

7 December 1988

Dear Harry,

I attach my attempts at understanding and translating The Song of Moiva which M. Latouche has kindly agreed to check out in Kiribati.

There are three points of translation on which I would especially welcome your advice:

- (1) Are there any inconsistencies?
- (2) Are there any places where I have obviously misinterpreted the text?
- (3) In stanza 16, am I right in identifying the resident I-Kiribati with the Bonito — see also para. 4 of my introduction?

As I have mentioned, also in para. 4, it seems odd that a Beruan poet should identify Abemama as the landing-place of the invaders. Is there, perhaps, a bit of Beru called Abemama (Abamama) or was Grinble romancing in attributing the poem to a Beruan poet?

Leid.

18 December, 1988.

Dear Reid,

You have certainly performed marvels on the 'Song of Moiwa', the more unexpected because I remember that on two occasions you had put it in your 'too-hard basket'.

Version B is in my opinion the finest piece of poetry you have ever written, and without any question deserves publication in its own right as conveying the imagery and beauty of the reconstructed Gilbertese version without deviating more from that text than Fitzgerald did in his 'Rubaiyet of Omar Khayyam' rendition of the Persian original.

Fitzgerald's translation despite being a very free one is generally considered to be an improvement on the original; and I would venture to say the same of yours.

Alas but after several readings I cannot detect any patent inconsistencies or misinterpretations, but this may admittedly be due to my own inadequate knowledge of classical Gilbertese and in particular its use of allegoric substitutions for reality which constitutes so much of the charm of its poetical compositions.

Furthermore I lack the time at the present juncture to work out each sentence with the aid of Sabatier and other reference material; and you also lack the time while I attempt what could well prove a fruitless task. After all without wishing to be modest I have not a tithe of your linguistic knowledge.

But no matter, for I have every expectation that if Latouche succeeds in enlisting the interest of the right old men you will have some thought provoking commentaries to aid you in preparing a final version.

As to the bonito Atinai being a totem of a section of the pre-Samoan inhabitants I can only say that it sounds likely enough; but we know nothing of their culture. My conjecture is that they were a mixture of Melanesian, or Malayo-Polynesian, people probably hailing from the New Hebrides and a part of the Samoan (or rather pre-Samoan) invaders who had either stayed behind or returned earlier. But whatever the reason actuating the poet in identifying himself with the bonito it seems that he did: it may have been its swiftness or some other characteristic.

Again why Abemama should be the locale of the Song of Moiwa (or of this version) beats me: still we do not know which of the invading clans conquered that island. Abemama may have been chosen because the Gilbertese considered it to

be the centre of the Gilbert Group, and therefore as typifying the invasion of the whole of Tungaru. I suppose that this was why Captain Davis raised the Flag first on Abemama instead of Butaritari.

But I doubt very much whether Arebaio of Beru was the author of the 'Song of Moiwa', or whether the author was an ancestor of his. A kuna on an episode dating back to the 14th century and of that classic quality would surely have been part of the traditional repertoire of the Gilbertese people; and Arebaio merely the person who recited it for Grimble. There are, I understand, other versions extant on other islands.

Honor has made a copy of your effort in case you wanted it for Latouche. She did it a bit darker to aid readability and we have kept another in case of need, thus enabling us to send you as many as you want at short notice.

Congratulations on a monumental task well accomplished, and my thanks for reading the tail end of Grimble and for your kind words on how it has turned out to date - it does look a bit better than I had expected and more like a book: let us hope that your predictions are realised and it sells more than the twelve copies I had predicted,

Yours,

Harry

THE SONG OF MOIUA

In *Migrations, Myth and Magic from the Gilbert Islands*, Rosemary Grimble, quoting her father, attributes this song to a Beruan composer who lived in the 18th century; and gives a translation of it at the beginning of chapter 11. I have used an original text narrated by Ten Aretaiio of Beru, a transcription of it by Grimble and the printed translation in this presentation.

