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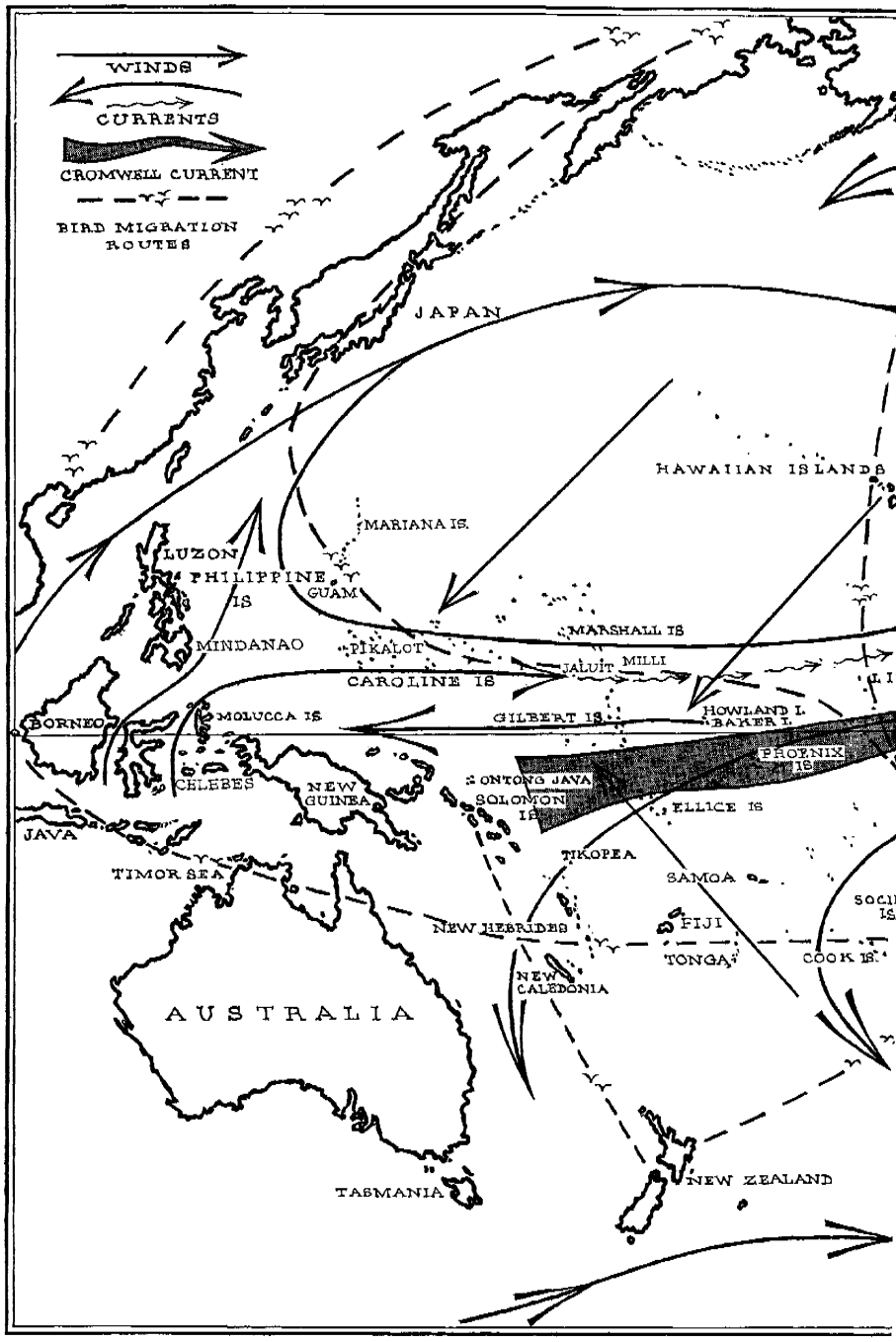
MIGRATIONS, MYTH AND MAGIC FROM THE GILBERT ISLANDS

ANTHROPOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY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NEW CALEDONIA
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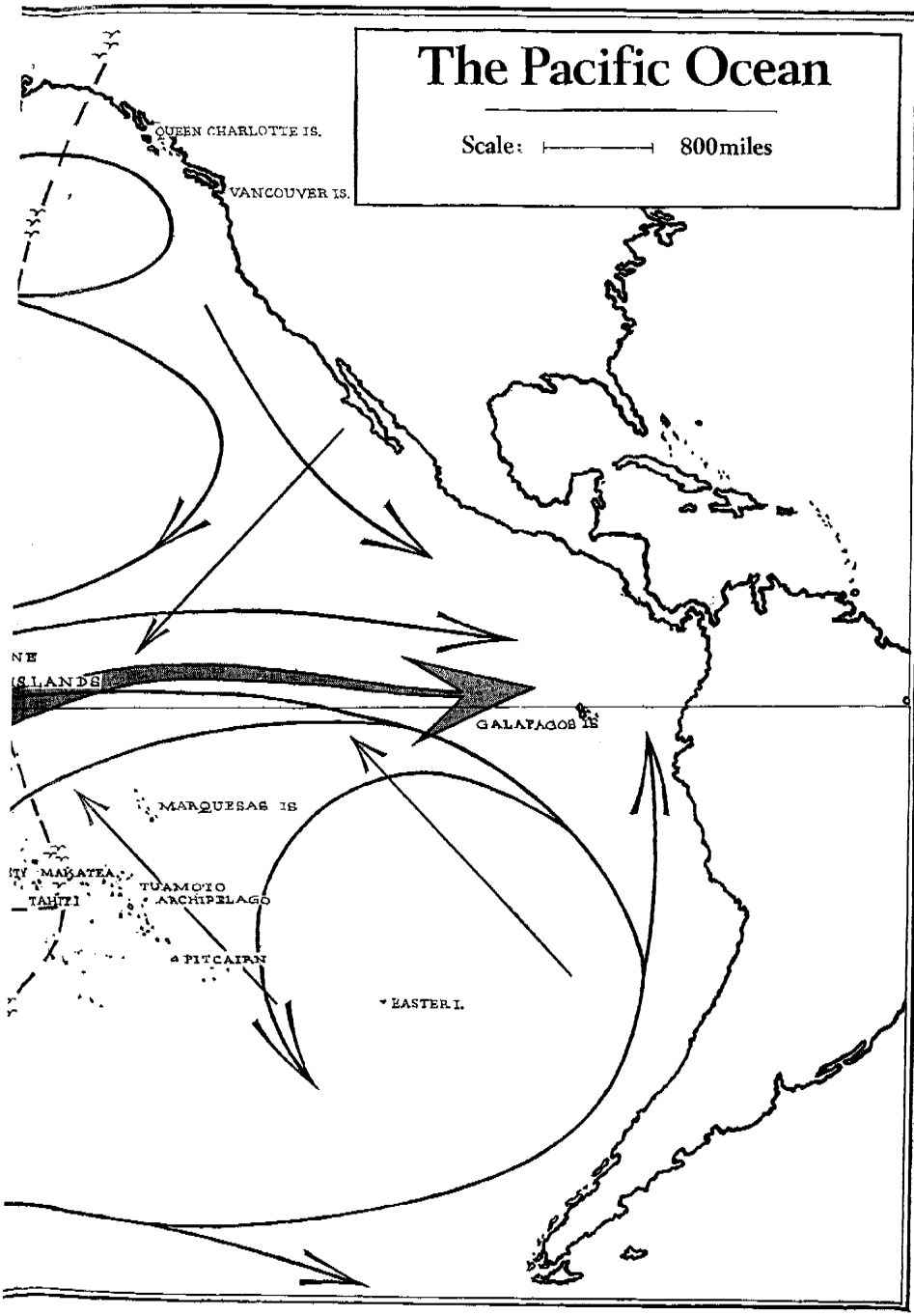
TASMANIA
NEW ZEALAND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ANTHROPOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

