Kiribati is home to the Phoenix Islands Protected Area (PIPA), a natural World Heritage Site since 2010. Kiribati is interested in maintaining natural resources in the face of climate change, while also considering the intersection of nature and traditional customs related to cultural heritage. There is a need for the conservation of cultural heritage found in building methods, architecture as well as significant sites of early settlement and spiritual tradition in Kiribati.
CULTURAL HERITAGE OF KIRIBATI

Traditional handicraft is still largely prevalent in Kiribati, especially in the rural regions of North Tarawa. Local skills and trades still contribute to the basic elements used in daily life.

Fishing and traditional handicraft are the primary trades for the Kiribati people; they rely heavily on the stability of the ecosystem for their livelihood.

The people of Kiribati have carefully maintained cultural traditions despite the inundation of modern influences.

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Few have heard of Kiribati (pronounced Ki-ri-bas), and even fewer know of its location. Situated in the Pacific Ocean, roughly between Hawaii and Fiji, Kiribati exists as a series of 33 coral atolls organized into 3 groupings: the Gilbert, Phoenix, and Line Islands.

As a pilot study and capacity building workshop, seven sites were documented, four cultural sites and three buildings, to demonstrate particular methods of documentation and data input. This approach can then be applied to the hundreds of other sites and buildings to further determine methods of conservation from a local level.

Environmental Conditions

The Republic of Kiribati is a nation being significantly impacted by climate change. Due to rising sea levels, Kiribati is experiencing a loss of shoreline, salination of ground water and loss of plant life. Manmade changes to the islands, through untreated waste, rapid imports of non-biodegradable products and artificial land buildup, are hastening the destruction of usable land in Kiribati.

It is expected that Kiribati may be inhabitable within the next fifty years due to these changing environmental factors. In preparation of major land loss, the Kiribati government purchased land from Fiji in March of 2012, creating a more permanent and visible alternative to their current physical location. However, they purchased just 5,000 acres of land in Fiji, which is only 3% of their current land mass.
HERITAGE & SPIRITUALITY

Creation Mythology

The I-Kiribati people are deeply connected to the land and sea, which is evident in their customs, mythology, language, and building methods. The traditional creation myth represents the value placed on nature and creatures in Kiribati culture. Typically shared as oral history, here is one iteration of the “Story of Creation.”

Before anything else existed, there was Nareau. He was awakened from eternal sleep by a voice calling to him as a breeze against the warm night, “Nareau, Nareau, Nareau arise, There is much work to be done.” As he awoke from his sleep, he realized that the voice was his own and that the visions he had experienced were not his dreams but a foretelling of the world he would create. A sealed sphere emerged from the darkness, which Nareau realized he must open. He stomped on it in an effort to break the form open, but only managed a small crack. This was enough to see that inside were various creatures including the octopus, shark, turtle, and eel. He also saw the flattened bodies of humans. He enlisted the help of the creatures to pry open the shell from within. He instructed the octopus to donate two arms as sustenance for the eel who was to force the sphere apart to his furthest reaches. As the eel lifted, the octopus stepped upon his tail causing the eel to leap into the heavens, and can now be seen in the night sky as the Milky Way. The creatures succeed in breaking apart the sphere. This enabled Nareau to breathe life into the flattened people, thus becoming the People of Creation. Nareau then surveyed the limitless waters as they merged with the infinite sky and was disturbed by the loneliness. He gathered his people beneath the maneaba structure and told them “This land and the vast expanse will become a world of fellowship amongst men.”

The “Story of Creation” relates to the maneaba in that Nareau desired a place for his people to gather. With the help of the spirits and three iterations later, he succeeded in creating the first meeting place, the maneaba. Connection to the land and sea is also apparent in I-Kiribati orientation of north, south, east and west, which is directly related to the construction and use of the maneaba.

Maneaba Orientation

Maeao: west

Cardinal directions of maneaba are different in Kiribati. What we traditionally define as North, varies from maneaba to another. I-Kiribati directions are based on where the sea is in context to the maneaba. The seaside is regarded as West and other directions are arranged accordingly. Variations in directions occur because of the geography of the island.
Kiribati is struggling to maintain its rich cultural heritage in the midst of its own development. Here one can find a rustic, coconut hut roofed with corrugated metal, or imported canned food behind the counter of a makeshift stand made of old billboards. Dependency on consumption of imported goods takes away Kiribati’s ability to maintain its own self-image. Modern products are replacing indigenous counterparts which, in turn, makes the traditional trades of crafts and services obsolete.

