude (1900-1940's), Ellis A F. (1869-1951) and Silverman (1962) etc. The methodology for extracting historical data was done by oral literature survey of the four villages on Banaba by most of the above authors. It is a customary practice not to disclose true historical accounts and origins about Banaban identity, which are traditionally held by communal elders (mostly men) to foreigners since Banabans are very secretive about their identity (Sigrah and King 2000). The classical history accounts of the above authors to traditionally link the Banabans to the Kiribati race was finally thrown into confusion when Lampert (1967) in his archeological findings of the Aka sacred burial ground, concluded that Banabans were once of distinct and unique race, physically and culturally before intermarriages and influx of outsiders began the assimilation process of saturating the small population of Ocean Island. The paper examines the Aka artifacts, as strong evidence to substantiate the argument that documented evidences on the origins of the Banaban people from the natives' perspective has never been told. This paper is the story of Banaban people from their own lips and oral traditions as passed down by their forefathers for centuries.

Introduction

The question regarding the cultural identity of Banabans is one that now has become a contentious subject, which opens a 'Pandora's Box' of associated issues. With the discovery of phosphate on Banaba in 1900 and the subsequent arrival of a British owned mining company, the indigenous inhabitants would find themselves manipulated and their island totally overrun by the Company's operations. Leading up to World War Two there was no doubts or question over Banaban identity. By outlining the historical processes that lead to what many believe was Banaban assimilation with the I-Kiribati, one of their Pacific Island neighbours, and the endeavours undertaken to try and obliterate Banaban identity altogether.

This study analyses the facts, identifies what is fiction and the role certain historical events played in aiding the formation of the current status quo of the Banaban people socially and politically today. The issue of Banaban cultural identity and its complexities also highlights the strength of a culture that for many years has withstood the full gamut of adversities which in most cases were intentionally used to repress the Banabans. The claims that the Banabans are now I-Kiribati, mainly through inter-marriage and the lost of the Banaban language is an assumption that is made by others and one that belies the Banabans claim for survival as an original Oceanic people.

History a Banaban view

The indigenous inhabitants of Banaba are recognized by the Banaban people today as the secretive and shy te Aka people, 'the word te Aka means 'the first hamlet', a small group of dwellings inhabited by members of the same family' (Sigrah & King 2001:26). The following key features of the te Aka were documented by Sigrah and King to be, distinct appearance and physical stature, their worship of the fire or sun as their totem, myths and legends that support the authenticity of their ethnic identity, land division on Banaba supporting their land ownership and known site of the sacred cairns on the island, and their own clan traditions that also endorse the orthodox European view of the settlement of Banaba. Another description of the te Aka stated, 'they are described as being small bodied, squat, crinkly haired, large eared and black-skinned and were skilful in sorcery' (Maude & Maude 1932:263). Sigrah and King (2001) have documented further evidence of a distinct te Aka appearance:

Te Aka ancestors had long jaws, seen in many skulls well preserved in sacred family *bangota* (ancestral shrines) right up until the time that Banabans were forcibly removed from the island during the Japanese occupation in World War II. Maude and Lampert also noted this evidence:

'They are apparently burial mounds and at one situated under a mango tree near the site of the former Maneaba in the hamlet called te Aka one could see the skulls of both the long jawed and the short jawed people through gaps between the stones: at least as late as 1903' (Maude 1995:106).

...the skulls referred to are under a low stone cairn and could be seen through gaps between the stones. They were skulls of both 'the long jawed and short jawed people'. The cairn was named te Burita, which has the meaning ...'an enchanted place, dangerous to visit' (Bingham 1908:79) and was situated under a mango tree near the

maneaba at te Aka. It was said to be still extant as late as 1964 apparently until the ground surface beneath the tree was bulldozed flat so that workmen's huts could be erected in the shade (Lampert 1965:3).

The te Aka recognise the place of te Burita cairn as that of second known sacred site where two large

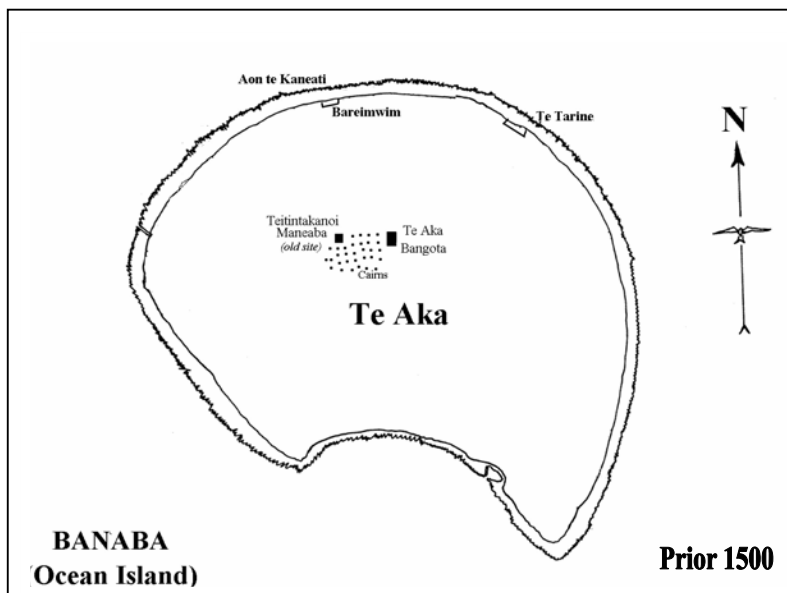


Figure 1.1: BANABA (Ocean Island) Prior to 1500, Before known Invasions

teitai (*Calophyllum inopohyllum*) trees grew that in their legends are known as 'the ship trees'. The te Aka had names for these two significant trees, 'one called te Burita which is also the name of their war canoe, and the other tree called te Itimoa, meaning 'first lightning'' (Sigrah & King 2001: 29). The te Aka were known for their skills and powerful sorcery, 'a power they possessed from the worship of their ancestral skulls' (Ellis 1936; Grimble 1921; Lampert 1968). What is apparent from Banaban legends is the fact te Aka were land dwellers, and had no concept of seafaring, as the island's surrounding fringing reefs supplied them with all their needs. Another endorsement of te Aka distinct appearance is the presence of 'thick, black crinkly hair' that was so prized that even up until modern times, te Aka descendants made wigs from the hair of their deceased ancestors and wore these wigs on special ceremonial occasions. Photographic evidence supporting this was published by Sigrah and King (2001:28; 160).



