



ADOPTION IN THE GILBERT ISLANDS.

—
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WHILE in many ways the custom of adoption forms a series of exceptions to the normal rules governing the Gilbertese social structure, it serves as an excellent introduction to the social organization of the Islanders, cutting, as it does, across their social structure and affecting in turn each of their social groupings. At the same time, since so little has been published to date on the ethnography of the Gilbert Islands, we have not hesitated, when necessary, to explain, in an extremely abbreviated form, the normal social structure when unaffected by the custom of adoption.

While our material has been mainly obtained from the southern Gilbert Islands, notably Beru, Nikunau, and Onotoa, the variations as found on the northern islands and on Banaba (Ocean Island) have been included, and for these, in particular, we are indebted to Mr. A. F. Grimble, C.M.G., the authority on all questions of Gilbertese custom.

1. THE MOTIVES FOR ADOPTION.

Among the reasons given by the Gilbertese to account for the prevalence of the custom of *tibutibu* or adoption in their islands the one perhaps of most importance is the desire of a middle-aged individual to obtain a protector and companion for his old age; one who will eventually gather his food, cut his toddy, nurse him in sickness, and look after his interests generally.¹ Besides this well-known motive, however, the adoptive contract is often entered into to cement or inaugurate a friendship between the adopter and the real parents of the adopted, since by custom no enmity should henceforward exist between these parties. A native might also adopt in order to leave his land, by means of the customary conveyances known as *Te Aba-n-nati* or

¹ His true children would by that time be married and busy rearing their own families.

Te Aba-n-tibu,² to individuals other than those to whom the land would normally have to pass on the death of the owner. For example, if an individual dies with issue his land will by custom be partitioned amongst his children. If, however, his brother had been particularly kind to him he might adopt one of his children and thus be enabled to leave him a portion of his land.

Finally we must not forget the intense desire felt by a childless couple for offspring, a desire felt especially by the aged Gilbertese, who would consider it as little short of a calamity to have no one to whom he could transmit his knowledge of arts and crafts, magic, and the traditions and genealogy of his family.

Orphans will always be looked after by some member of the *utu* or kindred. There is not usually any formal adoption of the orphan as the typical land-gift of the adopter—Te Aba-n-tibu—will not normally be given him. In exceptional cases, however, when those who are looking after the orphan have grown particularly fond of him, he may be formally adopted by them on his reaching the age of puberty.

2. TYPES OF THE ADOPTIVE RELATIONSHIP.

Either males or females may adopt or be adopted on exactly the same terms, but as a general rule it may be stated that a child may only be adopted by someone who:—

- (a) is a classificatory brother or sister—*mane* or *tari*—to its father or mother—*tama* or *tina*.
- (b) is a classificatory brother or sister to its grandfather or grandmother—*tibu*.

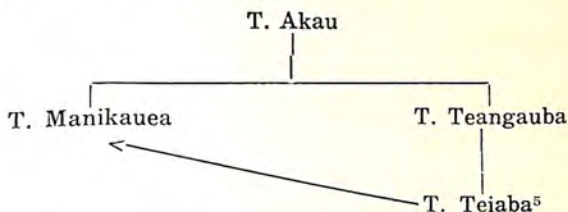
In the former case the child would be adopted as a son or daughter—*nati*—and in the latter case as a grandson or granddaughter—*tibu*—all these relationship terms being, of course, used in a classificatory sense. Under strict native custom, at any rate in the northern and central islands, no adoptive relationship was ever allowed between people who were not of the same *utu* or kindred. However, in the southern islands, whether owing to decay of custom or for other reasons this strict rule is not enforced

² Te Aba-n-nati=Land of the son (or daughter). Te Aba-n-tibu=Land of the grandchild.

and, according to the *unimane* (old men), has never been enforced, and consequently no objection is raised to a child being adopted by a total stranger. This is shown by the following well-known example dating back to a time well before the coming of the European:³

Two brothers, Ten Toanikaba and Ten Teinang of the Karumaetoa clan and Beru Island adopted Teng Kourabi of the Kabubuarengana clan and Tabiteuea Island, adopters and adopted being of different islands, clans and kindred.⁴

Adoption as a *nati* or son is also unknown in the southern islands, all adopted children being termed *tibu* or grandchild irrespective of their strict classificatory relationship to the adopter. The following example from Beru Island will illustrate this point:—



Ten Teiaba, the brother's son of Tem Manikauea, would normally call him *tama* or father and be called by him *nati* or son, but directly he was adopted by Tem Manikauea he addressed him as *tibu* or grandfather and was addressed by him as *tibu* or grandson.

On Banaba (Ocean Island) adoption from outside the kindred and if possible from outside the island was actually preferred, as it was considered that the son of a fellow-islander would tend, after his adopter's death, to carry on the name and fame of his true parents, whereas a total

³ This also illustrates the very exceptional case of two persons agreeing together to share an adopted child between them. In this case Teng Kourabi received Te aba-n-tibu from both adopters.

