

‘Strangers’ in a ‘strange’ land: *i-Kiribati*¹ in Solomon Islands²

Climate change threatens to displace *i-Kiribati*, the people of the low-lying atoll nation of Kiribati in the central Pacific, and much attention has been given to their future plight; however, any potential relocation will not be the first time that *i-Kiribati* have found themselves, en-mass, in a ‘strange’ land. During British colonial times, the then-Gilbertese first experienced relocation away from their island home. In the 1930s, as a result of over-population and resource scarcity, 700 people moved to three atolls in the uninhabited Phoenix-islands group in the extreme south of Kiribati.

Voluntary inter-island migration has been common in the Pacific for centuries, and is usually undertaken by individuals or families in response to population pressures, environmental change, or the desire to seek better economic opportunities elsewhere, often in a nation’s capital; the intra-migration of *i-Kiribati* people, however, was the first large-scale internal movement of Pacific people with the assistance of a governing authority.

Initially, the move appeared successful; yet, by the early 1950s, after repeated droughts and associated water shortages, the authorities made the decision to re-locate the settlers; and within the decade, the Phoenix-islands resettlement was abandoned entirely. Even today, with the exception of tiny Kanton atoll, the islands group remains uninhabited.

The newly re-displaced Gilbertese needed a new home once more, and, as none was to be found in any other part of Kiribati, they petitioned the British colonial government to find an alternative.

The British Solomon Islands Protectorate was chosen on the basis that it was more sparsely populated than Kiribati, and the first wave of *i-Kiribati* arrived in the Western Province in 1953. They were assigned land to the west of Gizo town on Gizo Island. Subsequent waves of settlers were dispersed to Waghena Island, in Choiseul Province, some 70-miles to the north-east of Gizo.

Today pockets, or sub-communities, of *i-Kiribati* are found scattered across the Western Province, especially in Gizo Island, Waghena Island, and in the villages of Canaan, Rawaki on Kohingo Island, and Baeroko to the north of Noro.

And now, more than half a century after the first Kiribati arrived in Solomon Islands, their descendants have adapted to some of the ways of the Melanesians (in particular, they have adopted the habit of chewing betel nut, a practice unheard of in Kiribati); however, they have also retained many of their own traditions and customs, and most notably distinguish themselves from their neighbours by fishing every day – a truly Micronesian practice.

¹ *i-Kiribati* is directly translated as ‘the Kiribati’.

² ‘Solomon Islands’ is a sovereign country. Before its independency in 1978, the nation was referred to as ‘The Solomon Islands’.

Kiribati is also the first language of the home, though anecdotal reports suggest that the language has changed quite considerably from that spoken in the Micronesian motherland. The regional development facilitator of the Anglican Church of Melanesia, Mrs. Tagolyn Kabekabe, relates that a few years ago Protestant church leaders from Kiribati visited the settlers in Gizo and were greeted on arrival with the traditional speeches of welcome, only for the visitors to remark what a “funny language” they were being greeted in!

The receptive Melanesian host communities have generally and genuinely welcomed the settlers to the Western Province, though potential tensions could develop in the future between the two groups.

Traditionally *i-Kiribati* have large families – the President of Kiribati, His Excellency Anote Tong, has eight children - and the estranged settlers have continued the tradition in Solomon Islands. Yet the enlarged and growing *i-Kiribati* communities are only able to settle on the plots of land given to the original settlers during the 1950s and 1960s. They do not own alternative land; and there is concern that future population pressures may cause friction between host and settled groups as resources become stretched. And already some settlers secretly voice resentment towards their status among the Melanesians.

“It’s very unfair”, said an *i-Kiribati* man, attending Outpatients at Helena Goldie hospital in Munda, Western Province, and who did not wish to be named. “The *i-Kiribati* are second-rate citizens in Solomon Islands; even if they are educated with a degree or a diploma it is hard for them to get a high-level job. A Solomon Islander will be the director, and an *i-Kiribati*, the cleaner. It’s not right.”

There are successful *i-Kiribati*, of course, and Solomon-born, Elizabeth Tekaingo is one. Tekaingo goes by the nickname of ‘Text’, and both her parents were born in Kiribati; her mother was one of the original settlers to Gizo during the 1950s. Elizabeth’s father, however, joined the police force in Kiribati in 1957, and it was his job that brought him to Solomon Islands where he met his future wife. Sgt. ‘Text’ Tekaingo followed her father, and joined the Royal Solomon Island Police Force (RSIPF). She is now a highly-respected police officer based in the village of Noro, some ten miles from Munda.

Tekaingo has been credited with providing the vision and drive behind the proposed Noro Safe House, the first ‘safe house’ for women and children experiencing domestic violence outside Honiara - there are only two such centres in the capital, run by the Christian Care Centre. Yet Solomon Islands is one of the nations with the worst incidence of domestic violence. A recent World Bank report stated that nationally 64% of women have experienced domestic violence, and, according to the WHO, many men view violence against a partner as a ‘form of discipline’.

With community-backing and the commendation of the RSIPF, Sgt. ‘Text’ is determined to offer shelter for women and children seeking refuge, wherever they

come from. “Counselling and training will be part of our rehabilitation programme,” said Sgt. ‘Text’, “and we are close to securing a secluded plot just outside Noro village. Everyone needing assistance will be welcome”.

There is concern that the centre may be overrun.

i-Kiribati and Melanesian women may look different physically, they may dress differently, too, and they may even act differently, but they both feel the same - they both hurt...



Newly-completed *maneapa* (Kiribati community meeting house) in Munda, Western Province.



Sgt. Elizabeth ‘Text’ Tekaingo (right), with Jessie, Noro Safe House support worker.