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MIGRATIONS, MYTH AND MAGIC FROM THE GILBERT ISLANDS

Early Writings of Sir Arthur Grimble

ARTHUR GRIMBLE

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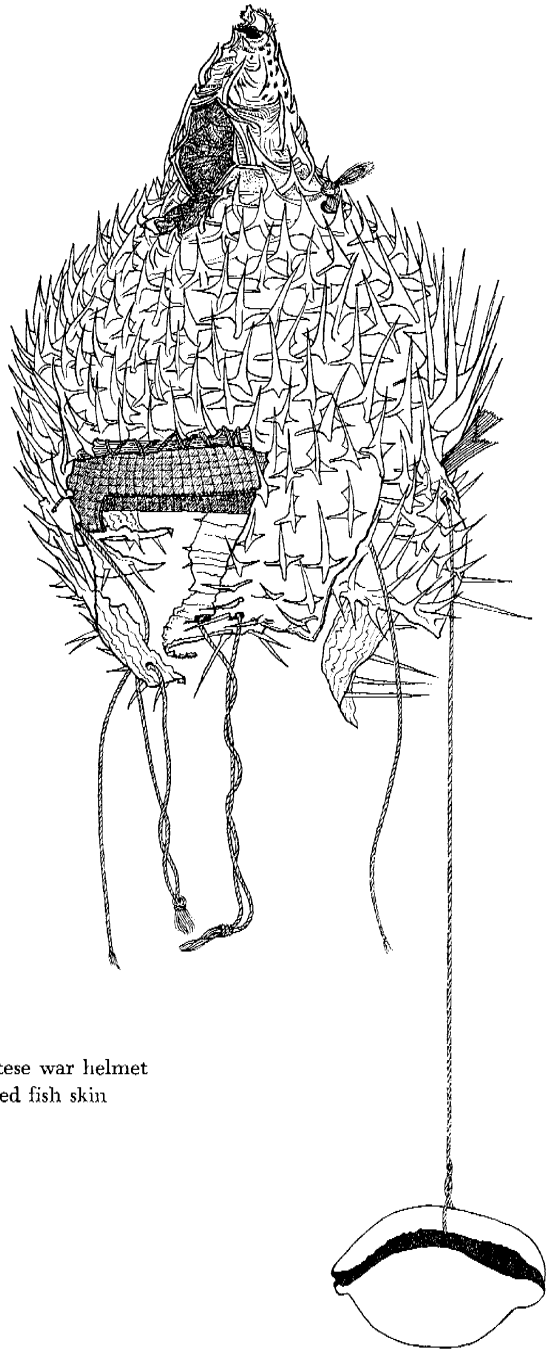

Gilbertese war helmet
of spiked fish skin

Migrations, Myth and Magic from the Gilbert Islands

Early writings of

Sir Arthur Grimble

Arranged and illustrated by

Rosemary Grimble

Routledge & Kegan Paul London and Boston

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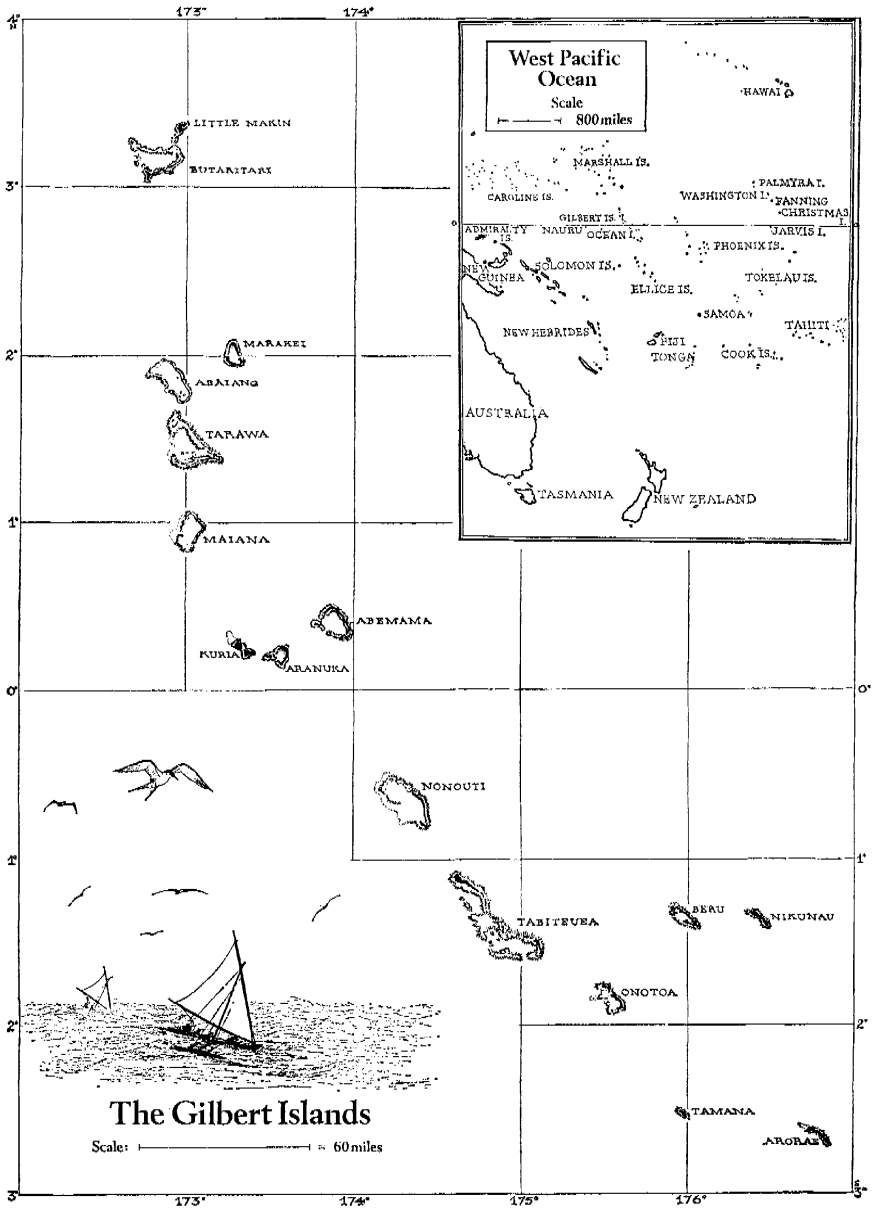
Maps

