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Gilbert Islanders'.

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Gilbert Islands
CANOE CRESTS OF THE GILBERT ISLANDERS.

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By A. Greenble

Particulars of the crests shown in the plate are as follow:-

| No. | Name of Crest. | Name of clan. | Family totem (Atua). | Ancestral god (Anti) |
|-------|------------------------|---------------|--|--|
| No. 1 | Te Nimta-wawa | Benuaa-kura | Te nimta-wawa (a marine worm) | Te-ibi-aro |
| No. 2 | Te kai-ni-kamata | Aba-bou | Nakuaumai (a fish; leather-jacket) | Tituaa-bine; Tangaroa; Taa'i (the Sun). |
| No. 3 | Te Mataaua | Buatara | Buatara (a small Sting-ray) | Buatara; Tituaa-bine. |
| No. 4 | Te Kika-n-ang | Ba-karawa | Kika-n-ang (a starfish) | Moa-aine (lit. trans. First-woman) |
| No. 5 | Mani-n-taiki | Ka-tan-rake | Stone representing | Nei Te-maiti |
| No. 6 | Tara-tara- venei-na | Ka-burara | Baiku (a large Sting-ray) | Tituaa-bine |
| No. 7 | Te Maro-tabu- ariki | Te Bakoa | Bakoa (a shark) | Tabu-ariki |
| No. 8 | Te Bou-uoua | Ka-rongo-a | Kanawa tree (<i>Gordia</i> subcordata) | Te-uribaba |

All the above were sported at the peak of the sail, except No. 6, which was lashed in an upright position on the outrigger float. There was a close connection between the crests and the totems of the various families, but by no means every Gilbertese native had a crest, these heraldic designs being usually confined to the so-called "navigating clans".

In former days the crests were much used by the island families, but are now almost forgotten. To some of them are attached traditions still indicative of a great antiquity, though time has obliterated much of their detail. The tale explaining the origin of No. 1 (Te Nimta-wawa) names the land of Roro in the West as the home of the earliest ancestor; it will be remembered that a Western Roro is one of the race-fatherlands of Maori myth. Further, the tradition of this crest relates that its streamer was once made of the red feathers of a fierce bird in Roro, while the family that has inherited it calls itself Benuaa-kura. There may be enough here to connect Roro with Maori-Rarotongan Enea-kura, the Land of Red Parrot-feathers.

No. 2 (Te kai-ni-kamata) is the crest of a family called Aba-bou, whose ancestor was a famous culture-hero of the race, named Bue. The adventures of this personage in Gilbertese story are remarkably like those of Maui in Maori-Rarotongan tradition, and of Mangarevan Ti'iti'i. Bue, for example, caught the Sun his ancestor in a noose, after a marvellous voyage to the Eastern edge of the world. Here is an extract from the tale:-

Many days he went eastwards, until he came to the side of the sky, where the Sun climbed out of the sea each day; there he waited. And when the Sun reached the rock that was his first stopping-place under the horizon, his first beam shot up into the sky. Bue saw the beam, and hurled at it one of his stones of red coral: it fell dead into the sea. And when the Sun reached his second stopping-place under the horizon, his second beam shot up into the sky. Bue saw it, and hurled his second stone of red coral: it fell dead into the sea. And the third beam he pelted with a small, shrivelled coconut, so that it also fell dead into the sea. Then the sun reached his fourth stopping-place, which was the first above the horizon; his face came into sight over the edge of the sea, and Bue was scorched with the heat of him. But he was not afraid; he took the second shrivelled nut and hurled it at the face of his ancestor; and when the nut struck him, the Sun winced and roared aloud. Behold, all the heat went out of him..... Then Bue ran forward lightly and encircled him with the coconut leaf and bound him so tight that he could not move from that place and said, 'Oh, my ancestor, I beseech thee, give me knowledge'. So Bue stayed there a great while and learned many enchantments and much knowledge from his ancestor. He learned the magic called Tiri-kua (The vanquishing of the porpoise), by means of which a vessel may be saved from fierce fish and all dangers of the sea. He learned how the dwelling of a chief should be built.....and how the wind might be

raised or stilled.....and how a dead man should be buried, and how a young warrior should be fumigated with smoke. All these and many other things he learned in the East and when he was ready to go, the Sun gave him a white stick ringed with black saying, "Take this staff with thee as a memorial of thy coming to the Sun. Wear it upon thy canoe; it shall be thy safeguard at sea, for no hurt may come ~~upon~~ ^{upon} thee when it is near". So Bue took the staff and it remains the emblem of his children to this day; it is the Kai-ni-kamata, the crest of the clan of Aba-bou, who are the children of Bue."/