Figure 1.2: Banaban dances wearing te Aka wigs during a *te karanga* dance performance prior 1910

There are other features of te Aka such as language, certain games, the sport of boxing, and a unique dance that has withstood the passing of time. The *karanga*, or stick-dance is a war-chant style dance offering insight into the old te Aka ways, with a snippet of the lost Banaban language that only exists today in this ancient dance (Figure 1.2). The Banabans have recorded genealogies of te Aka with Sigrah and King (2001:59) stating, that Sigrah's own te Aka family lineage had been documented back to at least the 1500s, while he believed that their Godfather and head of their clan, Teimanaia could go back well beyond this period.

In Banaban history we know of two recorded invasions prior to European discovery in the early 1800's. The first being Auriaria and his party in the late 14th century from Gilolo in the East Indies; now known as Halmahera, Indonesia. This invasion signified as 'they came as warriors...' (Sigrah & King 2001:91) denotes the subsequent conflict and warfare that ensued during this period of Banaban history. After various battles the island was divided into two separate divisions, the northern portion known as Te Aononanne, from the densely forested highlands surrounding the various te Aka hamlets and nearby *bangota*, sacred cairns down to the northern coastline and fringing reefs. These battles are believed responsible for the creation of *te karanga* dance. Another specific dance also developed during this period called *te karanga are e uarereke* (the short stick dance) which 'is a re-enactment of the land disputes that began after the arrival of Auriaria'. These new arrivals would be known for their skills in seafaring and as warriors.

Because of te Aka's reputation as skilled sorcerers they were respected and feared creating a veil of silence and secrecy surrounding them. Even the name Te Aonnoanne, meaning 'that place!' endorses this belief in the power of te Aka's sorcery. To utter the word 'te Aka', could bring about a curse. Auriaria and his descendants would soon learn to respect the te Aka, preferring to keep their distance and would eventually become known as the Auriaria clan inhabiting and settling on the south-west region of the island that would be known by the old Banaban word 'Tabwewa', meaning 'to the south'. (Figure 1.3)

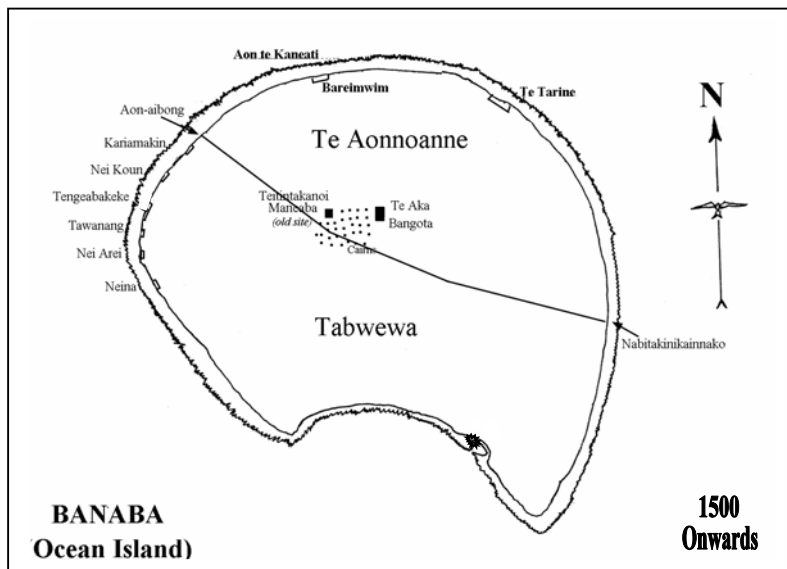


Figure 1.3: BANABA (Ocean Island) 1500 Onwards After the First Invasion

The second invasion of Banaba in the later part of the 15th century is quoted by Sigrah and King as ‘... they came in peace’ (2001:117). This aptly describes the arrival of a group of islanders, headed by a woman called Nei Anginimaeao from a southern Gilbert Island called, Beru, which according to ‘Arthur Grimble’s *Tungaru Traditions* (1989) relates to the Battles of Kaitu and Uakeia, when the two chiefs of Beru fought and conquered nearly every island in Kiribati in about 1680. Nei Anginimaeao’s arrival would coincide with her group fleeing these upheavals in search of new land, or becoming driftaways. This group unlike the first was invited by the Banabans living in the Tabwewa region to stay and settle on Banaba and once again new divisions were made within this southern area, while the te Aka upheld their original land boundaries in the region of Te Aonnoanne. This invasion also brings the first interaction and influence of Gilbertese (I-Kiribati) influence. What is also significant about this period is the fact that the indigenous Banabans, the te Aka still were reluctant to interact with these new arrivals, even with the inter-marriage of Nei Anginimaeao’s brother, Na Kouteba into the te Aka clan. Clear land boundaries were still observed. New rituals and customs associated to Gilbertese traditions were introduced and these new land divisions covered the areas surrounding the island’s only suitable landing place (Figure 1.4). This important aspect also gave these newcomers more contact with ships calling on this more protected side of the island, where certain family clans from the original Tabwewa descendants upheld the right to board foreign vessels, a custom the Tabwewans had created even before the arrival of Nei Anginimaeao.

What is acknowledged by the Banabans is that up until the arrival of the missionaries and mining industry on Banaba, ‘the indigenous te Aka, the sorcerers were the nucleus of Banaban society. Auriaria, the warriors, and Nei Anginimaeao, who came in peace, strengthened the foundations of our civilization’ (Sigrah & King 2001: 166). This rich collection of oral traditions has been passed down by Banaban forefathers for centuries and has withstood not only the influence of time but also insurmountable upheavals, and yet, it has survived.

