

Leonard Mason, ed., *Kiribati: A Changing Atoll Culture*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 1985. Pp. xxii, 202, maps, photographs, bibliography, index. US\$13.00 hardcover; US\$8.00 paper.

*Reviewed by Max Quanchi, St. Catherine's School, Melbourne, Australia*

The fourteen authors from Kiribati who compiled this collection may justly feel proud of the contribution they have made to the literature of their islands. For providing insight into atoll life that is both readable and enjoyable they will also be thanked by observers eager for coverage of contemporary events in Kiribati; by others attracted by the islands' uniqueness, isolation, and smallness; and by readers with romantic notions of lazy breezes sweeping over a lagoon.

The value of this book goes well beyond the mere listing of its usefulness or potential to attract buyers in Western bookshops. Its publication is a further step in the analysis and reflection by Pacific Islanders about their own culture and history. The Institute of Pacific Studies has played a major role in this development, having previously published *Kiribati: Aspects of History* (1979), *Politics in Kiribati* (1980), *Te Katake* (n.d.; traditional Kiribati songs), and *Iango Mai Kiribati* (1986; Stories from Kiribati) as well as reprinting Harry Maude's *The Evolution of the Gilbertese Boti* (1977). These volumes have been keenly sought by those interested in Kiribati and have added depth to a rather shallow library that had, in the past, relied on the published books of H. E. Maude, Arthur Grimble, Ernest Sabatier, and, more recently, Barrie Macdonald.

*Kiribati: A Changing Atoll Culture* brings the analysis up to the present in an accessible book form, and indeed is directed at considera-

ble length toward predicting which way culture in Kiribati will go in the future. This futures dimension is, to my mind, the greatest value of this work. It brings home in a plainly written, but terse and forceful manner the opinions of fourteen Kiribati writers and how they see the future. The authors come from a variety of backgrounds but appear to form what might be called a Western-educated elite, having in common training or tertiary education gained outside Kiribati and positions as teachers or in government service. They also share a keen sense of their own roots and the issues faced by their nation. Their theme is one of conflict between traditional influences and modern trends. This is too simplistic and at times rather overdone; however, it has a use by making it quite clear that composing songs, dancing, fishing, eating, making decisions, building homes, and going to school are matters requiring serious consideration. At both the national capital on South Tarawa and at the Maneaba level on outlying atolls, these authors show that it often does fall to a choice between modern or traditional ways. This scenario of conflict, and at other times of accommodation, between enculturated and acculturated influences is the major theme that the authors have tackled from their own specialist areas of involvement.

Another simplistic analysis runs through the chapters and that is the related description of life as being centered on either "new" urban, educated, nuclear families or more traditional, rural, subsistence-based families. This is a rather overworked concept but does capture the indecision faced by many Kiribati when it comes to raising infants, choosing a religious creed, speaking and writing, helping or leaving their family, going overseas to work or study, electing leaders, and fishing or farming. These are the topics and the decisions to be made in the future that form the focus points for each of the fifteen chapters.

The final chapter stands on its own, but also serves as a summary of all the themes raised in the earlier chapters. The conclusion focuses on the well-worn concept of "change and continuity" and rather disappointingly relies on a Western concept (or is it jargon?) to declare that "Kiribati now stands at the crossroads." It seems a shame that the commentators were not able to base their analyses in the vernacular, relying on idiom and Kiribati forms. It seems most unsatisfactory for such a book to have a conclusion that relies on an alien and imposed "crossroads" metaphor. Perhaps the promise of this book is that the next publication will break still further away from the convenience of these Western forms.

There is some repetition unavoidable in such a collection. This is more than made up for by the pleasure gained from reading forthright,

straight-from-the-heart opinions. These include one author's declaration of a personal preference for a certain cooked fig paste (*te tangana*). Another is critical of unsuccessful secondary school students who fail to win a place in post-compulsory schooling and become "troublemakers." Another is critical of certain song writers who have forsaken their own language by opting for cheap remakes of "pop" songs and trite Western lyrics. The authors have captured the immediate and personal sense of anger and concern felt by many Kiribati in the face of changes that many feel have passed beyond their control. At the same time this collection of commentaries on contemporary atoll life exudes confidence that the Kiribati are very conscious of changes that have already taken place and of the need to develop policies and practices that will ensure that they retain control of their own destiny.

This is on first appearance a modest collection from a part of the world that outside observers have often not appreciated or understood. Yet by sharing their concerns with the rest of the Pacific and a wider readership, these authors and the Institute of Pacific Studies have done us all a great service. This is a worthy sequel to the pioneering *Kiribati: Aspects of History* and other locally written and published collections. Like its predecessors, it has opened up their own history and culture not only to the people of this scattered atoll nation, but to hopefully a worldwide audience. We are indeed fortunate to now have such an informative insight on the way that Islanders perceive their own atoll culture to be changing.