The crest is thus a graphic reminder of Bue's exploit; its tuft of feathers represents the Sun; the two strips of matting are Bue and, according to some, his twin brother Ri-rongo, but, according to others, his sister Te-raa-iti. ⁽¹⁾ It may be noted here that the Sun was supposed to have six "stopping places", all great and rocky lands; three were under the Eastern horizon, which is to say, very far away to eastward; the last three were above the horizon, i.e., much nearer, the sixth being Samoa. ^{(2)†}

It seems possible that the name Kai-ni-kamata, to which I can attach no meaning, is a corrupt form of Kai-ni-kamaka, which, literally translated, would signify "Stick to make burn" - that is, "Fire stick". If this is so, Bue would seem to have been a Polynesian Prometheus, whose real object in visiting the Sun was to wrest from him the secret of fire, and the traditions connected with his name might form an interesting link between Sun and Fire worship, of which many traces still subsist in the Pacific.

- * 1. ^{Oh R} Te-raa-iti possibly the syllable raa is to be identified with Ra, the name of the ancient Sun-god of Polynesia; iti is Gilbertese for lightning, but this may be an accidental similarity.
- † 2. The six stopping places of the Sun may have some connection with the six nooses with which Mangarevan Ti'iti'i caught the lord of day. The Gilbertese version, by the way, makes no mention of the lengthening of the day, which, in Maori tradition, was Maui's chief object when he caught and disabled the Sun. It remains to be considered whether this "lengthening of the day" was ~~xxxx~~ or was not a figure of speech meaning "the finding of fire", i.e., of light.

In the traditions of the Kai-ni-kamata, the land of Roro, home of the Westerly winds and rains, is often mentioned as one of Bue's ancestral places.

Less significant of geographical origins, but very interesting, is the story connected with No. 3 (Te Mataaua). This crest belongs to one of the families claiming descent from the fair-skinned and fair-haired goddess Tituaa-bine, whose chosen creatures at sea were the giant ray and the sting ray. The crest is a conventional representation of the ray, the tuft of feathers at the peak being the mouth; those on the cross-piece are the eyes, while the vertical pole is the spine of the fish. In other words, the whole device is a picture of the family totem. Not from the crest-tradition, but from many other tales of the goddess and ancestress Tituaa-bine, we learn that her home was Matang, a submersible, floating and flying island, (very similar to Rarotongan Tinirau's Motu-tapu, or Sacred Isle) which was populated by fair-skinned folk, and was the bourne of departed souls.

Matang may, with reasonable certainty (by evidence extraneous to the present subject, and impossible to summarise here), be traced to Indonesia; compare the name with Medang of Sumatra, Mattang of Borneo, Malang of Java, possibly also Sa-marang and Pa-malang of the same island, and Makian of Gilolo.

Traditions relating to the other crests are rather too garbled to be used as evidence of origins. The tales are no doubt very ancient, but in true Gilbertese fashion have tended to become localised, i.e., their geographical venues

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3. Tituaa-bine - It has been suggested that this name, or rather, title may be a rendering of Te-atua-fine - the goddess. An alternative suggests itself in Te-iti-uaa-bine - the-lightning-bearing-woman - a title which has a direct reference to the personality of the goddess, whose eyes and hair, according to Gilbertese story, darted forth perpetual lightnings.
4. Tinirau, known locally as Timirau, was also an inhabitant of Matang, together with Tangaroa and a certain Tau-bene-roa, or Tau-bare-roa.
5. When the blonde Europeans came to the Gilbert Islands, they were called I-matang, inhabitants of Matang.

have been shifted to the present home of the race. Also, the wonderful has almost obliterated the actual, and even the merely absurd has sometimes lived at the expense of fact. For example, No. 4 (Te Kika-n-ang) has a history related as a funny story, which is all the more laughable to the native because it is supposed to be true:- ["In the old days, there lived on Beru an old woman, your ancestress, named Moa-aine (First-woman), who had three idiot sons. There came a day of public sport: a pool of clear water was prepared by the sea-shore wherein the trained fishes of the chieftains might fight one another for a prize".

