

# The legacy of migration in response to climate stress: learning from the Gilbertese resettlement in the Solomon Islands

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## Abstract

*The long-term threat of sea-level rise to coral atoll and reef island communities in Kiribati, Tuvalu and other nations has raised the possibility of international migration. Historical resettlements in the Pacific may provide valuable insight into the long-term effect of future climate change-related migration on communities. This study evaluates the challenges faced by Gilbertese people resettled from modern-day Kiribati to Ghizo in the Solomon Islands by the British colonial administration in the mid-1900s. Drawing upon field interviews (n = 45) conducted in 2011 and the available historical literature, the study examines the circumstances of the initial failed resettlement in the equatorial Phoenix Islands, the subsequent relocation to Ghizo, and the recent concerns of the Gilbertese in Ghizo. Focus is placed on the struggle to recover from the 2007 tsunami that devastated the unprepared community. The analysis reveals that uncertainty about land tenure (raised by 61% of respondents) persists 60 years after resettlement, and is linked to the ability to recover from the tsunami, tensions with the Melanesian population, concerns over political representation, cultural decline, and education and employment opportunities. The Gilbertese experience can serve as a cautionary tale for policymakers considering mechanisms for facilitating climate change-related migration.*

*Keywords:* Climate change; migration; Small Island Developing States; coral atolls; sea-level rise; Kiribati; Solomon Islands; land tenure; adaptation.

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## 1. Introduction

*“When it [the lagoon] was drying up, they were surprised, they went to go see the sea, rather than running up the hill for their lives. They kept being surprised, then it was too late” (Gilbertese elder).*

In 2007, an undersea earthquake triggered a tsunami that struck the nearby small island of Ghizo in the Solomon Islands, killing 50 people. The tsunami was devastating to the small Gilbertese community, which suffered 60% of the fatalities despite comprising only 14% of the affected population (McAdoo *et al.*, 2009). The community was established in the 1950s by migrants from the equatorial Gilbert Islands of what is now the nation of Kiribati.<sup>1</sup> As the quoted Gilbertese elder describes, many people did not

know that water rushing away from the coast after an earthquake was the sign of an imminent tsunami. Research indicates that despite three generations in the tectonically active Solomon Islands, the Gilbertese community still lacked the cultural knowledge to seek higher ground (McAdoo *et al.*, 2009).

Today, migration and resettlement is a common subject in Kiribati and other atoll countries like Tuvalu, the Marshall Islands and the Maldives. Climate change and rising sea levels pose an existential threat to low-lying communities on coral atolls and reef islands (Barnett and Adger, 2003). The future of the people of Kiribati in particular has been the subject of much research and media attention. For example, the Kiribati government’s 2012 land purchase on the Fijian island of Vanua Levu for investment purposes incorrectly drew worldwide speculation that large-scale migration because of climate change was imminent (Campbell and Bedford, 2013). Though the capacity of atoll peoples and the islands themselves to adapt over the next few decades is greater than headlines about “sinking islands” and “climate change refugees” may imply, sea-level rise may eventually make continued habitation prohibitively expensive, if not physically impossible (Donner, 2015). There is a clear need to consider the many ethical, cultural, socio-economic and legal implications of

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<sup>1</sup> The colonial term “Gilbertese” is used here because the Solomon Islands community, established before Kiribati’s independence, self-refers as Gilbertese rather than as i-Kiribati. The word Kiribati itself is derived from the pronunciation of Gilberts (kee-ree-bas) in the local language.

migration and resettlement as a strategy for responding to climate change in atolls and low-lying reef islands (Connell, 2013).