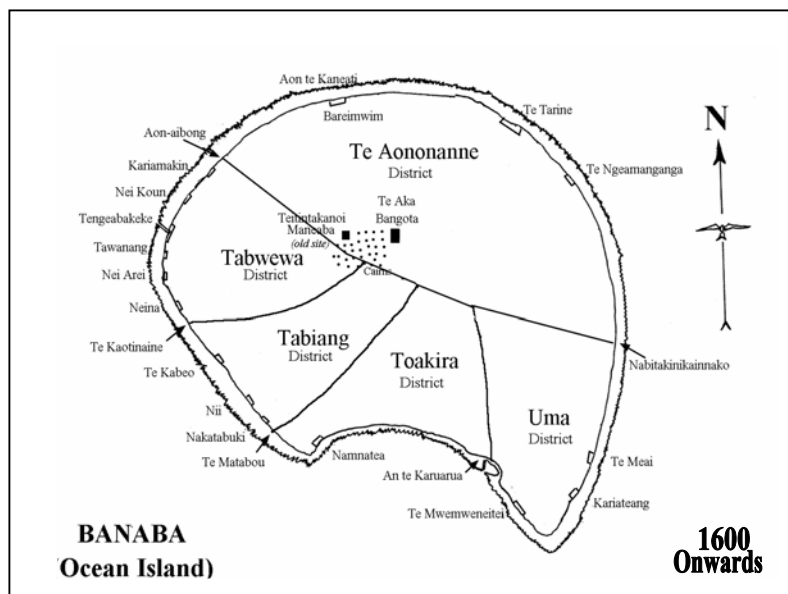


Figure 1.4: BANABA (Ocean Island) 1600 Onwards After the Second Invasion

Early European contact

The first mention of Banaba or Paanopa or Panapa, as the phonetic spelling of the name the island's inhabitants used, is found in the tomes of whaling journals and diaries from the early 1800s onwards when ships called on the island 'to buy meat (pigs) and to add fresh food to their sea rations while on their year-long journeys' (Mahaffy 1910:569). Paanopa would become known by European seamen as Ocean Island after the discovery of the island by Captain John Mertho in 1804 and named after his ship *Ocean*. For the next century Banabans would begin to come into more contact with the outside world as whaling ships discovered what they referred to as 'on-the-line grounds' which extended along the waters of the equator from the Line Island in the east to Nauru in the west (Sigrah & King 2001:177). It was also during this period that the Banabans came into contact with runaway convicts who had jumped ship while on their way to penal settlements in New South Wales or Norfolk Island. By 1985 records show that 17 convicts had settled on Banaba under what would commonly become known throughout the Pacific as 'beachcombers'. Mahaffy stated, 'they were usually bad, adopted the dress of the natives, and were tattooed like them; instructed them in all the vices of a 'superior' civilisation, and communicated to them its most terrible diseases'. He also mentions that a well respected sea captain, who visited Ocean Island in 1852 on a whaling-ship had related that, 'in their general character, the white beachcombers of that place were no better than those on Pleasant Island'. What Mahaffy has recorded is the impact these beachcombers had on the local Banaban community in his 1910 article:

They taught them to distil a spirit from cocoa-nut-toddy through gun-barrels; they mended the dilapidated muskets which the natives possessed; they practiced polygamy; they brawled among themselves, and not infrequently murdered and poisoned each other... Wars were of frequent occurrence among the natives of the four villages on the island, and in these struggles the white men took a leading part, and were sometimes

killed. (Mahaffy 1910:580)

Mahaffy concluded that he found no lasting memory of the beachcombers among the Banabans other than that 'they were bad men', and they left 'no abiding mark' on the Banaban society by the time of his first visit to the island in 1896. The other major influence during this pre-phosphate period as Banabans began to interact more with European ships' crews was the recruiting of young Banaban men to join crews and later find themselves as labourers on foreign plantations. This phenomenon would become known through out the Pacific as 'blackbirding' and if the entry recorded in the diary of Captain Mackay aboard the Queensland brig *Flora* in 1875 is any indication when he stated that, 'after they recruited 60 Banaban men to take to Queensland, he was approached by the elder from Tabwewa who with tears in his eyes, the elder said that most of their men had already been taken away...' (Sigrah & King 2001:177), then large numbers of young Banaban men were taken from their homeland. With these major influences of European contact over this period we find documented census figures which have now been gathered over this hundred year period from 1851 to 1945 and published by Sigrah and King (2001:184-185). The data gathered states a Banaban population in 1851 of, '2,000-3,000' (Webster 1851; Maude 1994:77), and by 4 Aug 1885 a massive population drop

to '200 or more' (Walkup 1885; Maude 1994:90). By the arrival of Ellis on 11 May 1900 and the discovery of phosphate on Banaba his diary records a total of 451 Banabans. Ellis and other Pacific historians, Arthur Grimble and Harry Maude would contribute this to a prolonged drought experienced on the island between 1871 and 1874. Walkup and Maude would also claim reports of the population on Banaba falling 'to between a dozen and 40 people'. Sigrah and King argue that, 'if so few Banabans had survived, the genealogical charts would reflect these losses with the disappearance of whole families from them. Our charts do show some losses but not to this extent' (2001:186).

Ellis used this fact to his advantage and promised the local community that the presence of his mining operations would also be able to provide them with water. What the Banabans did not realise, was that they would also have to pay for this privilege. Not much was known or had been written about the origins of Banabas' inhabitants leading up to the discovery of phosphate by Albert Ellis in 1900. As Mahaffy (1910:570) stated, 'the men were a fine athletic race, wonderfully clever in managing their outrigger canoes, and rather dark in colour when compared with the Gilbert Islanders, the result of their constant exposure to the equatorial sun'. He also concluded that, 'it is because I have never seen any record of their older state that I have endeavoured to collect in these notes some of the impressions of a six months' stay among them.'