2. The two texts differ a little in places and I have prepared a composite one with a commentary attached as a basis for my translation. However, except when the Grimble text clearly corrects a recording error or is contextually superior, I have given precedence to Aretaiio.
3. On the assumption that Grimble was able to consult traditional Gilbertese story-tellers when he made his translation, I first prepared a text (A) in which I have generally accepted his interpretation of the more obscure passages. The second translation (B) is partly derived from (A) but I have taken greater liberties in composition in the interests of presenting the Song in a more literary form.
4. The poem is about the conflict that took place when the descendants of Taburimai, Auriana and Aei Tituabine returned from Tamoia (Samoa) to re-conquer Kiribati. They are the Southern Race from Abaroa and are represented by the Porpoise, Whale and Tropic Bird. The narrator, who identifies himself with the Bonito in stanza 16, speaks for invaded Kiribati and the original descendants of Nareau's universal creation whose ancient customs were challenged and subverted in a series of attacks over a period of time. From stanza 3, it

seems that the first, memorable landing of the invaders was on Abemama Island — an attribution by a Beruan poet that is intriguing and, so far as I know, unexplained. Eventually, the invaders triumph and the narrator and his people seek spiritual rest in the homeland of the past (Manra) and the land of spirits (Bouru and Neineaba). The poem is completed in three repetitive and gloomy stanzas.

5. The significance of the Maneaba as a symbol of the Gilbertese way of life is made in at least two stanzas. In the first, the catastrophe of invasion is symbolized by the shattering of the ridge-pole of the Maneaba which also represents the zenith in Gilbertese navigation; and, in stanza 8, the Crane (Keet Heron) is both the name and totem of the highest pitch of roof used in Maneaba construction.

Canberra,
December 1988.

Reid Cowell.

KUNANI MOIUA

(Houn Ten Atebaio, Beru)

- 1. E to te taubuki ni karawa !
E rea-buni-karai-o,
Nakon ika ni marawa, Nei-o-o.
- 2. Te ika Taburimai ke ke ika Aurawai
E kaoti maian tari, e toboa tari,
M'e a kitemete n yirika n Uamane
Te U'i kaneanrai-o-o!
- 3. B'e urua ra? B'e urua taton Abemama.
E takitoki ieta ni kamatoa
Ba mwiri ana kai Na waihitia.
- 4. Ma N na waihakateresia.
E teke te ha, e tabwenana,
E mate te kua, e mate te ato,
E mate i mwiri wa ni Bue ma Rivongo-o-o, nafia.
- 5. Ba Naveau ma Ningoringo
A katangitang i bukini banni
Ni kananoanga n tanimaeo;
Ba a aki kona teke n te ika
Ate e tarotaki ma iterani karawa maiaki.
- 6. Kaneneia wa n nei-o
B'e ninimaunauna-o-a!
M'e a mauna ia tangina?
E hokakaro ma kakaro,
N auamange te karo n onatebu,
Te karo ni kua.
B'e na tiritiri, b'e na kakang,
Ba a roko mata n ana bong ni borau-o-o.
- 7. Ma I a kai, I tabeka kaina,
Ma I atai kateia ni katean ke ika
Ate nako mai an tari Bikeriniku, Bikerioa.
- 8. Kateia moa karawa,
N na raira moa nanana,
N na tivotiroia,
N na boea moa ke kai,

M'e a kekerua i eta,
Bungibungira te kai
Bakatafakara nano ni marawa aio.

9. Ba I karakinna ngai — o !
Ba I karakinna Manra, ngai — o !
E-e, ba I aki bia mate
Ba I aki bia tauaki
Ikeraiia atibu ma tonotono i aba ni Maekita !
E na lua ni mate rorobuakau,
E rae tangina ba I karaea
I tabo ni Manra, i tabo ni Bouru ma Neineaba.

10. Ti a toua te kainiman,
E tengerege, tengerege — e — e.
Ti a mavannako irouna ngkana e tabetabeki baina
Kua i marawa, ato ni marawa.
I Abaiti mai Abatoa — maia ?
Baba ni Mao n tarake.

11. N na karua te angina, uang,
Ba angin au manewe ni kua,
Ba angin te itera n anti.

12. E ruo i matenaua,
I matenan kain abau.
I ongo hukina ma rurungana,
B'e a kar touaki aon te kainiman
Ma te bai ni Kabo-tamate.