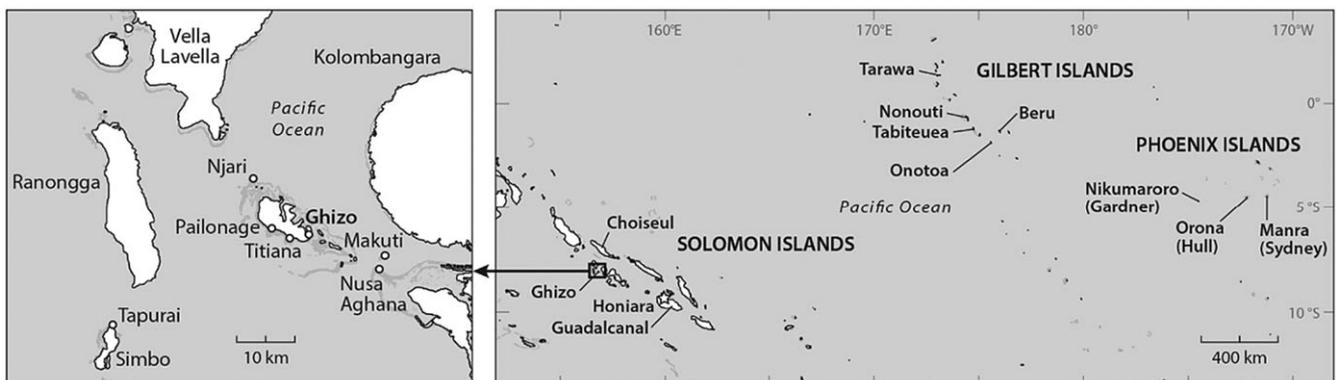
Migration and resettlement are, however, not new concepts to the people of most Small Island Developing States (SIDS). They have been a key means by which Pacific peoples have adapted to environmental changes and resource constraints throughout history (Silverman, 1977; Campbell *et al.*, 2007). In recent decades, individual or family migration has become a way for people in communities dependent on natural resources to diversify sources of income (Birk and Rasmussen, 2014). Much of the literature on migration and climate change has focused on either the international politics or the many factors influencing present-day individual migration and community resettlement decisions (Perch-Nielsen *et al.*, 2008; Barnett and Webber, 2009; Bardsley and Hugo, 2010). Surveys suggest that recent migration from atoll countries such as Kiribati and Tuvalu has been driven by economic factors, and not environmental factors such as climate change (Mortreux and Barnett, 2009; Farbotko and Lazrus, 2012). The personal, cultural and institutional ties developed by such economic migrants may facilitate future migration driven, or partially inspired, by climate change. For example, the Kiribati government's "Migration with Dignity" initiative explicitly seeks to use overseas work programmes and skills development to develop international linkages and expatriate communities (Onorio, 2013). The initiative could facilitate future individual migration or community resettlement as a response to climate change.

History can be a valuable guide for the social, cultural, and economic consequences of different climate change adaptation strategies. There is a wealth of literature analysing the history of past societies (e.g. Orlove, 2005) and the response to recent weather or climate extremes (e.g. Adger, 1999) in order to inform strategies for adapting to future climate change. Similarly, the experience of reef island or atoll communities that resettled over the past century due to perceived or actual environmental

constraints can be instructive in developing migration policies (Campbell *et al.*, 2007; Campbell, 2010, 2011; Birk, 2012; Connell, 2013; McAdam, 2014). Examples include the well-known forced resettlement of the people of Bikini Atoll in advance of US nuclear tests in the 1950s, and the resettlement of the people of Banaba (modern-day Kiribati) and the people of Vaitupu (modern-day Tuvalu) in the 1940s to islands in Fiji. Although there are clear differences in the governance and power structures at play between colonial era resettlements and future climate-driven resettlements of Pacific peoples, the historical examples can help identify specific issues and challenges that may arise in the future.

The Gilbertese community of Ghizo may provide particularly valuable insight into the long-term consequences of future resettlement of atoll communities due to climate change. In the late 1930s, the British colonial administration relocated some families from the drought-prone southern Gilbert Islands to the then-uninhabited Phoenix Islands (see Figure 1). In the 1950s, the people were resettled in Ghizo after the Phoenix Islands settlements struggled due to drought and isolation. The resettlements, though occurring during the colonial era and before climate change was a known threat, feature some key similarities to possible future climate-induced community resettlements. The proximate driver was freshwater stress, and the migrants had to adjust to new landscapes, cultures, food options, and natural hazards, including earthquakes and tsunamis.