For my mother and father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KURIA
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BERU
NIKUNAU
ONOTOA
TAMANA
ARORAE
175°
176°
5°
West Pacific Ocean
Scale
800 miles
HAWAI
MARSHALL IS.
CAROLINE IS.
PALMYRA I.
WASHINGTON I.
FANNING
CHRISTMAS
GILBERT IS.
ADMIRALTY IS.
NAURU
OCEAN I.
JARVIS I.
PHOENIX IS.
NEW GUINEA
SOLOMON IS.
ELLICE IS.
TOKELAU IS.
SAMOA
TAHITI
NEW HEBRIDES
FIJI
TONGA
COOK IS.
AUSTRALIA
TASMANIA
NEW ZEALAND
The Gilbert Islands
Scale: 60 miles

Introduction

The Gilbert Islands are part of a long chain of coral atolls and rocky islets, running eastwards for more than two thousand miles from the Palau Group, north of New Guinea, through the Carolines and Marshalls (with the Marianas further north), then south-east to the Gilberts and on for another thousand miles or so, through the Ellice Islands to Samoa and Tonga. The northern and western part of this chain is known as Micronesia.

Nine of the Gilberts lie north of the equator, strung out across two hundred miles of sea. First Butaritari with Little Makin beside it. Then a gap of sixty miles to Marakei, Abaiang, Tarawa and Maiana, which cover about seventy miles between them. Then a forty mile gap to Abemama, Kuria and Aranuka.

South of the equator, for another two hundred miles, the line continues with Nonouti, Tabiteuea, Onotoa, Tamana and Arorae. Beru and Nikunau lie some sixty and eighty miles east of Tabiteuea, while two hundred and fifty miles to the westward, and not strictly one of the Gilbert group, is Baanaba or Ocean Island.

In all, my father spent nearly twenty-two years among those islands, and along with his official duties, which took him at different times to every one of them, he devoted himself to the lore and language of their people, making a special study of magic, myths and traditions on which their history so largely depended. His broadcasts and the two books he wrote after retiring from the Colonial Service in 1948,[1] established his personal feelings about the islanders. For him they had a natural dignity and taste which set them apart from others. It suggested descent from some great civilization of the past. And they were seafarers, who knew the sea in all her moods, men whose ancestors could have sailed into the Pacific from any part of Asia—or even from Europe as the Portuguese did in more recent times.

He was convinced that they came from the west, at any rate; and was impressed by repeated references in their myths to a fair-skinned breed of giants, who made great voyages across the Pacific. If he had lived to read recent pronouncements on the subject, I do not think that they would have altered his views very much.

1 *A Pattern of Islands* and *Return to the Islands* published by John Murray in 1952 and 1957.

Thor Heyerdahl's *Sea Routes to Polynesia*[1] and the latest volume of Dr Joseph Needham's *Science and Civilization in China*[2] would have pleased him especially. 'There were many migrations, this way and that,' he used to say. 'At least four from the West that we know about, and perhaps many more.' He never questioned the proposition that rafts from Peru could have reached the Pacific islands, bringing new cultures with different traditions; he simply believed that they were not the first. And the fact that some of their people were said to have been fair-skinned, fair-haired and blue-eyed, suggested that they might well have descended from the fair-skinned navigators of Gilbertese mythology, who had crossed the Pacific to South America many centuries before.

Some time before he died, he gave me a bundle of handwritten sheets and half sheets of paper, some booklets in pale pink covers and one in a dark green cover. The manuscripts were field notes—on spells and incantations, on folk lore and sea lore, and tales about voyages across the Pacific. The booklets were papers of his, published years ago by the Polynesian Society in New Zealand and the Royal Anthropological Institute in England. 'You may like to use these in a book one day,' he said. 'I think you would enjoy doing it.'

He was right. But when I had worked on them for a while, and added my own scattered memories of Beru and Baanaba, I realized that there was still not enough to make a full length book. So I wrote to the Polynesian Society, who referred me to H. E. Maude of the Australian National University's Research School of Pacific Studies. The following passages from his reply gave me renewed enthusiasm and great encouragement:

> . . . This Department does possess many of Sir Arthur Grimble's ethnographical field notes and a smaller amount of his manuscript ethnological writings. Some of them are in his handwriting, some in my wife's and some in my own (when we were working with him), and from a rough check list I prepared for him in 1931, I think they constitute the bulk of what he possessed at that time.
>
> . . . I have already abstracted and copied all the material on myths, legends and oral traditions, which I imagine are the subjects that interest you most, and I am sending you a copy by separate mail.
>
> . . . We are in process of preparing a definitive edition of Sir Arthur's anthropological writings—intended both to preserve his ethnographical material and to conserve his reputation in the world of scholarship. I consider that you have as much (or more) right to use your father's notes as any scholar. In any case, quite frankly, I doubt if we are competing; I think that your book and ours are aimed at different publics.
>
> . . . Please let me know if I can help in any other way. My wife has just been reminding me that when we went to interview your father at Dinard

1 George Allen & Unwin, 1968.
2 Cambridge University Press, 1970.

many years ago we found, not Grimbles, for they had left for England where we eventually ran Sir Arthur to earth, but a toy on the grass by the empty house with 'Rosemary' written on it.

Our best wishes for the success of your work,

Yours sincerely

H. E. MAUDE

Mr Maude has helped me in many other ways, and I can never thank him enough for his unfailing encouragement. There were so many technical and historical side roads down which I had to make my way, in order to get the notes and tales into their true perspective.