Modernization

Effects on Maneaba

Modernization of the Maneaba is something that the Cultural Center of Kiribati is keeping a close watch on. These meeting houses are in many ways the backbone of Kiribati’s culture. This is where culture happens in terms of village gatherings, feasts, dancing, even habitation. However, with the modernization of the maneaba, its cultural significance wanes. Many of the cultural customs that are rooted in the act of constructing the maneaba are no longer practiced in the new structures. Things like seating positions for elders, or welcoming ceremonies for guests, or town meetings occur less and less as maneabas are being replaced. Newer maneabas, often built by outside organizations like churches or schools are cheaply, quickly produced. This takes ownership away from the community, and changes the relevance and sense of shared ownership over these vital structures.

New maneabas, without specific cultural rules and customs fail to reinforce a sense of respect in its users. As a result, the maneaba as a symbol of peace and justice is quickly transforming into something like a glorified park bench. Preserving the traditional maneaba is not just about keeping the skills and trades involved in building such structures alive or just about protecting the environment, but also, it is about preserving the culture of Kiribati itself.
MANEABA

**Tokahuean Auriaria**, Elta, South Tarawa

The Elta Maneaba is dedicated to the “reign of King Auriaria”, a giant king who once lived in Kiribati. It serves as a meeting house for Elta, and like its counterpart in Nuatabu, it is also the place to welcome guests onto the island. Visited by the Royal Family, this original Maneaba has been around ever since 1979, being the third structure on the same, century old, site.

**Moan Benebene**, Nuatabu, North Tarawa

This special Maneaba is used as the welcoming meeting house for guests to North Tarawa. Upon arrival, dignitaries are expected to stop here, first, and participate in a water drinking ritual. Located at the center of the village, it is the second Maneaba and has been built originally in 1979. Although it was the smallest Maneaba surveyed, it was almost completely built using vernacular means.

**Eutan Karawa**, Bouriki, North Tarawa

Largest Maneaba in North Tarawa, built in a mere five weeks. Although it has a concrete slab for the foundation, it adheres rigorously to the tradition of building that was established in North Tarawa. Along with the physical documentation of the structure came a descriptive and thorough narrative describing the mythological and spiritual significance each and every part of the Maneaba symbolizes.
MANEABA TYPOLOGICAL STUDY

Tokahuean Auriaria, Plan and Sections

Moan Benebene, Plan and Sections

Euutan Karawa, Plan and Sections
**Te Kamaraia shrine**

Spiritual site in North Tarawa associated with evil spirits. Comprised of a large shell where offerings are made, a bed of coral and shells, and a border of rocks. The site is a cleared area in a forest with at least three burial plots and a separate spirit stone known as Kaoburang. The site has been in use for several generations and continues to be utilized.

**Nei Temakua shrine**

Spiritual site in North Tarawa associated with bountiful fishing harvests. Comprised of several sea shells enclosed within a larger bed of coral and rock border. The site is a cleared area adjacent to the sea associated with a visible fish trap approximately 25 meters out. The site has been in use for several generations and continues to be utilized. Erosion from the sea threatens the integrity of the site.

**Atinimebeo shrine**

Mythical site in North Tarawa associated with the appeasement of an ancient king known as Beiamatekaai. Comprised of several alignments of rocks to create an oven where fish were cooked. The site is located on the perimeter of Bauriki village in an overgrown, unused area near the main road. The site has no current usage and is not widely known or utilized by the local people.

**Baon King Kewe shrine**

Mythical site in North Tarawa associated with the ancient king Kewe. Comprised of an enclosure of rocks that demarcate the location of a mythical event. The site is located on the perimeter of Bauriki village on an eroding seaside cliff near the main road. The site remains respected by the local population and requires stabilization.
CULTURAL SITES SURVEY

Te Kamaraia shrine

Nei Temakua shrine

Atinimebeo shrine

Baon King Kewe