13. E rurunga b'e tokitoki iterani karawa
Ba nao n Nei Auti.
Kateia moa, b'e na matakua te aba irouna,
Ngkana e rarairaki ni man te Take.

14. E taka mai karawa ba N na kawinako te man,
A moti taumori ni wau,
A nangi to tanou au kamakinikin.
I tamare, A nangi to tanou
B'e a tiba tutaki, Neio,
Ba ... a tita rana ... uara !

15. E birinako moa n tangina,
 E biriteke, te ilka ni kakang,
 Mataku lai ba akea,
 Ba e mauna, ai e mauna nako i annang,
 I ratarata ni karawa i eta — ae!
16. Ti ruwa inanon te Akatara ma Taubukin-te-kiha,
 Ba i a mwia abau Aokinkiri ma Tengaongao.
 E na kain nanon te rawa i eta,
 A aevake ni karia te Atinai ma te Ikanituti.
17. E tabeka marawa, e rorotongitong,
 E namoia te keang, ngaia ba e tau,
 Katangibururu, kataemakai ngkami,
 Be a ruo te ba itibubua.
18. Tabeka marawa, e rorotongitong,
 E namoia te keang. Ngaia ba e tau.
 Katangibururu ma kataemakaingkami,
 Be a ruo te ba itibubua.
19. E tabeka marawa, e rorotongitong,
 E namoia te keang, ngaia.
 E tau — o ... Akea!

COMMENTARY ON THE GILBERTESE TEXT BY STANZA

1. Line 2. I have accepted Grimble's transcription bungitarai for translation.
 3. Nei—o—o seems to be a poetic exclamation. Not translated.
2. Line 3. Kirremere seems to be obsolete. The root Kire = excited, furious is extant. Ikamane = adult, warrior etc. — figurative use of ika.
 4. Iti kaneawai, changed by Grimble from Anebaio's iti kaneanrai which I have restored. I suspect the phrase is an obsolete equivalent of eoti tai = splendid etc.
3. Line 3. I have read ana kai Na waibitia as a personification of bitanikai = trick, stratagem or ploy. But Na waibitia may be an anti-ma-aomata.
4. Line 4. The introduction of Bue and Rirongo seems to be anachronistic but serves to emphasize the correlation of the porpoise/whale and the invading 'South'.
5. Line 1. I have translated Nirgoningo as Naveau's 'wife' (B).
 2. I have attributed to banni = lit. leaf of the coconut palm, the figurative meaning of 'children of' hence the translation (B) banni ni kananoanga = sorrows flood upon our youth.
 4. Tete = tetei = stand in (A).
6. Line 1. Grimble begins the stanza with the personal pronoun I which is not in the original text.
 5. I have read auamange as a species of ana = mullet. Grimble transcribes as Auamange and treats as a proper noun.
 8. Roko mata (cf. rokomaon). I have

6. translated as 'choosing their own time' (A).
7. Lines 1/2. Grumble translates the two lines 'See, I take up the magic spell for I know the charms to appease the fish ...'
4. Bikeiniku = a large cetacea (Sabatier). I assume Bikeioa (Bikeiwa in Grumble's transcription) is also a name for whale or porpoise.
8. Grumble regards the first five lines as a poet's boast which invokes magic and is incidental to the main theme. I have read the text literally judging that kai = crane or reef heron and that the allusion is to Taberan te kai, the highest pitch of a maneaba roof (A). The last two lines are read by Grumble as a command for the magic spell to descend upon the ocean.
9. Lines 1/2. Grumble translates these lines as 'I, even I who speak, will tell the tale. I, even I who speak, remember the homeland Manra'. I have read Karakinna in the alternative sense of 'hurry towards' (A).
5. Grumble's manuscript reads i aba ni Mao, Kita! The original text reads Maekita or, since the writing is damaged, perhaps Maakita. In the context, it seems that Maekita (mae = scattered; kita = possessions) may be a possibility. In any event, the poet is picturing defeat and desolation.
- 6/8. I have translated these lines freely in (B). The association of Manra (original homeland or this world in other traditions) with Bouru and Neineaba (lands of the dead) is interesting.
10. Line 1. Grumble translates kainiman as 'rocky