Fortunately I never lacked for helpful guides. Commander G. P. Naish, Keeper of the National Maritime Museum, devoted an afternoon to advising me on Micronesian and Polynesian canoes. David Goddard, Director of the International Sailing Craft Association's museum at Exeter, Dr David Lewis of the Australian National University, Captain G. H. Heyen, who sailed schooners and a barquentine to the Gilbert Islands in my father's time, Captain E. V. Ward of R.C.S. Ninikoria at Tarawa and Captain Brett Hilder, all wrote me long letters based on personal experience. Dr Lewis has also allowed me to include his article 'An Experiment in Polynesian Navigation' as an appendix to this book and sent me further information from more recent researches to add to it. Captain Heyen and Captain Ward have permitted me to quote from their most detailed and scholarly letters on ocean-going canoes. I must also thank my husband, Adrian Seligman, himself a master in sail who knew the Pacific Islands, for his patient and well-informed criticisms and his advice at all times.

Other distinguished navigators have helped with ideas about the migrations. Michael Richey, of the Institute of Navigation, sent me copies of his journal, and I am specially grateful to Gordon E. Taylor, of the Royal Greenwich Observatory, for information about the stars. Dr Joseph Needham, Master of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, lent me his latest book in page proof. His references to voyages by ancient Chinese sailing craft across the North Pacific and 'palpable similarities between many features of the high Central American civilizations and those of East and South-East Asia' would have fascinated my father, who was born in Hong Kong, where his father and grandfather spent most of their lives, and where his grandmother kept a school for girls.

He was a man of surprisingly varied qualities, yet reticent about most of them, preferring to reserve certain tastes and pleasures for the few periods of personal privacy which an active life in the Colonial Service allowed him. The Gilbertese called him 'Kurimbo', a name which is still remembered all over the western Pacific. Captain Heyen describes him as '. . . a kindly man, scholarly yet practical . . . all that an English gentleman and colonial administrator should be.' I remember him best in the West Indies: dealing with people, surrounded by people, always interested, always ready to listen; he had an insatiable curiosity about

people. At Government House parties: one moment you would see him standing apart, slim, tall and impeccably turned out, his eyes half-closed and smiling slightly; then suddenly he would dart into the crowd and begin to talk, maybe to an old friend or maybe to a stranger from some distant village, who looked a little out of his element. He had that rare gift for putting people at their ease, by never for one moment letting it appear that that was what he was doing. Perhaps he was not. He was a man who could identify himself at once with anyone he spoke to. Except the intolerant. Intolerance of any kind he could never accept.

At Chigwell School he had been a notable high diver, runner, gymnast, footballer, captain of cricket and deputy head of the school in his final year. But one of his contemporaries recollects that when they were playing cricket 'he would fill in time when people were out by walking about on his hands, to the great amusement and diversion of the onlookers.' Another remembers him most vividly as Martine in a scene from Molière's *Le Médecin malgré lui*, '. . . looking very elegant on a sofa, with a magnificent white hair-do à la Pompadour.' It was the scene in which Martine quarrels with her husband Sganarelle, and the boy playing Sganarelle got so carried away that he forgot he was play-acting and fetched poor Martine a hearty swipe across the quarters. A remarkable commentary on the sang-froid of a future colonial administrator came from a critic who recorded that Martine's subsequent replies to her husband's scolding were delivered '. . . in impeccable French and with such icy venom as to send the poor fellow stammering into the wings.'

His insatiable curiosity and inventive mind sometimes brought my father into conflict with authority. One of his closest school friends, O. W. Darch, recalls that in wet weather they used to make their own fireworks:

> . . . a dangerous occupation; I remember rubbing the saltpetre mixture too vigorously in a pestle and mortar, when the whole thing blew up—fortunately without harm to life or limb, but some damage to furniture before we could put out the fire.
>
> Another boyhood amusement was a toy theatre, made entirely by ourselves and based on the London Hippodrome, with its moving stage and great arena covering a tank for water shows—e.g. Annette Kellerman diving from the roof. Our own tank was made from a 7lb. biscuit tin and had a backwater down which boats could be floated realistically into the arena. I fancy it was Arthur who made our special model of Annette Kellerman—a wooden doll, with a very proper swimming suit carefully tacked in place. It was so shaped and weighted that when gently pushed off from the top of the theatre it dived cleanly into the tank and came up hands first.
>
> One of our set pieces was Mount Vesuvius in cardboard, with a tray of our own gunpowder behind. When lit by a taper this flared up realistically, and steam piped from a toy steam engine in the wings floated from the top

of the cone. The only contretemps was once when a spark from Vesuvius landed in our stock of gunpowder. Fortunately this enabled us to demonstrate the theatre's fire-fighting apparatus—another 7lb. tin of water with a hose attached . . .

These experiences seem to have reverberated down the years. Readers of *A Pattern of Islands* will remember my father's spectacular blasting of the Residency backyard on Ocean Island during his first few weeks as a cadet in the Colonial Service.

Magdalene College, Cambridge, where he spent three and a half years, was in those days one of the smallest colleges at the university, with only sixty undergraduates. Second and third year men would invite freshmen to meals, so everyone soon got to know each other. My father took a degree in law, ran for the college, captained the cricket eleven and stroked a second Lent boat. G. H. L. Mallory, the Everest climber, and Lord Tedder were contemporaries of his; but the two men who undoubtedly influenced him most were A. C. Benson, the poet, who was a senior don, and Robert Keable, later to become famous as a novelist.

Keable was a year senior to my father, but they were inseparable companions, though very different in character—my father easy going, urbane, gregarious (he was a founder of the Aristippeans, a society devoted to the pleasures of the moment); Keable an earnest, somewhat introspective young man, reading for the church and immersed in missionary work during vacations. The bond between them was literature, especially poetry and philosophy. One can imagine the midnight discussions in clouds of smoke (at Pepys Society meetings they all smoked churchwarden pipes), tremendous passions aroused, momentous decisions arrived at only to breed greater and more agonizing doubts followed by fresh debates next day.

Then suddenly it was all behind them, and my father, a bit of a dandy, steeped in hedonistic traditions at Cambridge, had disappeared to one of the remotest corners of the empire—there to throw himself unconditionally into the austere and lonely disciplines of a life dedicated to service and the humanities. Keable began in the same manner, as a missionary priest; but after a few years he broke away and wandered across the world—grasping at life and drinking it in lusty, passionate gulps. He wrote easily and well, producing books on many subjects, including one or two splendidly erotic novels, before he died in Tahiti at the age of forty. Both of them loved the Pacific Islands, but never met there. In fact they never met again after Cambridge.

Putting this book together has been a fascinating experience, not least because of the many new and interesting friends it has made me; and also because of new light which it has thrown on the personality of someone who was formerly known to me only as a parent. I had heard many of my father's beliefs and theories, but did not know until I began to discuss them with others, how fundamentally they had affected people's thinking and the directions which their researches were to take.