Figure 1.5: Original copy of Gilbert Islands Proclamation dated 1892

European recording of Banaban history

By the time of Ellis' discovery of phosphate, Banaba was a remote and isolated community. Even at the time of Great Britain's Protectorate over the Group that would become known as Gilbert Island in 1892 (Figure 1.5), Banaba was not included as stated by Maude 1975 in tabled evidence in the British court:

Inter-locking world of the Gilbertese, Ocean Island and the Banabans, situated far to the west, had no part. Forgotten in Gilbertese tradition, unrecorded in the Gilbertese genealogies, it may be doubted if a single Gilbertese Islander was aware of the existence of the Banabans at the time of their first contact with Europeans. Ocean Island was no more part of the Gilbert Islands than Greenland was part of Norway a century or two after the Scandinavians voyages had ceased. Like Nauru, it was a dead-end reached by occasional driftaways from the Gilbert Islands, but from which there was no return (Sigrah & King 2001:35).

It was from this period that misinterpretation of Banaba identity begun. The assumption that Banaba was controlled by chiefs was typical of western thinking at the time, however this was further exaggerated when Ellis had the Banaban man who came out to meet him on his arrival in 1900 place his mark of an agreement to mine the island for the next 999 years and declare him as the King of Ocean Island. From the Banaban point of view the negotiations would have seemed somewhat strange and mystifying. The proposal being made was absolutely new and there was no way the Banabans could have foreseen its implications (Williams & Macdonald 1985:31). Ellis was soon to discover that there were in fact four different settlements which he termed 'villages', in what is commonly referred to under the English concept of social organisation. In fact this first assumption was another grave mistake as each settlement clearly represented the different clans and settlers living on the island who all upheld their own cultural practices and traditions (Figure 1.4). In Banaban culture all men and women are considered equal, and only elders within the community are elevated because of respect for their knowledge and understanding in all matters relating to culture and daily life' (Sigrah & King 2001:169).

Ellis would later state in his diary, 'it soon became evident that people in the other villages were aggrieved'. He discovered that the original two signatories on his agreement were trying to restrict trading to their own village, and it was not until five days on the island that he realised that the land he wished to buy or lease was divided into innumerable private plots, and to acquire the areas needed to begin mining and shipping would involve reaching a separate agreement with almost every resident' (Williams & Macdonald 1985:34). What Ellis did not understand or preferred to dismiss, was the fact that each settlement consisted of *kainga* 'hamlets' with a central *maneaba* 'meeting house'. Banabans argue that villages were a new system introduced by the Europeans where their people were brought together into one common land boundary with a central *maneaba* and church, and to assist the Company and government in controlling the local inhabitants. The Banabans believe 'the development of the village system brought about one of the most significant changes' (Sigrah & King 2001:218). Ellis would soon learn that labouring for wages was not a local custom, and the idea of bringing in either Gilbertese or Caroline Islanders was raised as 'they had lived under British or German rule and had learned to work. The important thing was to be sure that the Ocean Island

people understood that the Company must have the right to bring in foreigners' (Williams & Macdonald 1985:28)

In his 1910 article, Mahaffy would also claim that when he had first visited Banaba in 1896 he had found it in the occupation 'of a purely native community', and even thought the inhabitants were 'rather dark in colour when compared with the Gilbert Islanders... they spoke the purest Gilbertine, and are beyond question members of that race: their tattooing closely resembled that of the Gilbert Islanders, with whom I was well acquainted'. What is interesting is his assumption that because of the tattooing he believed that this signified the entire population's Gilbertese lineage. In fact, tattooing is recognised amongst the Banabans as being introduced by the Tabwewans and is not recognized in the Aka traditions (Sigrah & King 2001:164). The later arrivals from the Gilberts living in the southern districts of Uma and Tabiang would also use tattooing as one of their customs. Mahaffy would also confirm his observations by stating, 'I only landed for a short time at the village of Uma, on the south-east corner of the island'. The mention of 'a pure Gilbertese language' is also of interest and suggests that it was not the typical language he had heard in his travels. Of course, what has to be remembered during all these early European inter-actions is the fact that observations were being made and viewed from a solely European perspective with no real knowledge or understanding of the complexities of Banaban society.

The alienation of Banaban identity by colonial historians and academics

As problems between the Banabans, the mining company and the Colonial government compounded the re-writing of Banaban history started to evolve. The main catalyst was the interest in documenting history mainly in regard to phosphate mining. But invariably the articles would reflect the lifestyle of the island's indigenous inhabitants as publishers and editors met the public's demand for stories regaling the exotic ways of this remote Pacific isle. Numerous books would be published and people such as Ellis, Grimble, Maude, Eliot, Mahaffy, Pope, who had all started off as Company or government staff ended up becoming best selling authors. These publications had the power to shape and re-write history to suit the objectives of the authors, especially in the case of Ellis and his justifying the world benefits of his phosphate discovery. Grimble's subsequent poetic style of writing would become so popular that his books would become part of the school curriculum, reading material in Australia at the time. While millions of Europeans enjoyed these men's vision of South Seas adventurers the impact on the Banaban community would prove very detrimental. What has to be remembered during this period leading up to World War Two is the fact that Grimble, a Resident Commissioner and the man involved in major Banaban Land disputes such as the 1931 Compulsory Land Acquisition and his cadet Maude, who between 1931 and 1932 would become the Native Lands Commissioner on the island ended up becoming recognised archeologists from their writing and recordings of Banaban history. Maude would admit that he had based much of his work on Grimble's original notes gathered on Banaba during this pre-war period in the belief that the traditional old Banaban history had already been lost. He admitted that it was 'virtually impossible to get information from the Aka because of their code of secrecy' (Sigrah & King 2001:32). What little information he did uncover would be limited and confused with another Banaban clan known as the Mangati who were descended from the Auriaria clan residing in the Tabwewa district. This seemingly simple but very important mistake would cause a further alienation of Banaban identity. It would also cause more confusion and conflict with the Banaban community in later years due to sensitivity over original land boundaries close to the

sensitive area where the Aka sacred cairns once existed (Figure 1.3). To add to this dilemma Grimble's early research had mostly been taken from interviews with Banaban woman, Nei Beteua, a direct descendant of Nei Anginimaeao from Tabiang district, and therefore offered a historical perspective based on Gilbertese traditions.