- places'. I can find no evidence to support this and in (B) have given it the meaning of 'Tree of Custom' or 'way of life' on the analogy of Kai n Tikualba. The modern meaning of 'flagpole' is not apt.
11. Line 5/6. Grimble treats Abaiti, Abatoa and Baba ni Mao as place names and translates the two lines 'from Abatoa or Abaiti, from Baba ni Mao to eastward'. It seems to me that 1 Abaiti mai Abatoa simply means 'the mighty ones from Abatoa' (B) or that the text should read '1 Abaiti ma 1 Abatoa' (A). I have translated Mao n as if it should be maon n and Baba ni Maon as 'raiders'.
12. Line 4. Kainiman. See comment on 10.1
5. Grimble substitutes kabotamaroa for kabotamare and translates it 'let us find beautiful words to tell of it'. In (B), I have read tamare in the normal sense of 'strategy' (of reduction) and kabotamare here as 'take by surprise'.
13. Lines 3/4. Grimble's translation reads 'Take up the song; let the people gaze upon the dancers in their beauty'. I have translated more literally and read man te Take simply as 'the Tropic Bird', the symbol of Nei Tituabine.
14. Line 3. According to Grimble, kamakinikin = a magic spell to conjure fear. Tano in this context = fine white sand used on cheeks in certain magic spells.
16. Line 1. I have translated the names of the canoes freely in (B).
2. Grimble retains the names Aokinikini and Tengaongao. I have given a free translation in (B).
- 3/4. Grimble renders ria kainanon te rawa ieta as 'the trees at the lagoon passage come in sight' and the following line as

16. Lines 3/4.
(cont'd)

'The people go forward to be joined with the Atinai and Ikarinibuti?' Atinai is a bonito (small tuna or mackerel) and it seems likely that Ikarinibuti is of the same species. It seems reasonable to assume that both words refer to a people with the bonito as their totem.

17-19

These are difficult lines and I am far from being sure of my translations. It is possible that the three stanzas are a metaphorical description of an invasion by sea with keang = a green seaweed representing the invaders. On the other hand they may just express the gloom of the poet evoked by the earlier stanzas.

SONG OF MOIUA (A)

1. The ridge-pole of the sky lies shattered!
Let a whirlwind take my song
To the deep-sea fish,
Flesh of Taburimai or Aurawai.
2. The sun rises, the sea is lashed with foam,
Tempestuous as the warrior sons
Appear in all their glory.
3. Was anything destroyed?
Yes, the land of Ahenama,
Ashore, they made themselves secure
By use of Na Waihitia's spear.
4. But I'll transfix them;
The net is struck, cleft in two,
The porpoise and the whale lie dead
In the wake of the canoe
Of Bue and Rirongo — their children!
5. Nareau and Ningonigo weep in the west,
Full of sorrow for those in travail.
They cannot stand against the fish,
With their magic weapons, from the south.
6. Drive off their canoes, out of sight!
When will the sound die away?
They quarrel and dodge
Among the mullet, those schools
Of porpoises and whales;
They are vicious, ravenous,
Choosing their own time to roam the seas.
7. I am in trouble, I take up the challenge.
For I know how to make an offering to the fish
Which come upon me from the sun — porpoise
and whale.
8. Lift up the heavens again,
I will turn things around,
I will observe them.
I will chide the heron first
For it screeches on high.

But the heron comes back
To the ocean — to attack down here.

9. I hurry on!
I hurry towards Manra!
I would not wish to die,
I would not wish to be buried,
By the rocks and gravestones of Maekita!
My youth will fade and be lost —
Its breath scattered
On Manra, Bouru and Neineaba.

10. We tread the rocky outcrop,
It stretches far away.
We'll slip and fall if the porpoise and the whale
Raise up their fins.
From where do I-Abaiti, I-Abatooa come?
From Baba-ni-Mao in the east.