Some of the most helpful and illuminating advice on the spread of pandanus came from three eminent botanists—Dr Harold St John, of the Bernice P. Bishop Museum in Honolulu, Dr Benjamin C. Stone, head of the botany unit at the University of Malaya, and Dr Janaki Ammal, Emeritus Scientist at the Regional Research Laboratory of Jammu and Kashmir, Srinagar. Dr Stone wrote to me at great length and also sent me copies of his published works. My father would have been delighted to read these, especially *The Role of Pandanus in the Culture of the Marshall Islands*, because many of Dr Stone's observations apply equally to the Gilberts, where the ethnological significance of certain rituals and traditions concerning pandanus were a main plank in my father's beliefs about western origins for the Gilbertese people.

When it came to illustrating the book, I was helped particularly by Mrs Jay of the Central Office of Information, who took a great deal of trouble to obtain aerial views of Tarawa and arranged a special showing of a long documentary film. Mr B. A. L. Cranstone, Assistant Keeper of the Department of Ethnography at the British Museum, allowed me to work from my father's own collection of Gilbertese tools, cooking vessels, armour, fishing gear, agricultural equipment and other articles, now housed at the museum.

For permission to reprint extracts from my father's papers, first published in their Journals, I am indebted to the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, and to the Polynesian Society of New Zealand.

Mr L. P. Kirwan, Director of the Royal Geographical Society, helped me with maps of the Moluccas. Mr A. L. Free, of the Pacific and Indian Ocean Department at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, provided up-to-date facts and statistics from the Gilbert Islands. Both were admirers of my father's work, and I was warmed by the heartening letters they wrote me.

Finally, special acknowledgment is due to John G. Murray, my father's publisher and literary executor jointly with my mother, for permission to make use of extracts from my father's writings.

But the most moving of all the messages I received came from Tarawa itself:

> I have made enquiries for your old nurse and her husband, and it is with regret that I must tell you that Nei Batiauea died some ten years ago at Bikenibeu, a village on the southern arm of Tarawa atoll . . . Nei Batiauea's husband, Te Nauoko, is now also dead but I have not been able to find out when or where.
>
> Let us hope you will be able to visit these islands some day.
>
> R. G. Roberts,
> Acting Assistant Resident Commissioner

It began to dawn on me then that, beyond the teeming romance that lies in differences between men—the diversity of their homes, the multitude of their ways of life, the dividing strangeness of their faces and tongues, the thousandfold mysteries of their origins—there lies the still profounder romance of their kinship with each other, a kinship that springs from the immutable constancy of man's need to share laughter and friendship, poetry and love in common. A man may travel a long road, and suffer much loneliness, before he makes that discovery. Some, groping along dark byways, never have the good fortune to stumble upon it. But I was luckier than most. The islands I had chosen blindly, for the only reason that they were romantically remote, were peopled by a race who, despite the old savagery of their wars and the grimness of their endless battle with the sea, were princes in laughter and friendship, poetry and love . . .

ARTHUR GRIMBLE
(from *A Pattern of Islands*)

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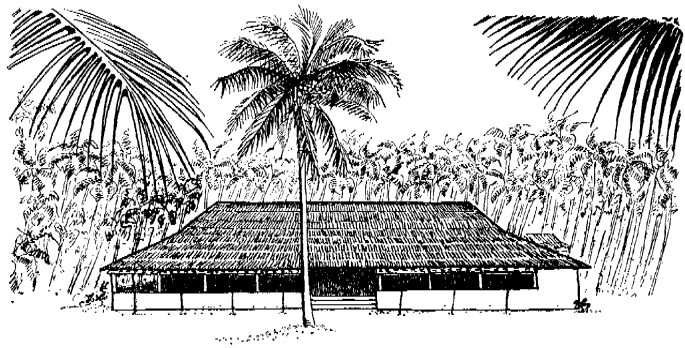
Chapter one

Te Tabunea n Te Kawai



The world into which I was born was a slender wisp of coral, a few hundred yards wide and six to ten feet high, enclosing a broad lagoon in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. This was Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands, and in those days few people had heard of it. I was the first white child to be born there. My sister Joan, born on nearby Ocean Island, was the first white baby the islanders had ever seen.

It is difficult to describe an ocean atoll from memory, the memory of a small child. Some of them cover a very wide area, with lagoons the size of minor British counties: you cannot see across them, and it takes several hours to sail from one side to the other. Others are smaller and irregular; but they all follow the same general pattern. Most of my memories are of Beru atoll, where my father went as District Officer a year or two after I was born. A few vivid pictures of this island remain with me still while others, which may have been coloured by later conversations, seem just as real.

Beru lagoon is only twelve miles long and three or four miles wide. Our house there was built to a plan worked out by my parents and the islanders themselves. Whilst it was being built we all lived in two shacks, set eighty yards apart near the lagoon edge, for there was no house when we arrived. This was because my father's predecessor, when he left to set up his headquarters in Onotoa, had taken most of it with him, including the kitchen stove, all the cooking utensils, the beds and the front verandah.

In *A Pattern of Islands* my father tells of our arrival in Beru in a copra steamer from Australia (where my sister Monica was born) and our picnic existence in those shacks for two months at the height of the rainy season, until part of the new house

was ready and we could move in. It must have been a worrying time for both our parents. The lagoon may have been full of fish and some chickens had been landed with us, but there was no fresh meat or milk on Beru—for there was no grass to support the animals—nor any green vegetables either; and should a crisis occur, no doctor within three hundred miles.

Of course I remember nothing of the difficulties or dangers of this period, but I do have fleeting memories of the lagoon edge where we played, of cool shadows beneath the coconut palms, and of water that was warm and green and crystal clear.

Our house, when it was ready, stood facing the lagoon scarcely a hundred yards from the shore. It was built of native materials with a high steep roof and no ceiling—like a church inside. The rafters and beams were lashed together with hand-made coconut fibre string. Not a nail anywhere. But what I remember best was an airy darkness in contrast to the white glare of sun on coral outside. I have a mental picture of deep cavernous rooms and open windows, with the trade winds rushing through them like perpetual thunder. From outside, the rustle of palm fronds, the thud of a nut falling and the gentle breathing of surf along the lagoon's edge. In the evenings wood smoke and at night mosquitoes.