⁴ Te, Tem, Ten, or Teng, usually abbreviated to T, is placed before names of males and Nei, usually abbreviated to N, before names of females.

⁵ Throughout this article the adoptive relationship is indicated by an arrow, pointing away from the adopted and towards the adopter.

stranger, removed from his home-island, would rely for his local prestige upon the name of his adopter and thus perpetuate his memory. Such an adopted could inherit all the adopter's land, even to the exclusion of the adopter's real children. This forms an instance of the vast difference, also noted in other phases of social organisation, between the culture of the Banabans and that of the Gilbertese.

3. THE PROCEDURE OF ADOPTION.

(a) *Te moa-n roko Tibutibu* (the commencement of the adoption):

The proper time to arrange an adoption is on the birth of the child it is desired to adopt.⁶ Sometimes proceedings are instituted even sooner, the parents of the child being approached when it is known that the mother is pregnant. On Marakei, when a woman was pregnant and another person wished to adopt the child, he often said nothing, but asked his wife to make a new *riri* or coconut-leaf skirt, which would then be sent to the pregnant woman without any message. The acceptance of the *riri* by the pregnant woman was equal to a promise that her child would be given in adoption to the sender, no answer in word or gift being given him at that stage.

In the great majority of cases, however, on the child's being born its parents are approached by the prospective adopter, who makes his request in person. Except in the northern Gilberts this request cannot be refused even in the case of a first-born, and in the northern islands only on the grounds that the prospective adopter is not of the same *utu* or kindred as the child. The parents would be *mama*, or ashamed to do so, and would be considered *tauti* or mean by the whole community.⁷ If more than one person wishes to adopt the child, it will either go to the first comer or the applicants themselves may come to a decision as to which one of their number will become the adopter. No presents are given at this stage, and no transfer of land or ceremony takes place, but the verbal agreement

⁶ We were informed by the old men that the adoption of an adult would generally excite contempt, as it would be considered that the motive for it was solely to obtain food and work from the adopted.

⁷ Cf. Rivers, *The History of Melanesian Society*, vol. 1, p. 50.

made is considered as fully binding the adopter and the parents of the adopted.

At the name-giving feast, which takes place when the portion of the umbilical cord which has not been cut by the midwife finally falls off, the real parents will name the child. The adopter will often, however, change the child's name later, giving it either his own name or a name intimately connected with himself. These intimately connected names or extensions (Kiri-na or Tiki-na) are obtained by varying the vowel sounds or consonants in a name. For example, Teng Karekenna on adopting a child called it Kareua, and Ten Timirau called his *tibu* by the *tika* of his name, Timau.

(b) *Te Kakoriri, or Weaning:*

The child continues to live with its real parents until the time of *kakoriri*, or weaning, when it is taken away from them to live with the adopter and his family. The adopter will often endeavour to hasten on the time of weaning, as he will be anxious to obtain the child as young as possible in order that it will speedily forget its real parents. On the other hand, the parents have been known to protract the period of suckling in their desire to have their offspring for as long as possible. The parents are often extremely unwilling to part with their child, and it is probably only the force of native custom and the fear of social ostracism which makes them do so.

(c) *Te Ni-ni-marai:*

At the time when the child goes to live with his adopter the parents of the adopted will usually give him a present known as *Te Ni-ni-marai*, or, in the northern Gilberts, *Te Ba-n-uri*. This gift is absolute, being subject to no reversion,⁸ and is generally a piece of land, occasionally a fish-pond or *babai* pit, its object being to repay the adopter for his trouble in bringing up the child; hence the singular names: *Te Marai* (the soft kernel of a young coconut)⁹

⁸ There seems to be some doubt as to the point of reversion with regard to *Te Ni-ni-marai*. On *Beru* Island, at any rate, it is customary to return this gift on the child's reaching maturity.

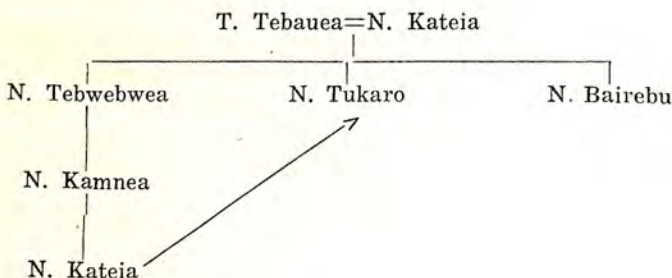
⁹ *Te Ni-ni-marai* is the palm from which this coconut is obtained.

which is the staple food of the child, and Te Ba-n-uri (the leaf of the *uri* tree)¹⁰ which is used in the infant's toilet.