This study examines the challenges faced by the Gilbertese community in the Phoenix Islands and Ghizo, based on interviews and the available historical literature, in order to inform planned responses to climate change in atoll communities. The study begins by describing the circumstances of the Phoenix Islands Resettlement Scheme (Section 3) and the subsequent Gilbertese Internal Resettlement Scheme, which relocated people to the Solomon Islands (Section 4). It then examines recent concerns of the Gilbertese community in Ghizo, including land tenure, cultural changes and political representations,



**Figure 1.** Map of the west-central Pacific, including the Gilbert Islands, the Phoenix Islands and the Solomon Islands. Inset map is of Ghizo and the surrounding islands in the Western Province of the Solomon Islands.

with a focus on the struggle to recover from the 2007 tsunami (Section 5). The results point to the long, problematic legacy of resettlement decisions and the potentially precarious nature of land rights for communities resettled in the future due to climate change.

## 2. Method

The study is based upon interviews conducted during the month of May, 2011 in Ghizo and also in Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands, and a survey of the limited available historical literature on the Gilbertese resettlement. It also draws upon field research on climate change adaptation in the Gilbert Islands of Kiribati conducted over a ten-year period (see Donner and Webber, 2014). According to the 2009 census, native Melanesians comprise 95.3% of the Solomon Islands population of 515,870 (Solomon Islands Government, 2011). The Gilbertese, classified as Micronesians in the census, are the second largest minority group after Polynesians, with a population of 6,466 (1.3% of the national population). Ghizo and other islands in the Western Province hold the largest Gilbertese community in the country (43% of the Gilbertese population), followed by Choiseul province (25%) and Honiara (23%).

Long, semi-structured interviews (30-90 minutes) were conducted with 45 respondents, and followed a snowballing strategy. Using existing networks, initial contact was made with seven “key informants” from local institutions in Honiara and Ghizo (government, non-governmental organizations, churches) with expertise on regional development and the challenges faced by the Gilbertese community since the tsunami. The key informants were asked to recommend potential study participants in the

Gilbertese community, with a focus on original migrants, other elders and community leaders in Titiana, New Manra and other Ghizo Gilbertese communities. Additional participants in the Gilbertese community were then identified by the elders and community leaders, as well as by spending time in the community. The 32 study participants spanned three generations of the Gilbertese community, and included five original migrants; an additional six study participants were Melanesians connected to the Gilbertese community through marriage or co-settlement.

All interviews followed a template prepared in advance (Table 1), with adjustments made to suit the expertise and known history of the respondent. The interviews with key informants more strictly followed the template. Interviews with members of the Gilbertese community began with questions about their background and memories or family stories of the original migration, and then were allowed to proceed to the issues of greatest concern to the respondent. This semi-structured approach was used in order to generate in-depth discussions with the respondents and to not constrain the study to preconceived notions of the key concerns of the Gilbertese people. Due to the flexible structure, individual respondents did not comment in depth on all of the issues listed in Table 1.

Interviews were conducted in English, when possible, and Gilbertese with the help of local translators, and recorded when permission was provided. Notes were also taken throughout the interviews to provide context and record non-verbal cues. The individual Gilbertese interviews were augmented by a discussion in the Titiana *maneaba* (community meeting house), with 12 of the respondents present. The *maneaba* is the physical and cultural center of Gilbertese life; it is where the *unimane* (old men) meet to make decisions, where community events are held, and where visitors are greeted. The discussion,

**Table 1. Interview themes with sample questions**

Theme	Sample questions in each theme
Background information	What is your age? Do you work for a living? What is your “home” island? How did you or your family come to the Solomon Islands?
Resettlement history	Do you have any memories, or family stories, about the Phoenix Islands? How did you (or your family) cope during the early years in Ghizo?
Identity	Do you see yourself as Gilbertese or as from the Solomon Islands? Do you have an interest in returning or going to Kiribati to visit?
Culture	Is the culture being maintained through to the next generation? Specific questions, where appropriate, about growing taro; sailing and fishing; dancing; participation in the <i>maneaba</i> ; communal nature of society
Land rights	How have you managed land rights? Did you experience good relations or difficult relations with others about land rights? Have you received assistance or help since the tsunami?
Food security (including marine tenure)	How have marine resources been managed? Have you been able to eat, grow or catch the same food? Have you, your family and/or the community adopted new practices to suit the land (e.g., farming) or the marine environment (e.g., different fish, fishing grounds)?
Political and economic opportunities	Tell me about the employment opportunities for the younger generation How have you and your community been treated by the Melanesian Solomon Islanders? By the government?

organized to respect tradition and to meet members of the community, provided an opportunity to observe community dynamics. Since seating position (*te boti*), mannerisms and speaking order reflect standing in the community (Maude, 1963; Whincup, 2010), focus was placed on both the words and the manner in which they were spoken.