11. I will call upon a wind, two winds,
Winds on the words of my song,
Winds of the land of spirits.

12. It sweeps through the open spaces
Among the people of my land;
I hear it pound and tumble.
For it seeks to flatten that rocky place
And by surprise overcome it.

13. There is a rumbling as the heavens
reverberate
To the waves of the westerly winds.
Wait a minute! Let everyone watch in
astonishment
As everything is overturned by the Tropic Bird.

14. The heavens decree that I must drive the bird
away;
My canoe is ready rigged;
I deck my cheeks with sand to cast my magic
spell.
I cast it. My magic sand is ready,
It is spreading far and wide, Neio.

It's working, what do you think of that!

15. Rapidly, their cry fades in the east,
The fierce fish speed far away,
Look over there — not a thing to see!
They have disappeared, vanished into the clouds
Beyond the far horizon.
16. We put out to sea in our canoes,
The Akatara and Taubukin-te-kiba.
I long for my lands, Aokirikiri and
Tengaongao.
On the beach inside the passage people come into view, and
The Atinai and Ikaributi go ashore to meet them.
17. The sea is rough, it is very dark;
Seaweed covers everything, everywhere.
Sound the conch-shell loudly, quickly!
For mighty thunderbolts descend on us.
18. The sea is rough, it is very dark;
Seaweed covers everything, everywhere.
Sound the conch-shell loudly, quickly!
For mighty thunderbolts descend on us.
19. The sea grows rough, it is very dark;
Seaweed covers everything.
Enough, enough! There's nothing more to say.

Streaming upon us from the rising sun.

8. Let things on high be as they were again,
That I might change the destiny we dread!
I'd spy on them and I would chide the Crane
Because it screeches shrilly overhead.
I'd call on it to turn and, flying back,
Swoop down into the ocean, to attack.
9. But I must hurry off, although I know
My journey ends on Manra's timeless sands.
I would not wish to die, nor lie below
The shingled gravestones of our wasted lands.
And I will prove my mettle, brave and true,
That my last breath, with honour, may be borne
To Manra, Meine'ata and Bouru.
10. We tend the Tree of Custom without fail —
Its branches spread out far to shade us all;
But, when the roving Porpoise and the whale
Raise high their fins, like dying waves we fall.
Whence come the mighty ones of Atafua?
Raiders, appearing off our ocean shore.
11. I call upon the howling wind to bring
To me the music of our ancient gods
In inspiration; so that I may sing
A song of passion to these poignant words.
12. The wind sweeps through the empty space which
lies
Between our homes. I hear it rush and bear
A warning. They would take us by surprise
And trample on the customs we revere!
13. A boom reverberates throughout the sky —
It is the time for deep-sea voyaging,
Time of the best wind when the waves pile high
Upon the reef and echo, thundering.
But wait! We yet may see the Tropic Bird
Turn upside down the lives we've always lived.

14. 'Drive off the Bird', that is the heavens' command;
 My rigging's set, canoe prepared for sea,
 So I shall deck my cheeks with magic sand
 And make a spell to trick the enemy.
 My cheeks are almost covered. See, it's gone!
 The Bird has gone! And so my spell is done.
15. The fierce fish turn around and swim away,
 Into the east their plaintiff cries recede;
 The far horizon where the clouds hang low
 Is clear of them as on their way they speed.
16. Then, we put out to sea in our canoes,
 The 'Seeker' and the 'Zenith', filled with grief,
 And leave behind our homes, laid waste and bare.
 New faces through the beach and through the reef
 Be, the Bonito, sail to meet them there.
17. The night is black, the ocean surge is strong
 And everywhere green seaweed meets the eye.
 Enough! Blow on the conch-shell loud and long!
 The thunder rolls, forked lightning cleaves the sky.
18. The night is black, the ocean surge is strong
 And everywhere green seaweed meets the eye.
 Enough! Blow on the conch-shell loud and long!
 The thunder rolls, forked lightning cleaves the sky.
19. The night is black, the ocean surge is strong
 And everywhere green seaweed meets the eye.
 So be it! That is all there is to tell
 And into nothing fades away my song.