(d) *Te Amarake ni Kaniko*:

At the same time the child's true parents will commence giving to the adopter a series of presents known as Te Amarake ni kaniko, or "the food for the settlement," a typical gift consisting of various foods such as *babai*,¹¹ *te beo*,¹² fish, *kamaimai*,¹³ etc., one or two *riris* or grass skirts, a shell or two of coconut-oil, a mat, and sometimes if the adopted child's parents are wealthy, a canoe. These presents are given in return for the adopter's providing the child with all its necessities, and they are made as handsome as possible in order to please him, in order that he may be more likely to give the child a liberal amount of Te Aba-n-nati or Te Aba-n-tibu, as the case may be. The gifts are repeated from time to time until, if the adopted be a boy, he reaches puberty, or if it be a girl, until she marries.

If the adopted child should die before puberty or marriage, his or her parents may continue giving Te Amarake ni kaniko. Should they do this they may be given the Aba-n-nati or Aba-n-tibu which would have been given to the child had he lived. In the following example, Nei Kateia was adopted by her grandmother's sister, Nei Tukaro, but died almost immediately. Her parents, however, continued their presents and eventually received Nei Tukaro's land as Te Aba-n-tibu.



¹⁰ *Uri*: *Guettarda speciosa*.

¹¹ *Babai*: *Alocasia indica*—Schott.

¹² *Te beo*: a pudding made from pandanus fruit.

¹³ *Kamaimai*: coconut molasses.

4. TE ABA-N-NATI AND TE ABA-N-TIBU.

The adopted, from the time of weaning to the time of his or her marriage, lives in the adopter's house, and the relations subsisting between the adopter and adopted are exactly the same as those between a parent or grandparent and his own children or grand-children.¹⁴ The child's parents may occasionally come on a visit to see him, but such visits are of short duration; however, no endeavour is made to keep the child in ignorance of the adoptive relationship or of the identity of his true parents. On marriage the adopted, if a girl, will go to live in her husband's house; or if a boy, will set up a house of his own, but in either case he or she will continue to look after the general welfare of the adopter in the same manner as his true offspring, if any.

On the adopter becoming an old man he will partition his lands and goods among his children and adopted children, at the same time parcelling out among them his knowledge of arts and crafts, magic and tradition.¹⁵ While there is no custom fixing the amount of land that an adopted child should receive, he will usually be given slightly less than the adopter's true children. The land given by the adopter to the adopted is known as *Te Aba-n-nati* or *Te Aba-n-tibu*, according to whether the child has been adopted as a *nati* or *tibu*.¹⁶ In either case the land is subject to a reversion to the adopter or his eldest descendant in the male line should the adopted die without issue. If the adopted has issue, the land passes finally to such in fee simple. This land will not finally pass into the hands of the adopted until the adopter's death, but it is from this land that the adopted will obtain the food for his adopter in his old age. Should the adopted die after the partition but before the adopter, the land may be taken again by the latter and re-partitioned among his other descendants. Except in the case of exchange adoption, to be mentioned

¹⁴ A Gilbertese usually lavishes more affection on his adopted children than on his true offspring.

¹⁵ The family genealogies were thus often handed down from grandfather to grandson, a process which has resulted in the skipping of many generations in the records.

¹⁶ *Te Aba-n-nati*, as has been mentioned before, is not found in the southern Gilberts.

later, the adopted child will also get the same share of his real father's land as he would have had he never been adopted.

5. ADOPTION AS AFFECTING THE POSITION OF THE ADOPTED IN THE COMMUNITY.

(a) *His Clan:*

An adopted person is in the peculiar position of being able to belong either to the *kainga* or clan¹⁷ of his real father or that of his adopter. An adopted child can always sit in the *boti* or clan sitting-place of his true father in the *maneaba* or communal meeting-house, but in the majority of cases he will, with the consent of his adopter, transfer to his adopter's *boti*; he will still, however, retain his right of sitting at any time in his real father's *boti*. It might happen, of course, that his adopter belongs to the same clan as his true father, and this will always normally be the case when the adopted is, through males, of the same *utu* or kindred as the adopter.

(b) *Marriage:*

Two factors regulate marriage in the Gilberts, the clan and the kindred. The Gilbertese clan is, or rather was until recently, exogamic, and an adopted person would be absolutely prohibited from marrying within the clan of his true father, sexual intercourse within the clan being considered incest. No objection, however, would be raised to his marrying into the clan of his adopter, even if he sat in his adopter's sitting-place in the *maneaba*.

Besides the clan, however, a Gilbertese is prohibited from marrying any individual who traces descent from a common ancestor up to and including the third generation. This prohibition is expressed by the well-known Gilbertese maxim, *e ewe te ka-roro* (the fourth generation goes free). An adopted child would not only be prevented from marrying within the prohibited degrees as traced through his real parents, but also within the corresponding degrees as fictitiously traced through his adopting parents.