The text of the interviews was systematically analysed to identify memories and stories related to the initial resettlements and to isolate concerns of the Gilbertese community in Ghizo that may stem directly or indirectly from the resettlement. Key concerns noted by the 32 Gilbertese respondents in the interviews and the *maneaba* discussion were organized by issue (e.g., land tenure, food security) following the initial question template. The most frequently mentioned concerns of the Gilbertese respondents were then identified (Table 2). These results are supplemented by and contrasted with the interviews with the key informants and the Melanesian respondents connected to the Gilbertese community.

A variety of terms, including migration, relocation, displacement and resettlement are used in the literature to describe the forced and voluntary movement of individuals and communities (Campbell *et al.*, 2007; Connell, 2013). In order to reduce confusion, here the term “resettlement” is used to describe a community connected by place, culture or kinship moving and establishing a settlement in a new location (e.g. the Gilbertese resettlement in the Solomon

Islands). By this definition, community resettlement is distinct from migration, which refers to the movement of individuals or of families to a new location (e.g. an i-Kiribati family today moving to New Zealand).

### 3. History of the Phoenix Islands Resettlement Scheme

*“We ourselves had largely created the problem and the native, prevented from solving it in his customary manner; looked to us for a solution. Migration seemed the obvious answer, and from 1931 onwards we combed the Central and Eastern Pacific for suitable uninhabited islands. High islands there were a-plenty in Fiji, Tonga, and elsewhere — but the Gilbertese are one of the most highly-specialized races on earth and, even had any been available for colonization purposes, it seemed a pity to settle them on fertile volcanic islands when they would far rather live on the barren sandbank they were accustomed to”* (Maude, 1952, p. 66).

The Phoenix Islands Resettlement Scheme was the vision of British colonial official Harold Maude. In 1892, the Gilbert Islands had been annexed together with the neighboring Ellice Islands (now Tuvalu) into the British Protectorate of

Table 2. Key concerns raised by Gilbertese respondents

Issue, % (#) of respondents	Key concern	Sample quotes
Land, 61% (17)	Uncertain land tenure	<p>“That is the difficult part of living in the Solomons. Land is the only problem . . . For the Gilbertese to have the land for themselves, there is a limitation”. [R20]</p> <p>“The land, the land on Kiribati is too small. The population is going up. In the Solomon Islands, there is lots of land but they give us little. Our parents come here because of British . . . and we still live in the same place, too crowded”. [R3]</p>
Culture, 57% (16)	Culture is weakening (e.g., less dancing, decline in language)	<p>“Not enough strong elders to enforce culture. So the churches come in and enforce the power of whatever the church can be”. [R18]</p> <p>“The language is the same. But the youth of these people, we are in the Solomon Islands with these people, so we talk in the pidgin”. [R40]</p>
Post-tsunami recovery, 50% (14)	Insufficient aid	<p>“Funding is not enough, if you build one house, not completed. . . . I can sleep, but no room, no window. We need more materials to complete. The funding is finished”. [R2]</p>
Identity, 39% (11)	Weak connection to Kiribati	<p>“If I go to Tarawa, they recognise me as someone from a different place. ‘This guy is an alien.’” [R10]</p>
Political power, 36% (10)	Limited education, job opportunities	<p>“We used to have very senior officers, undersecretaries, permanent secretaries, back in the days when the colony was administered by the British. During those days, most of the high level posts were given according to your paper, how qualified you are. When the British go home, no longer”. [R10]</p>
Pressure to integrate, 32% (9)	Note importance of intermarriage to gain land rights	<p>“I married to a Solomon Islander. And I stole him. He’s the son of a chief, so I get his land for my family in the future. I am really serious . . . The Solomon Islanders, they causing trouble, because too many [Gilbertese] people. My children, my grandchildren they have my land because of him”. [R3]</p>
Food security, 21% (6)	Felt being in the Solomon Islands increased food options	<p>“In the Gilberts, you use only coconut, young coconuts and the old coconuts, make kamaimai [sweet syrup] you know. In Solomon Islands, many kinds of food, vegetables. So in my mind, I think Solomon Islands better than Gilbert Islands”. [R2]</p>