As Maude began to realise his mistake spending time interviewing Banaban landowners and recording the individual land holdings for the very first time. It was from this period that he began to report the existence of a pure Banaban identity, 'the Banabans were a unique race, while still referring to only customs and legends that the I-Kiribati introduced to Banaba after the invasion of Nei Anginimaeao' (Sigrah & King 2001:32).

In 1935 Maude and P.D. Macdonald conducted a series of standard anthropometric measurements on 'those Banabans considered by themselves to be of stock unmixed with Gilbertese blood. These numbered 70 in all...' and their results appeared to suggest a difference in certain facial measurements and indices when compared with a control group on Beru. In his 1975 sworn statement to the British Courts he would also comment that: 'at all events it was commonly asserted by the late Sir Arthur Grimble and others that a typical Banaban was distinguishable in physical appearance from a Gilbertese, and this I consider to have been the case in a number of the older generation, whose features appeared quite distinctive (Sigrah & King 2001:35).



Figure 1.6: A young Arthur Grimble in his office as Resident Commissioner c. 1920

In this sworn testimony he would finally admit his original mistake over Banaban identity:

The view that the Banabans were Gilbertese was indeed uncritically accepted by myself during my early years of residence in the Gilbert and Ellice Colony and it was only after detailed study that it became apparent that, like almost every community the world over, they in fact represented a racial mixture, in which the Gilbertese component was a relatively recent overlay on a basically non-Gilbertese stock; and that in any case the Banabans had never at any time formed a part of the Gilbert Islands, whether geographically, politically or through social cohesion (Sigrah & King 2001: 37).

The recording of incorrect information, however irrelevant it seemed at the time, would have major and devastating impact on the Banabans in the years following.

The use of language to define ethnic identity and influence of Missionaries

Language has often been used through out the years to align Banaban identity to the I-Kiribati. This issue has caused argument and debate over the years as the Banabans lament the loss of

their original language. This process cannot be entirely blamed on the phosphate mining industry, however the influx of 'around a thousand recruited Pacific Islands labourers' (Williams & Macdonald 1985:84) who were mostly Gilbertese would also have some impact. The first introduction of Gilbertese language began with the arrival of Nei Anginimaeao's group who had arrived around 200 years earlier. However this influence was contained to the more recent settlements on the southern side of the island. The main catalyst would be the arrival



Figure 1.7: The new Banaban *tani Kiritian* (Christian) congregation on Banaba early 1900's

of Captain W. Walkup on 4 August 1885 from the Hawaiian Board of Missions. He quickly 'convinced the Banabans that they could learn much from a mission teacher and the word and stories from the Bible (*Baibara*) that had been translated into the Kiribati language' (Sigrah & King 2001:195). Over the next 15 years half of the Banabans, mainly residing in the southern districts would embrace the American Congregationalist philosophy, if not always the practices. Whereas te Aka in the northern district still upheld their old *tani Bakan* (Pagan) ways. Maude would summarise the Banabans 'gradually began building their village churches and schools and learning to read and write with the Gilbertese Bible and other mission-produced literature to help them' (Sigrah & King 2001:197). This episode would not only formalise the Gilbertese language on the island but also introduce the Banabans to western style of education especially the 'written word'. The missionary influence was so strong with Banabans encouraged that to learn the 'word of God' they must adopt the Gilbertese language so they could receive his message. Maude would also enter into the language debate in his sworn statement to the British Court:

It is sometimes asserted that the Banabans must be Gilbertese because they speak Gilbertese. Apart from the fact that linguistic affinity is a shaky foundation on which to base racial relationship, that this was not always the case in not only affirmed by the Banabans themselves but was obvious to me when I was living amongst them in 1931-32. During the course of the Land Commission proceedings, which were conducted throughout in the vernacular, I soon became aware that part of the vocabulary, and a number of idioms, being used by the witnesses and assessors were not, in fact Gilbertese at all... though they amounted to a significant quantity, even then, due to the use of the Gilbertese Bible, or Gilbertese as the language of instruction in the mission schools, the influence of the many hundreds of Gilbertese phosphate workers brought to the island under indenture... the Banaban speech had long been swamped by introduced Gilbertese... nevertheless its former

Banaba	Kubati
Sogero	Karangama
Aua	(one) do bika ngara!
Borebare	Kawatata
Nouta	Kato
Kani	Toa naka
Tolon bawati	Kubanawawa
Karawa	Tawaka
Toa banawa	Toa bawaka
Mono	Raa

Figure 1.8: Banaban words from Maude's notebook 1932

existence is an indication of separate identity while its extinction is attributable to pressures emanating from European contact (Sigrah & King 2001:201). Maude instructed his court clerk to record these uniquely Banaban words in a notebook, the original copy of this important documented evidence is part of the Maude papers, held by the Barr Smith Library, University of Adelaide (Figure 1.8). As mentioned earlier the other legacy of the lost Banaban language can be found in the words of the distinctively te Aka dance *te karanga* (Figure 1.2) and both these important records were published by Sigrah & King (2001:201; Appendix 9).