(N.B.- Fish-fighting was a favourite sport in the old days, as well as cock-fighting. The name of the fish used was batua; its training was supervised by a special official known as Te Tia-kauni-batua - lit. The enragor of batua).

"So the three idiot sons of Moa-aine desired greatly to distinguish themselves in the batua-contest, and went to prepare their fish, but because they were foolish, they knew no difference between the star-fish (kika-n-ang) on the reef and the batua. So each went and took a starfish as his champion. And when they tried before all the people to make their star-fish fight, everyone was convulsed with laughter; and forever after that, the foolishness of the three idiots was remembered, for they were given a canoe crest in which the body of the star-fish is seen, and the three idiots close by".

The star-fish is the dark cross in the circle of matting; the matting itself represents the pool of water, while the three pennants of pandanus leaf are the three idiot brothers watching at the brim. Venturing upon a conjecture, I think that the above story is possibly the mutilated account of how three heroes, whose totem was the star-fish, attempted some bold feat of arms against a clan whose totem was the batua, and were beaten for their pains.

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No 5 is known as Mani-n-taiki - the Crest of Taiki. No tradition of its origin is available, save that it came from the land of Taiki. This is probably the ancestral Tawhiti of the Maoris and Rarotongans rather than the Polynesian island of Tahiti.

No. 6, called Tara-tara-veneina, is a crest of one of the Tituaa-bine or Sting ray families. While all the other crests are worn aloft, on mast or peak (generally the latter), this one stands on the outrigger float; hence its name, which means "Watch the wake of it". It is also occasionally called "The crest that never sleeps" because, while all other pavilions are furled when sail and mast are lowered, this remains always in its upright position on the outrigger. In its watchfulness, it is emblematic of a deified hero of Tituaa-bine's line, whose name Mata-n-tara-tara means "Sleepless-eyed", and who was reputed to have the power of seeing, awake or asleep, all things that happened afar.

No. 7 is called Te Maro-tabu-ariki - the Girdle of Tabu-ariki. Tabu-ariki was the greatest god, as Tituaa-bine was the greatest goddess, of the race. The meaning of his name is clearly "Holy Chief" or, more precisely, "Holy Royal Priest". There is good ground for an inference, from data in my possession, that Tabu-ariki was either Tane, one of the sun-gods of the Polynesians, or else a deified priest of Tane.

The crest exhibited belonged to one of the families of Tabu-ariki. Only the so-called "head piece" is here pictured; this was attached to the peak of the sail, but it was supplemented, on gala occasions, with a dressing of mat pennants on the fore and aft mast stays, and on the stay from outrigger to mast-head. A canoe thus decked out with scores of fluttering flags was a truly pretty sight.

No. 8 is the Bou-uoua - the Two-tufted - and was sported by ^{certain families} ~~the people~~ of the

clan of Karongoa. There were two other variants of the same crest: the first tipped with a single tuft of coconut leaf and two pennants, the second bearing but one pennant and a tuft.

They were known generically as Bou ni Karongoa — Tufts of Karongoa. Their individual names were: Ie Bou-wana — The two-tufted
Ie Bou-tenana — The single-tufted (2 pennants)
Iui-tui-te-rara — Drip-drip-the-blood.

The tradition connected with the crests explains that the tufts represent human heads, which were the favourite food of the clan-god, Ie-wibaba. From another tradition of the Gilbert Islands we learn that the heads were taken from the first-born children of certain districts in Samoa. The confinement of choice to a class of victims so narrow and so peculiarly marked out by tradition as the first born, seems to show a religious or sacrificial intent in the feeding of the god.

The ^{appellation} ~~name~~ Ie-wibaba, like those of all the greater Gilbertese gods, is a mere title, probably used in deference to a tabu on the name proper; it means "Surface root," and refers to the god's place or position on the ~~ancestral~~ Banyan Tree (Kiri-ana), from which all the mightiest ancestral beings were supposed to have sprung. Ie-wibaba was probably Polynesian Rongo, the war god, to whom human sacrifices were made; or else he was a priest of that deity. His clan of

example, R.L.Stevenson's friend Tem Binoka, High Chief of Abemama, as late as the 'eighties, designed himself a new crest of black cloth, to be worn in the middle of the sail, which signalled his vaunted "difference from all other inhabitants of Abemama". In his choice of materials he was certainly modern; in his motive and method he was but repeating the usage of his ancestors.

Most of the crests are probably as old as the gods of the race, for the gods are deified ancestors, and the crests tell in graphic form the reasons why they were deified.

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