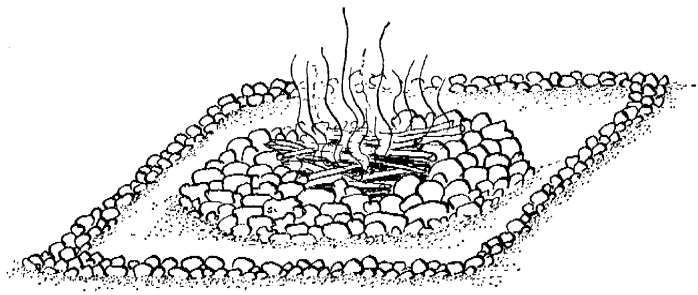
It was not always like this. Shortly after we moved in, a gale lifted our roof off in the middle of the night. After that we had shutters on all the windows. Yet curiously enough I can remember no storms or even cloudy skies from those days. We must have known them, but they have left no pictures. Only white sand and a blazing sea, pressed flat by the noonday sun.

At night we slept on mats beside our nurses. Joan's was dark-skinned and always smiling; her name was Faasola. Monica's I don't remember. But my own nurse, Batiauea, I shall never forget. She came from a village on the north side of Tarawa, and her parents were among the few who had never adopted Christianity. She had an almost pathetic loveliness of face. Her skin was golden, with soft appealing eyes. Like all Gilbertese, both men and women, she spoke softly, yet with authority—with the voice of truth.

This is what I remember, and I shall never forget it. I have since seen photographs of Batiauea, but they were not of the girl I knew. There are some things the camera cannot record. It catches at instants, and no look or gesture, thought or feeling, can be instantaneous; yet all of these are a part of beauty, which belongs to the spirit behind the flesh as much as to the flesh itself. Perhaps it was the spirit of Batiauea, something more ancient and more enduring than flesh and bones, which has remained with me. Or perhaps a spell was cast, one of those age-old spells by which the Gilbertese at one time lived.

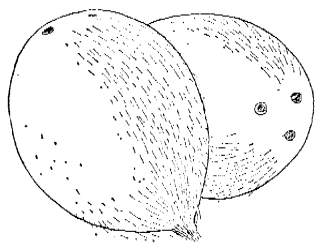
To the Gilbert Islander, magic and magical presences, benign or evil, were a part of life. Every aspect of his daily existence, every object, wish, thought, condition, action and purpose, good or bad, was governed by its own set of charms and spells. There was a spell for protecting your coconuts against theft, another to help you steal your neighbour's nuts; spells to poison an enemy's food, others to protect

your own food against hostile incantations. There was *wawi*, the killing magic, and *bonobono* to frustrate it. At every stage in the building of a house you had to observe a different ritual.



This magic was of two distinct kinds– *-te kawai* and *te tabunea*. *Te kawai* was purely ritual, being unaccompanied by incantations or spoken spells of any kind. An example is the lighting of a fire of twigs laid in a circle surrounded by a square, in the preparation of a poet to compose his song. *Te tabunea* is the incantation or spell. It is generally combined with a ritual, in which case the ritual is called *te kawai* and the spoken charm *te tabunea*.

Ritual and words are equally important, one being considered powerless for good or evil without the other. In a few cases *te tabunea* is used on its own; for example, in the exhortation to Sun and Moon made by the poet before his song is first raised in the *maneaba* (Meeting House). My father made a collection of spells and rituals wherever he went in the islands. From those he passed on to me I have chosen a few at random.



Nakimoa: the love spell

To win a woman whom you desire, take a young green coconut (*te onibua*) and sprinkle the contents over your head. Recite as follows, looking in the direction of the woman you want:

Ko rie ni katua, ma ko rie ni karoko,	*Thou goest to make speak, and thou goest to make come,*
Ko rie ni kabaka, ma ko rie ni kamati,	*Thou goest to make fall, and thou goest to kill,*
Ko rie ni karangirang, o e rang-o!	*Thou goest to turn mad, oh she is mad-o!*
Aa! e a rangro, neinne!	*Aa! She is black mad, that woman!*
Aa! e a rangi ni kanana aaroa i marenan rangau ikai.	*Aa! She is mad for her food here between my thighs, here.*
Te ika n tangirio, te ika n tangirake,	*The fish to cry west, the fish to cry east,*
Tanginakoaiki-o-o!	*Cry towards south-o-o!*

Repeat this three times, then throw the nut away and watch it come to rest. If its mouth is turned towards you, this is a sign of luck. If it is turned away, success is not yet.

Te kaiwa: the love test

If you want to know whether a girl loves you or not, you must do the kaiwa or divination of *te rakunene*.

At any time of the day you may take the pinnule of a coconut leaf and tear a strip about half an inch broad along one edge, without completely detaching it from the pinnule. Press the strip lightly between the finger and thumb of the right hand, drawing them away from you along it in a gentle stroking motion, again and again as you whisper:

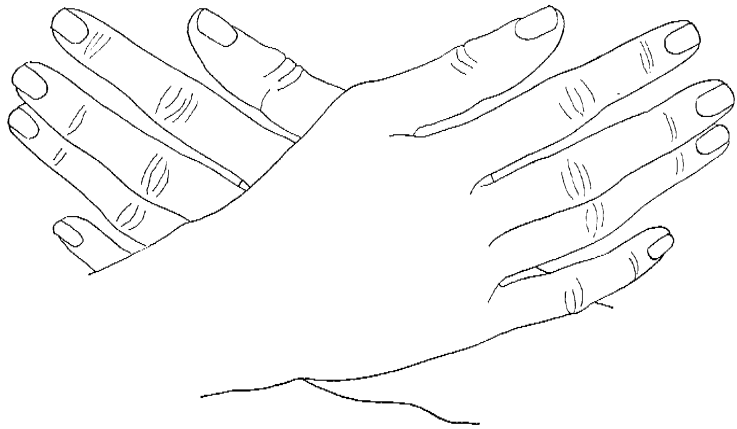
Teera, tia, ten, a,niim, ono, iti, vaan, rua, tuangai nkoe Te Rakunene ke e taanai Neirei ao . . . tuangai ke e ribaai; tuangai ke e tangirai Neirei ao . . . tuangai, ao tuangai, ao tuangai.	*One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, tell me thou Te Rakunene may she desire me that woman . . . tell me may she hate me; tell me may she love me that woman . . . tell me, and tell me, and tell me.*

Repeat this three times facing in any direction, then detach the strip from the base of the pinnule by tearing the end off straight.

At a distance of three fingers (index, mid and ring) from the end of the strip you make a crease by folding. Lay the strip across the same three fingers turned upwards, so that the crease is in line with the outer edge of the index finger. Then take three turns round the fingers with the rest of the strip and tear it off at the point where it completes the third turn.

Now you must unwind the strip and split it into two tongues by tearing it down the middle as far as the crease. Make five knots in each tongue, the fifth coming at the extreme end. If the two end knots are level with one another, the girl does not love you, if one projects beyond the other she does.

Finally, you must repeat the whole process with another pinnule. But this time the girl loves you if the end knots come level and not if they do not.