the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (Macdonald, 1982). People had lived in the Gilbert Islands for at least a thousand years, maintaining a largely maritime culture since the thin nutrient-poor soils limited cultivation to copra, breadfruit, and pit crops like *babai* (swamp taro). The population began increasing around the time of colonization due to conversion to Christianity and the end of traditional population control measures, as well as improved medicine and technology (Knudson, 1977). By the 1930s, the colonial administration became concerned about poverty and land pressure in the more drought-prone southern atolls, such as Onotoa and Beru (Maude, 1938).

Maude successfully lobbied the colonial administration to appropriate the largely uninhabited Phoenix Islands, a set of coral atolls 1,800 km southeast of the Gilbert Islands, into the colony and investigate resettlement (Bedford, 1967). The Phoenix Islands had likely never been permanently populated, although there is archaeological evidence for temporary settlement by Polynesians, and several islands had been used by Europeans as copra plantations intermittently since the mid-1800s (Bryan, 1942). The limited settlement history is related in part to climate; lying east of the International Dateline and the warm western Pacific waters, the Phoenix Islands receive less rainfall than the Gilbert Islands and are prone to long droughts. Although the only stated goal of the Phoenix Islands Resettlement Scheme was to alleviate population pressure in the southern Gilberts, the British administration's other motivations may have included establishing a stopover for trans-Pacific flights (constructed on Kanton Atoll in the 1940s) and pre-empting American attempts to claim the islands through the US Guano Act.

Despite the risk and warnings about the challenge of establishing the new settlements, there was a surplus of volunteers; people even intentionally concealed resources in order to increase the chance of being selected (Maude, 1952; Knudson, 1977). Between 1938 and 1940, 722 Gilbertese people were resettled to Manra (formerly Sydney, renamed by the Gilbertese), Orona (formerly Hull) and Nikumaroro (formerly Gardner). Each adult was provided with a parcel of land near the government station and the boat anchorage, and another piece of land containing ~25 coconut trees (Maude, 1952). Children were granted unplanted land under the condition the family would clear and plant copra within five years. The land was truly a new home; following Gilbertese custom for people "lost at sea," land in the Gilbert Islands that had belonged to the Phoenix Islands settlers was distributed to others according to need (Knudson, 1965).

Although marine resources were plentiful, access to freshwater for cultivating food and copra (for export) were immediate issues. Attempts to grow *babai* in Manra, an enclosed atoll with a saline lagoon, were abandoned because of salinity; pandanus and breadfruit trees often failed to bear fruit and died (Turbott, 1954). Drought killed many young coconut trees, and then heavy rains would

cause the saline lake to flood the gardens and kill crops (Knudson, 1965). Interviews with original settlers now living in Ghizo confirmed available reports (Knudson, 1965) that life was pleasant in the Phoenix Islands: "plenty to eat" [Respondent (R) 19], "many things in Sydney Island" [R40]. However, the weather was too challenging: "there was no rain, the plants would die" [R45]. The colonial administration grew disappointed with the pace of development and the cost of paying settlers to clear land that was inevitably not very productive due to low rainfall (Laxton, 1951). People began travelling to Kanton, which now featured a US military base and air strip, or to copra plantations in the distant Line Islands for work.

In the early 1950s, Gilbertese leaders in the Phoenix Islands, discouraged by the droughts and isolation, travelled to Tarawa to request relocation. A delegation of Gilbertese people and colonial officers were sent to explore the high island of Ghizo in the Solomon Islands, also a British protectorate. The Gilbertese delegates chose Titiana Point because its low-lying coastline and protected reef flat were reminiscent of the Gilbert Islands (Knudson, 1977). On 1 September 1955, the first 30 settlers from Manra landed at Titiana Point. Within a decade, the Phoenix Islands settlements were fully abandoned for the Solomon Islands.