Definition of Banaban identity and the value of land

It is important to record what the Banabans perceive and recognise as their own cultural identity. As already documented, the Banabans acknowledge three distinct groupings based on the island's history leading up to European discovery. The first grouping is te Aka with the recognised head or Godfather as Teimanaia, the second grouping based on the first invasion and their Godfather, Auriaria, the third grouping relating to the arrival of driftaways from the Gilberts and the recognised head, Nei Anginimaeao. To be considered as a true Banaban or of Banaban blood in today's world a person has to be related to at least one of these three groupings, and even with inter-marriage many Banabans can still trace their genealogical ancestry back to all three. This status for Banaban identity also highlights the infallible link with land ownership and inherited lineage. This fact is further endorsed by the Banabans concept of cultural law known as *te rii ni Banaba* (backbone of Banaba) used in settling clan disputes especially in relation to land ownership. This process is 'the simple three-point formula given to us by our elders' (Sigrah & King 2001:135), and also forms the fundamental basis of Banaban identity: 1) genealogy, 2) inherited family role, 3) name of hamlet.

In Banaban custom to earn respect, one has to be acquainted with all aspects of tradition and culture. This knowledge can only be achieved by knowing his or her family's genealogy and

the position and inherited duty that each individual holds within society. In other words 'to know one's genealogy is to know one's birthright' (Sigrah & King 2001:56). The 'claiming of the rights' represents a complicated system of inherited family roles within Banaban society that represents all aspects of daily life with particular clans recognised as official holders of certain duties and rights in society. 'Many of these duties were introduced into Banaban society as far back as the 16th century through a process of trading for land' (Sigrah & King 2001:133). The naming of your hamlet represents the clan's inherited land ownership. These three points are of critical importance as each one inter-locks with the other proving indigenous Banaban identity and the overwhelming link to land. The Banaban system of cultural law, 'te rii ni Banaba' is still practiced today.

Te Aka discovery

The existence of the te Aka was virtually unknown outside of the Banaban community. The clan's strict code of secrecy and powers of sorcery is well known and respected among the Banabans. These traits also aided in keeping their existence obscure. While many of the new European arrivals began to interact with the local inhabitants and especially men like Ellis, Mahaffy, Grimble and Maude who began to record Banaban folklore and sociology, the te Aka shied away from any foreign contact. This is evidenced from the first invasion of Banaba by Auriaria when te Aka fought the invaders and upheld land boundaries and the whole northern side of the island over the centuries that followed and right up to the mining of their land. Even with the arrival of missionaries many of the te Aka refused to convert to Christianity, and upheld their traditional pagan beliefs evoking powers from their ancestral skulls and practicing their rituals based on sun worship. The missionary influence over half of the island's inhabitants from 1885 onwards would aid in creating a cultural divide where the Christians would begin learning new concepts based on western ways and the Land of Matang (the place where the fair skinned men dwelled), especially in the area of education. With the formal introduction of Gilbertese language through the Bible, and Banabans being sent aboard to missionary school the gap between the old ways and the new would emerge. By the time of Ellis' arrival in 1900, his Christian values and more gentlemanly ways proved a welcomed relief from the earlier beachcombers and driftaways the Banabans had experienced in the past. Ellis was quick to align himself with his fellow Christians and use the local missionaries to his advantage, especially those who had a grasp of English. This development would further alienate te Aka and only build to the mystery and fear surrounding them. No mention of them would appear in any historical writing. In Maude's 1932 article on Banaban Social Organization he described, 'according to local myth the original inhabitants of Banaba were Melanesian in type'. His information was confusing and no mention of the te Aka appears, but snippets of valuable insight can be found:

A portion of this host, whose ancestor was Auriaria, landed on Banaban and succeeded in overcoming the inhabitants, 'casting them into the sea,' though they had a wholesome fear of their sorcery... However, it would appear from local tradition that not all of the black folk were killed, for a remnant appears to have been driven to the central plateau of the island...' (Maude & Maude 1932: 264)

Unfortunately he would go on to mistakenly identify the te Aka as the Mangati people and the 'people of Tairua [Taaira]', when no such place exists, and no family or hamlet are known by

this name. 'The word Taaira or Tairua as the Banabans spell it, means 'foreigner', and the word Banabans associate with as the Battle of Tairua,'. (Sigrah & King 2001:143) Once again it must be remembered that the Banabans would only refer to te Aka and their settlement on the island as te Aonoanne, 'that place!', because of the curse they were convinced would befall them at the mere mention of the name. Maude (1997) would admit 'while he was researching traditional Banaban history, it was virtually impossible to get information from te Aka because of their code of secrecy' (Sigrah & King 2001:32). The physical and scientific evidence of the existence of te Aka and their old sacred village site would not be discovered until the Company began preliminary preparations to mine an area on the central plateau near the old wireless station in 1965. Even with the removal of the Banabans from the island in 1943 by the Japanese and their subsequent resettlement on Rabi over 3,200 kilometers away in the Fiji Group, the fear and mystery surrounding this area remained. In 1964 BPC employees discovered an old village site in the interior while they were preparing the area for mining. This initially involved clearing overlying vegetation and completely removing the land surface, which threatened to destroy the site. Mining was postponed in the immediate area and the Company informed the Bishop Museum in Honolulu and the Australian National University in Canberra of the discovery.



Figure 1.9: Phosphate mining nearing te Aka village site in 1965

A joint archaeological investigation was conducted by Dr Ronald Lampert with the assistance of Professor John Golson of ANU's Department of Anthropology and Dr K.P. Emroy from Bishop University. Lampert spent three weeks excavating the site with a full-time labour force of two I-Kiribati and one Tuvaluan, and Mrs Lorraine Thwaites along with volunteers among the BPC's European staff (Sigrah & King 2001:266). Lampert verified and confirmed the site as that of the old te Aka site and noted the different sources of identification. He also located an old BPC map dated 1907 that showed six 'native houses' then surviving at the location. Following the re-discovery of the site the BPC had mapped the floor plans of the buildings in detail and with the aid of this map and his own examination Lampert was able to identify the existence of at least a dozen buildings that had been represented at the site over time. One of the building sites was identified as a *maneaba* (meeting house), with part of it having been already accidentally bulldozed before his arrival. The most valuable find to be uncovered were