Te kaanangaroi: how to make friends—an invocation to the sun

If a man wishes to be received with favour by his fellows, or loved by the other sex, or treated with generosity by his kin, he dips the palms of his hands in oil and performs the following magic:

Descend upon me. Mount to me. Care for me. Be kind to me.
Whence comes kindness to me, to me here, only indeed to me, Takeuta?
For it appears from within the mouth of So-and-So.
I go down from upon the shoulder of that woman[1]
Crowd hither. Be kind to me.

At the last words you cross your hands on your breast and rub yourself with oil. This is done facing east on any day of the month just before sunrise.

The collective area of the sixteen Gilberts—eleven lagoon islands, five without lagoons—is only 166 square miles, and none of them stands more than fifteen feet above the sea. How they arose is still uncertain, but most people believe that they were once the fringing reefs of rocky islets (themselves the tips of submarine mountains) which slowly subsided, while the encircling coral grew on upwards until, after hundreds of thousands of years, there was nothing left near the surface but rings and twists of coral. The central rocks had disappeared completely.

Later on, another slow movement of the earth's crust pushed these coral patches into the air. But nowhere very far, and only a little faster than the action of wind and waves could wear them down; or break them up, to lie in tangled skeins,

1 'That woman' refers in this case to the sun as it rises.

burnt white by the sun and cut to ribbons by the sea—disjointed, ancient and enduring, like bleached skeletons of prehistoric monsters—until the first men found them four to five thousand years ago.

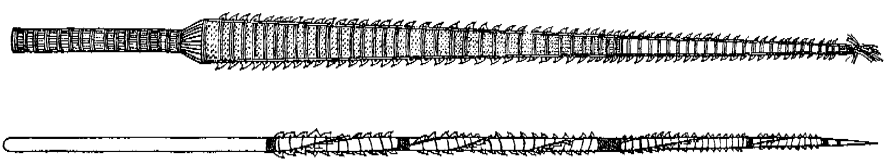
The only trees I can remember were coconut and pandanus palms, and a coarse scaevola scrub called *mao*. There was not much water and only a thin layer of soil under the palm trees, where the islanders grew *babai* and breadfruit with sometimes a few flowers painstakingly cultivated. Yet for my father, who spent a third of his life in the islands, they held a magic and a meaning which he found nowhere else in the world.

In an article in the *National Geographic Magazine* he speaks of gem-like islets cast at random 'through the murmurous and sapphire solitudes of the Central Pacific', of matchless transparencies of atmospheres and 'the latticed shade of palms that overlean the beach'. In another passage he writes: 'A twenty-mile flake of coral sand, curved like a deeply flexed bow, with horns pointing westward, that is a Gilbert atoll . . . Within dreams the lagoon, shut off from the ocean by its enclosing reef, which stretches like a bow string from tip to tip of the land.'

This is the characteristic shape of almost all the Gilbert Islands. Perhaps because they were tilted in the making by movements of the ocean bed, their eastern sides are higher and mostly dry, their western reefs submerged or awash. Against their eastern shores the trade winds, blowing continuously for eight or nine months of the year, send regiments of waves to burst through every gap. This water, flowing across the lagoon, escapes over the western reefs, where it has cut the only navigable channels.

The eastern side, the side on which the trade winds blow, is the fierce side, the thunderous warlike side, where fangs of coral reef jut into a raging surf. The ground is covered with a tangle of scaevola scrub, through which the wind flies harsh and hard, rattling the shrivelled branches. And at dawn each day, Auriaria—Au-of-the-rising-sun, the heroic ancestor—leaps into battle before his people.

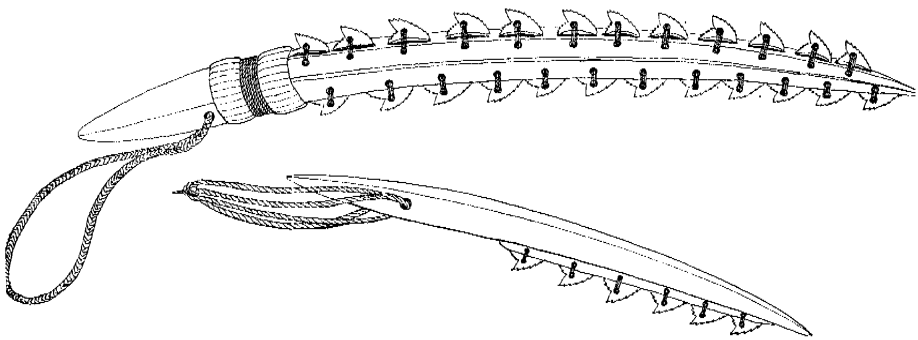
These eastern shores therefore have a mystical and inspiring significance for the Gilbertese, touching their harder, more warlike qualities. They appeal in quite a different way from the lagoon-side beaches, which are sheltered and restful, or the western reefs through which the waters pour and tumble into the open sea—running west and north-west to Mone, the Kingdom of Undersea, and the ancient ancestral lands of Mane, Neineaba and Bouru.[1]



1 These are mythical bournes of the Gilbertese soul after death—see 'The destination of the soul', Chapter 3, pp. 87–91.

And so, if a man wished to be brave and strong in war, he went down to the eastern shore in the dark before dawn. There he sat facing the east, and when the sun appeared he held his spear and three pinnules from the crest of a coconut palm in his right hand. As the sun rose, he beat the weapon and pinnules against his breast and chanted:

Boa ni manawa-u aio!	*Striking of my breast, here!*
Tabwena ni ngaina mainiku.	*Breaking of light in the East.*
Ba I aarakinna tera?	*For what do I approach?*
Ba I aarakinna te un.	*I approach for anger.*
Ba I aarakinna tera?	*For what do I approach?*
Ba I aarakinna te tau.	*I approach for readiness.*
Ba I aarakinna te ba are e rebwe-rebwe irarikini karawa mainuku.	*For I approach the thunder which rattles at the side of Heaven in the East.*
Ba I aki bubu, ba I aki rawarawa,	*For I am not cowardly, for I am not unwilling,*
Ba I aki mamao, ma un-ee,	*For I am not slow in war, but angry!*
Te un! Te tau! Te mauri!	*Anger! Readiness! Safety!*



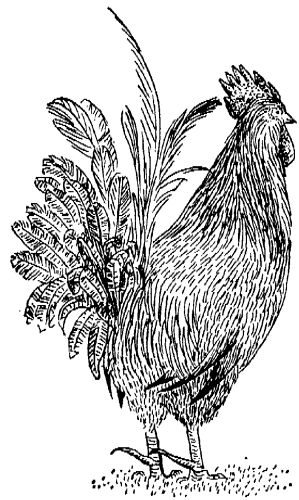
There was also a charm to turn away the weapons of an enemy. Just before the fight you made a necklace out of a pinnule from the leaf of a coconut tree and, holding it in your hands, you said:

E bungi te kai e aarabungi te kai!	*It is ready the weapon, it is quite ready the weapon!*
Ma N na bitia ni katanrio-ia, ni katanrake-ia.	*But I shall change it to turn it west, to turn it east.*
E bungi te kai, e maaku te kai. Bu-u-u! Te mauri!	*It is ready the weapon, it is afraid the weapon. Coward! Safety!*

If you wanted your cock to be a good fighter, you held him to your breast in the crook of your left arm, striking him gently and continuously with your right hand as you repeated three times:

Nan Tebu, Nan Tebu:	*Sir Cowardliness, Sir Cowardliness:*
Nan Temaku, Nan Temakuna,	*Sir Fear, Sir Fear,*
Nako, Nan Tebu!	*Go, Sir Cowardliness!*
Nako Nan Temaku!	*Go, Sir Fear!*
Nakomai te un, nakomai te tau,	*Come anger, come seemliness.*
Nakomai te mauri.	*Come safety.*

At the end of the third repetition you threw down the bird. No special orientation was required.



If you were travelling between islands and saw a *rereba* (trevally) passing your canoe, you knew that it had been sent to warn you of impending violence from the spirits of Undersea. So you charmed yourself by leaning over and chanting aloud to the fish:

Na Rereba tabaniban O!	*Sir Rereba, the striped one, O!*
Wairio, wairio-o, tuangia Uea-n aoni Mone ba!	*Go west, go west. Tell them, the Kings of Mone, thus:*
An tai baaweawe tabuna karawa, tabuna Mone.	*'Come do not (desecrate) the holiness of heaven, the holiness of Mone.'*

Naako i mwi ma naako i moa ma ee!	*Go after them, and go before them, e-e!*
E ieie na n te anti a!	*It sails (away) the horde of spirits, ah!*

Some of the most important spells were those which gave protection to property. With the appropriate rituals and incantations, carefully observed, you could protect anything which belonged or was in any way associated with you, as well as every activity or ambition, projected or fulfilled. *Te kaoanikai* was the name of the magic ritual designed for the protection of growing foodstuffs against thieves, while *te rabu* (the covering) was the technical term indicating any object attached to a plant for the purpose of denoting that the *kaoanikai* ritual had been performed upon it.

A *rabu* often consisted of a piece of a woman's worn-out *riri* (leaf kilt), but it was more generally made of coconut leaf fresh-cut from the tree. For this purpose, on the island of Marakei, a green leaf was split down its midrib into two halves, which were then cut up into sections, each one bearing four pinnules. Every section formed a *rabu* for one tree, being tied round the trunk by its pinnules (two on either side) like a belt. Round the midrib of each *rabu* was knotted a single slip of white leaf plucked from the topmost shoot of a young coconut palm.

Immediately before being tied to their respective trees, all the *rabu* were collected in a heap before the owner, who held in his right hand an opened drinking nut (*moimoto*). Facing east, he sprinkled the water of the nut with a clockwise sweep of the arm[1] over the heap, intoning the following formula in a low singsong:

Matakaakang, Matakaakang!	*Matakaakang, Matakaakang!*
Mataoraora, Mataoraora!	*Mataoraora, Mataoraora!*[2]
Ko kanna tera, au rabu?	*Thou eatest what, my* rabu?
Ko kanna te aomata ane e anaana uaa-n au ni.	*Thou eatest the man who continually takes the fruit of my coconut trees.*
Ko kanna ra-na? Ko kanna bai-na.	*Thou eatest what part of him? Thou eatest his hands.*
Ko kanna ra-na? Ko kanna wae-na.	*Thou eatest what part of him? Thou eatest his feet.*
Ko kanna ra-na? Ko kanna rabata-na.	*Thou eatest what part of him? Thou eatest his body.*
Ko kanna ra-na? Ko kangi mata-na.	*Thou eatest what part of him? Thou eatest his eyes.*

1 The clock is imagined as lying on the *rabu*, facing upwards.

2 These are the names of the spiritual powers who carry into effect the curse of the formula. *Kaakang* means to eat human flesh; *oraora* means to eat uncooked food; *mata* means face or eye.

Ko kanna ra-na? Ko kanna atu-na.	*Thou eatest what part of him? Thou eatest his head.*
Ko kanna ra-na? Ko a tiring-na, ko a boi-a, ko a kamate-a.	*Thou eatest what part of him? Thou shalt smite him, thou shalt beat him, thou shalt kill him.*
M'e a mate . . . o-o-o!	*So shall he die . . . o-o-o!*

This formula having been intoned three times, the *rabu* were tied in place, and the empty drinking nut planted mouth upward in the ground by any one of the trees: therein, as in a flower-pot, was then stood the topmost leaf of the young coconut tree from which were plucked the pinnules for adding knots to the *rabu*. The leaf rested against the trunk of the adjacent tree and remained as a kind of scarecrow to thieves.

When the owner himself desired to gather the fruit of a protected tree, he was obliged to undo the magic, lest a curse fall upon his own head. He stood before the tree and untied the knot of white leaf attached to the *rabu*, intoning at the same time:

E maatanaa, e matana au rabu, aio!	*It is undone, it is undone, this my* rabu!
E matana bai-na, ao e matana wae-na, ao e matana un-na, ma tiritiri-na, ma kaakangi-na, ma oraora-na!	*Its hand is undone, and its foot is undone, and its anger is undone, with its violence, with its eating of human flesh, with its eating of raw flesh!*
E maatanaa, e matana.	*It is undone, it is undone.*

Having slipped the knot and thrown the leaf upon the ground, the performer then took the rest of the *rabu* from the tree and proceeded with his food-gathering. There was no ritual burning or destruction of the cast-off *rabu*.

Te bitanikai—the magic staff

On Marakei, a man desirous of stealing his neighbour's fruit in despite of the *rabu* put upon it protected himself from evil by the aid of a magic staff called *te bita-ni-kai*. *Bita* means *change* or *reverse*: the word *bitanikai* thus signified reversal of the *kaoanikai* and applied not only to the magic staff, but also to the whole ritual concerned with the desecration of a *rabu*.

The performer cut a straight wand about six feet long and an inch thick, from any convenient tree, and peeled it. Holding this staff by the middle in his right hand, he stood by the east side of his house, facing east, at any time between sunrise and noon,[1] but preferably on a day when both the sun and moon were

1 From his rising until noon, the sun is said to be *marau* (agile or active), which is to say *helpful* for the purposes of magic rituals. After his nooning, he becomes *makanakana—soft* or *unhelpful*.