#### 4. History of the Gilbertese Internal Resettlement Scheme

Between 1955 and 1971, roughly 2,300 Gilbertese people were resettled to the Solomon Islands. Although the people were resettled to islands distant in culture and geography from their original home, the settlement was technically internal to the British Western Pacific High Commission, which governed both the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony and the Solomon Islands from an administrative base in Fiji. Following on the initial migration from Manra to the new villages of Titiana and "New Manra" in Ghizo, people from Orona and Nikumaroro were settled in the Shortland Islands and Wagina Island in Choiseul Province. Some unassisted migrants also moved directly from the Gilbert Islands to Honiara (Fraenkel, 2003). This migration stopped in 1971 after the Governing Council of the Solomon Islands restricted automatic entry rights for children of settlers (Fraenkel, 2003).

As with the Phoenix Islands, the Solomon Islands resettlement was a centrally governed programme with standards for land and marine access, building materials, social services, and livelihoods (Birk, 2012). Each household in Ghizo was allocated four acres of freehold land, a limited area given the size of some families. Given the land limitations around Titiana and New Manra, the Gilbertese from Manra were also granted small uninhabited islands offshore of Ghizo and land in the Shortland Islands, 250 km away. The land allotment scheme dispersed people and created uncertainty about how land should be allocated

to descendants (Knudson, 1965), since under Gilbertese tradition, land is passed down to descendants, but can also be claimed by people who have made contributions to the community.

Historical reports and interviews from this study suggest that the settlers found life more challenging in the Solomon Islands than in the Phoenix or Gilbert Islands. The one noted advantage was the wider variety of food options on the high island with productive soils:

*“Life in Orona was the typical Kiribati way of life. In the Solomons, here is too much work . . . Here they are working so hard, but you can actually grow things, plenty types of food. There, not much work to do not like here”.*  
[R40]

Nevertheless, as people adjusted to living in a different climate with different marine resources, there were shortages of clean water and food (Knudson, 1965). Many settlers working the land also suffered from malaria, which is not found in the Gilbert or Phoenix Islands. The shortages and health issues led to initial government complaints that the settlements were failing and expensive (Cochrane, 1969).

Despite the hardship, the Gilbertese settlers had some advantages over the local Melanesian population. Thanks to experience working in administration in the Gilbert and Phoenix Islands, as well as higher levels of English literacy, the Gilbertese were generally more comfortable working with the European way of life (Cochrane, 1969). Given insecurity about their land rights and lack of gardening experience, many Gilbertese sought education and entered the cash economy (Bobai, 1979; Fraenkel, 2003). The Gilbertese came to hold a disproportionate number of government and business jobs, for which they experienced some resentment from the Melanesians (Bobai, 1979; Fraenkel, 2003). As time passed, Gilbertese customs became less stringent, with younger people and women occasionally speaking openly at the *maneaba* (Knudson, 1977).

Although the Gilbertese in Ghizo had been granted title to their land and the right to acquire further land, land tenure was a source of tension up until the Solomon Islands' independence in the late 1970s (Premdas *et al.*, 1984). The 1977 “Land and Title Amendment Ordinance” effectively nationalized most alienated or freehold land held by non-Melanesians, including the Gilbertese. During the constitutional conference with Britain that same year, the Solomon Islands agreed to restore freehold land to the Gilbertese and allow them to become citizens, essentially in exchange for a promise of more British aid (Larmour, 1984). In the late 1990s, some Gilbertese families who had purchased freehold property on the island of Guadalcanal were forced off their land by the indigenous rebel group that was targeting settlers from other islands, particularly neighbouring Malaita (Fraenkel, 2003). Though the

Gilbertese in Western Province were not directly affected by the “tensions” in Guadalcanal, the violence and civil unrest had nation-wide political and economic repercussions.