¹⁷ The Gilbertese clans are totemic, patrilineal, and exogamic, and play a very important part in the social organization.

(c) *Totems, Food Prohibitions, etc.:*

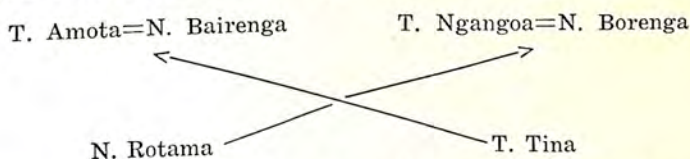
An adopted child will have to respect the *atua* or totems, the *bakatibu* or ancestors, and the *anti* or tutelary deities of both his adopter's and his real father's clans, and he may fly the *man* or crest of either clan from his canoe.¹⁸

He will also have to observe the food-prohibitions of both families. For example, Tem Baretta of Beru and his kindred are not able to eat *te baiku*, or the devil-fish.¹⁹ Ten Tiotio, who has been adopted by Baretta, also observes this *tabu*.

6. ADOPTION BY EXCHANGE AND SUCCESSIVE ADOPTIONS.

(a) *Exchange Adoptions:*

A common variation of the normal form of adoption is known as *Te Ni-ni-katoro*, or exchange adoption. This form is shown in the following illustration from Beru Island:



Nei Rotama was adopted by Ten Ngangoa and Nei Borenga, the parents of Ten Tina, who was at the same time himself adopted by Rotama's parents, Ten Amota and Nei Bairenga.

In this form of adoption *Te Ni-ni-marai* or *Te Ba-n-uri* will not pass, since each family is feeding the other's child, but *Te Amarake ni kaniko* and *Te Aba-n-nati* or *Te Aba-n-tibu* will, however, still be given. As has been already mentioned, in the case of an exchange adoption the adopted children will be entitled to no share in their real father's land.

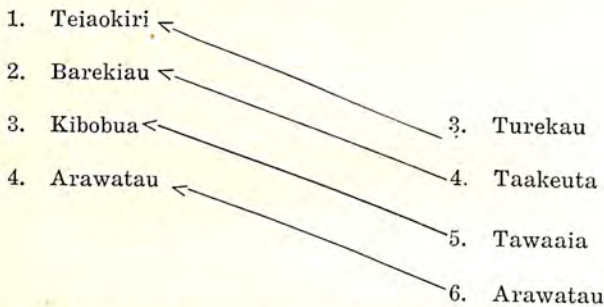
(b) *Successive Adoptions:*

If a person adopts another as his *tibu*, his son will frequently adopt as *tibu* the son of the person first adopted. The process might be repeated through three, four, or even more generations. The following example, which was

¹⁸ Cf. A. F. Grimble, "Canoe Crests of the Gilbert Islanders," *Man*, June, 1921.

¹⁹ If they meet one in the sea they will throw it any food, tobacco, etc., they may have on them.

obtained by Mr. Grimble on Marakei Island, illustrates this form:—



The effect of this repetition is to prevent all possibility of marriage between Ten Teiaokiri and his descendants and Ten Turekau and his descendants, for by each renewal of the adoptive tie in successive generations each adopted descendant of Turekau is brought into the first degree of brotherhood with one of Teiaokiri's descendants.

7. ADOPTION OF ANIMALS AND INANIMATE OBJECTS.

As a general rule only human beings were adopted, but when cats were first introduced into the Gilberts they were greatly venerated and, at any rate on Butaritari Island, were adopted and given in adoption in the same manner as human beings.

Kiremrem, or carved wooden dolls, were also adopted in the northern Gilberts. On Butaritari Island one of these dolls is still in existence, being closely guarded by its owners, and the one known to have been on Marakei Island has only recently crumbled into dust.

In the case of both cats and dolls, Te Aba-n-nati or Te Aba-n-tibu passed as it would have had the adopted been a human being.

8. CONCLUSION.

To sum up, we have seen that the adoptive contract, which can only be broken on grounds of marked unkindness on the part of the adopter, takes the child from the house of his true parents to that of his adopter and causes him to be regarded by the community as one of the adopter's family, while at the same time he retains many of the

privileges due to him and prohibitions incumbent upon him as a member of the family of his real father.

We need only add that adoption among the Gilbertese appears to be on the whole a utilitarian custom, which will be retained by them precisely as long as it continues to serve any useful purpose in their life. Very little magic it found attached to the custom, the only known example being from Marakei, where the *tabunea* or magic ritual called Kānangaroi was performed upon the adopted in order that he might be well treated by the adopter. This virtual absence of magic is remarkable when one considers the large part that it takes in almost every other phase of Gilbertese life.