the skeletal remains of two individuals found in the earth-filled extension of the *maneaba* and a third burial site was located in one of the other building sites. The first remains consisted of a skull only, while the second burial site contained an incomplete skeleton with the skull and long bones of the legs completely missing. These bones were in poor condition while the third remains were in good condition, but also missing the skull. He would also go on to discover other artifacts including various type of adzes used as cutting edges, various shell type ornaments, partly finished stalactite fishing hooks and weights used for frigate bird snaring. Lampert's findings would conclude te Aka village had been occupied until fairly recently and wood samples were analysed by Mr Polach from the C-14 Dating Laboratory at ANU to be fewer than 200 years. Later carbon dating tests on charcoal taken from one of the cooking pits would date the relevant sample back to 300 to 400 years (Sigrah & King 2001:281). Lampert would also comment that the finding of the remains would endorse the practice whereby relatives of the deceased would often retain the skull and certain other bones for the making of tools such as fish hooks and shuttles use for thatch roofing. A femur bone from the third burial site was sent to G.C. Schofield, from the Department of Anatomy at Monash University for extensive examination. He found that the bone was a right-sided femur of an adult female, and was obviously not Polynesian (Sigrah & King 2001: 35,282; Lampert 1968:17)

Once Lampert had removed the remains and artefacts for safe storage and assessment back at ANU, the mining was to resume and the site would be completely destroyed. It would not be until 1997 that Lampert would discover the significance of the site and its value to the Banaban people. He was also shocked to learn that the plans to mine the site had been cancelled not long after he had finished his investigations. The sudden unexplained death of an overseer involved in the mining of the area had finally brought the mining to a halt. Now 24 years since the cessation of mining on Banaba, te Aka remains unmined all except for the original surface clearing that was conducted before Lampert's arrival. Today the site is completely encircled by a 'fortress' of towering limestone pinnacles making access virtually impossible. While the superstitions regarding te Aka live on, this sacred place once again has been enveloped and shrouded in mystery. The skeletal remains and artifacts kept at ANU were finally returned to the Banaban community on Rabi in 1998.

Banaban assimilation – fact or fiction

The question of Banaban identity was never an issue leading up to World War Two, but once they were removed from the island in 1943 by the invading Japanese forces and subsequently relocated to Rabi, Fiji in 1945, the situation of the Banabans became very tenuous. From the post war period onwards as mining on the island moved back into full production, the island's European staff had virtually no idea or understanding of the Banabans. With the island's labour staff made up of thousands of Gilbertese (I-Kiribati) and Ellice (Tuvaluan) islanders the legitimacy of Banaba's indigenous population became obscure. It was during this time that the idea of Banaban assimilation with Kiribati seemed to intensify. Now with European Company staff having no direct contact with the Banabans and the influx of such a large number of Kiribati labourers dominating the island's workforce, the notation of Banabans being 'troublemakers' began to grow. This catch cry had originally generated from the Company management instructing their staff 'not to mix with these Banaban troublemakers' (Lennon 1992), and grew over the years becoming the status quo with Banabans relocated over 3,200 kilometers away in Rabi, Fiji. Up until the mid 1970's, the presence of one lone Banaban representative and his family living on the island was the only contact the Banabans and the

people living and working on the island would have. This important but difficult role would also endorse the Company's claims especially over the years as the Banabans became more dissent and began legal action against the Company.

In January 1974 the Banabans would also unsuccessfully petition the British Government 'calling for the separation of Ocean Island from the Gilbert and Ellice Island Colony and the recognition of Ocean Island's independence' (Sigrah & King 2001:18). When a Banaban contingent of over 100 young Banabans arrived on the island in 1977 and again in 1979 to stake their claim to the homeland, while their legal proceedings were underway in the British Courts, the situation was tense, with Banabans forced to live in a make shift camp down on the beach behind their old village site of Uma. The Banaban aims were to try and stop mining while their court case was underway, and their protests had turned violent resulting in the death of one of their young men. The Court case against the British Government and the British Phosphate Commission (BPC) would finally come to an end in 1979 becoming known as one of the longest civil court cases in UK history. It was during this tumultuous period that the argument of Banaban-Kiribati assimilation came to the fore. Another contributing factor to the argument would go back to the removal of the Banabans from their homeland by the Japanese occupation forced in 1943 and their dispersal to Japanese camps in Kosrae, Nauru and Tarawa. By the end of the war in 1945 when the Banabans were gathered together on Tarawa with the aim of relocating them to Fiji, from the 1,003 war survivors brought together, 703 were listed as being Banabans, while 300 were I-Kiribati. This I-Kiribati influx had grown over the war period from their forced relocation to other Pacific islands resulting in the forming of new relationships and inter-marriage over that period. This group would form the nucleus of the new Banaban settlement arriving on Rabi 15 Dec 1945.

Over the years of mining it is correct that there were a number of inter-marriages between the islanders including the Ellis (Tuvalu) and Fiji contingents, with some of the imported labour staff being adopted into Banaban families, but traditional Banaban customs especially in the area of marriage, sports, dances, claiming of the rights (inherited roles within the community, based on cultural law of '*te rii ni Banaba*'), adoption, elders' position within the *maneaba* were all maintained. The Banaban elders were diligent in upholding of their cultural and ethnic identity even after the relocation to Rabi, with certain dances and sports banned from official gatherings to ensure that these important cultural practices were respected and preserved for future generations (Sigrah & King 2001:162-164).

