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## Battling overwhelming odds

*Te Rii Ni Banaba* by Raobela Ken Sigrah & Stacey M King - Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 2001.

Reviewed by KATABWENA TAWAKA

*TE RII NI BANABA* is a gripping account of the struggles of the people of Ocean Island against cultural invasion, and later the destruction of their homeland during the phosphate rush. The authors, Raobeia Ken Sigrah, a Banaban, and Stacey M King, who had family involved in phosphate mining on Banaba, have done their research well.

They also draw on their personal experiences, relationships and affinity with the Banaban people to put up a compelling challenge against the many widely-accepted research on Banabans. 'Te Rii ni Banaba' touches on the anthropological and archaeological aspects of the Banabans and through oral history as related by the Banaban elders. By drawing on this source, the authors are able to claim that their book is the voice of the Banaban people.



Outsiders may not be able to tell the difference but despite the cultural and physical similarities with the I-Kiribati, the Banabans have always considered themselves a separate race and nation. This is even though the language is more or less the same. The authors write from an indigenous Banaban viewpoint, and bring into stark focus the dying traditional heritage and culture of the Banabans.

The book, categorised into four segments, outlines the chronological history of the Banabans, beginning with the 'Te Aka clan' who are classified as the original people of Banaba. Their customs, culture, legends, dance and genealogy are well covered.

The other segment details the invasion of Banaba mainly from Kiribati and later by Europeans (I-Matang).

Their impact on the Banabans, their culture and language, evident to this day, are discussed in the form of legends and myths. The onslaught of Christianity which led to the conversion of many Banabans was another major upheaval.

The discovery and extraction of phosphate put ongoing pressure on the Banabans. The final outcome was horrific - the destruction of what the Banabans held so dear - their homeland. Before Banaba, an isolated patch of land in the Central Pacific, was ruined by phosphate mining, it was the home of 5000 Banabans.

They are today scattered between Banaba and Rabi Island in Fiji, which was purchased from the Fiji government. The phosphate dollars, all but finished now, have done little to mollify a displaced people. Throughout their travails, Banabans have tried to cling to their own unique customs and traditions - a daunting challenge. The Banaban community will be grateful to the authors.

The book is a living record of their heritage. It is an educational tool for their youth and interested parties wanting to know more about this unique ethnic group that despite overwhelming odds, never gave up the struggle. □