Banabans today living under two governments - Fiji and Kiribati

Today the Banabans find themselves living under two different Pacific Nations. This process also further complicates their quest to uphold cultural identity while having to observe laws and traditions living in foreign lands. While Pacific islanders uphold great respect for their Island brothers, the customs and traditions that are so essential in every day life, and more importantly the survival of cultural identity in a rapidly changing world, is very much under threat. Banaban elders had made every effort in the past, especially since their resettlement on Rabi to ensure that Banaban identity would be protected and secured in the years that followed. However, today with so many of the elders gone, and a new generation facing difficult upheavals, now more than at any other time in history the Banabans are at the greatest threat of being assimilated into mainstream Kiribati and Fiji societies. This concept of assimilation was one that was always assumed by the mining company would provide the best outcome to assist

them in the mining of Banaba. History has shown that past Colonial officials who tried to protect the Banabans interests in the early days of mining would be sent packing. The idea of moving the Banabans to another island was first raised back in 1914 (Maude1946:10), and documentation from the Prime Minister of Australia to the Dominions Office in 1927 would also support these plans (Sigrah & King 2001: 239,323). The Japanese invasion of Banaba would provide the perfect solution in removing Banabans permanently from their homeland. Today the Banaban community on the homeland currently numbers around 250 who live amongst the crumbling asbestos ridden wreckage and decaying buildings left by the mining company. Banaba now comes under the laws and jurisdiction of the Kiribati Constitution with the interpretation of a 'Banaban' or 'Banabans' defined as, 'the former indigenous inhabitants of Banaba and such other persons one of whose ancestors was born in Kiribati before 1900 as may now or hereafter be accepted as members of the Banaban community in accordance with custom' (See Chapter IX, section 125). They have two Banaban representatives in the Kiribati Assembly, one representing Banaba, and the other representing Rabi.

Between the Banabans arrival on Rabi in 1945 and 1995, the Banaban community on Rabi grew from 1,003 to over 5,000. The Banaban Settlement Ordinance of 1945 (Cap.104) set up the frame-work for the administration of Rabi Island and provided for Rabi's administration through a separate island council, although resettled Banabans were otherwise subject to Fiji law. Banabans were quoted as 'enjoying a unique position in Fiji' by the Committee who conducted the Inquiry into Rabi Island Council Affairs, April 1994. Their report also stated that:

The Banabans of Rabi are citizens of Fiji with full voting and electoral rights, yet they also have a representative in the Kiribati Assembly representing the Banaban community in Fiji. They have the right to free entry and residence on both Banaban and Rabi. They have been given wide powers to govern themselves on Rabi, they may set their own taxes and rates, they have the sole right to administer their land, they may establish their own police force. In many respects they have greater autonomy than the Rotumans.

Yet, with all these provisions in place why then are the Banabans today under such threat? In May 2003 a report commissioned by the Commission on Human Rights in regard to the Minority Rights in Fiji and the Solomon Island painted an alarming picture:

Aid dependency and poor financial management have led to deteriorating living standards for the Banaban community of Rabi. After misappropriation of funds in the 1980s and a failure to meet debts in 1992, the Rabi Island Council was briefly dissolved by the Fiji government. Banabans remain one of Fiji's most disadvantaged and politically marginalized communities. Affirmative action programmes for indigenous Fiji and Rotuman communities in the aftermath of the 1987 and 2000 coups have not been targeted at Banaban people.

The report would go on to state that the 'settlers from their once phosphate-rich island of Banaba find themselves trapped in a position of social deprivation, and exclusion from mainstream political processes'.

Conclusion and recommendations

There are three points that must be addressed to ensure that Banaban ethnic identity is upheld: education, unity and autonomy. Over the centuries, the teaching of the old Banaban ways decreed that, 'secrecy is the fortification of identity' and ensured that Banaban traditional knowledge and values would be well protected and guarded from foreigners. Now as the Banabans face new challenges and assimilation into Fiji and Kiribati societies it is imperative to embrace cultural practices uniquely Banaban. To ensure that Banaban history is kept alive in the very present, so that when the future generations walk on their homeland and touch their land, it will tell them who they are and where they belong.

To strengthen Banaban claims for autonomy that would provide a voice in the areas of formal recognition, education policies and legal freedoms and rights in today's world, the Banabans first have to understand the basic principles needed to achieve this goal. While autonomy is generally understood to refer to the capacity to be one's own person, to live one's life accordingly and without manipulation by others, there are two necessary components for self-rule. Before one can govern oneself they first must be in a position to act competently and be able to do so through the desires or values that are in some sense one's own. Therefore the strength to guide and build a strong future for the Banabans must come from within and be a united movement. A movement based on human kindness and spiritual unity, with respect for the humanity of each and every person that can achieve far greater things than any oppression, persecution or denial of freedom.

The history of the Banabans is one of colonization, in which a colonizing culture was actively promoted to replace their indigenous culture. The term 'folklore' is not an acceptable term to the Banabans. Their culture is not 'folklore' but the sacred law intertwined with a traditional way of life – the laws that set the legal, moral, and cultural values of Banaban traditional society. They **are** Banaban cultural identity.

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Figures:

- 1.1 Sigrav, Raobeia Ken Sigrav and King, Stacey M. Map titled, *Banaba (Ocean Island) – Prior 1500, Te Rii ni Banaba*. IPS, USP Fiji 2001, p. 24.
- 1.2 Maude, H. (1930-32) Photo of Te karanga dancing costume wearing wigs. *Te Rii ni Banaba*. IPS, USP Fiji 2001, p. 28.
- 1.3 Sigrav, Raobeia Ken Sigrav and King, Stacey M. Map titled, *Banaba (Ocean Island) – 1500 Onwards, Te Rii ni Banaba*. IPS, USP Fiji 2001, p. 90.
- 1.4 Sigrav, Raobeia Ken Sigrav and King, Stacey M. Map titled, *Banaba (Ocean Island) – 1600 Onwards, Te Rii ni Banaba*. IPS, USP Fiji 2001, p. 116.
- 1.5 Copy of original Handwritten Gilbert Island Proclamation dated 1892. *Te Rii ni Banaba*. IPS, USP Fiji 2001, p. 33.
- 1.6 Williams, J.F. (1905-1931). Photograph Arthur Grimble.
- 1.7 Williams, J.F. (1905-1931). Photograph of early Banaban church congregation early 1900's.
- 1.8 Maude, H. (1932) Photo of Banaban words from Maude's notebook. *Te Rii ni Banaba*. IPS, USP Fiji 2001, p. 201.
- 1.9 Lampert, R.J. (1965). Colour plate taken at Te Aka site Banaba.