## 5. Modern challenges of the Gilbertese in Ghizo

The issues most commonly raised by the Gilbertese community in interviews were land tenure (61% of Gilbertese respondents), cultural changes, including language use among the younger generation (57%), and the post-tsunami recovery (50%) (Table 2). The concerns over land tenure and the post-tsunami recovery were strongly connected, and also linked to pressure to integrate with the Melanesian population (32%) and concerns over political representation and related economic opportunities (36%). These views were largely corroborated in the interviews with the non-Gilbertese key informants, with the possible exception that the informants did not perceive a change in Gilbertese culture (see subsection 5.2).

### 5.1. Land rights and tsunami recovery

The interviews revealed that disputes about land tenure had grown since the Solomon Islands' independence, and accelerated after the 2007 tsunami. One example that typifies uncertainty about land tenure was the disagreement over title to a series of small offshore islands, some of which are no larger than a sandbar. Despite the British granting the title in the 1950s, the Gilbertese community feared that some of the islands are being, or will be, repossessed via local custom land claims, creation of nature preserves, and corrupt deals with the regional government. Respondents were quick to note the Gilbertese were being unfairly persecuted:

*“We come here because of actions by the British high commissioner and the others who do the services and when they lead us here, they say we are owning this land and these islands . . . we own those islands. But the government is taking them, they have their independent ownership. And we are being deprived by our rights now”.* [R20]

Gilbertese respondents consistently lamented the lack of opportunities to gain enough land for the growing population: “Everywhere is occupied. No space in Ghizo. Squeezed”. [R41] Regional church officials and roughly a third of the Gilbertese respondents suggested that land concerns created pressure to integrate, and was the reason for the increasing number of marriages between Gilbertese women and Melanesian men (Table 2). By marrying a Melanesian man with custom land rights, the Gilbertese women's children will have access to their father's land, and the Gilbertese land will not need to be further subdivided.

The devastation caused by the 2007 tsunami further exposed the precarious nature of Gilbertese land rights. Due

to the heavy damage in Titiana and the neighbouring coastal communities, not to mention the psychological terror of the tsunami, many families relocated uphill to unoccupied government forest land. Families were given occupancy permits and also provided with support from outside organizations (e.g., Oxfam, UNICEF) and the government. Despite initially being legally permitted to stay, the situation was still insecure several years after the tsunami. The Gilbertese could not legally register the government land; it was the legacy of colonial government purchase from the custom owners, and thus was still subject to custom land claims. The hills above Titiana also had limited access to freshwater, which contributed to sanitation problems.

Several respondents said the move to higher ground by many families had physically divided the community and contributed to a weakening of the culture. This topic dominated discussion in the Titiana *maneaba* (see subsection 5.2). The upland area that belonged to the Gilbertese community featured different soils and vegetation, which in turn forced people to adjust habits. There were, for example, few coconut trees for making toddy, the traditional beverage made from coconut sap. The broader concern, expressed by many respondents, was that the fact of living uphill from the sea was itself a break from Gilbertese tradition:

*“Our ancestors depend on the sea resources, not the land. Even if we stay up there (on the hill), we want to come back here. If the god could ensure us no more tsunami!”* [R10]

The rebuilding and resettlement challenges after the tsunami recovery contributed to a breakdown in trust between the government and outside organizations. Four of the key informants confirmed Gilbertese complaints that the post-tsunami aid was generally insufficient to complete reconstruction of all the damaged homes and *maneabas*. The shortage of assistance fed into existing feelings of anti-Gilbertese prejudice and suspicions about the government’s intentions. The suspicions are reflected in the strong words of an original migrant: “They want to take the place for tourism, for making money”. [R21]

## 5.2. Culture and identity

Changes in culture were mentioned almost as frequently as land tenure among interviews with Gilbertese respondents (57%), and were echoed in statements about identity (39%). Respondents broadly perceived a decline in the traditionally communal subsistence culture, including less reliance on the old system of village governance conducted in the *maneaba* by the *unimane*, increasing use of Pidgin rather than the Gilbertese language by the younger generation, and a reduced participation in dance and other traditional means of expression. This is a continuation of trends observed by Knudson (1977), who noted less reliance on the *maneaba*,

sailing canoes replaced by Melanesian dugouts and motorboats, and more food being purchased.

Cultural changes were repeatedly attributed to the loss of elders who could reinforce practices from the Phoenix and Gilbert Islands. In the words of one Titiana resident, “The elders died. The new ones didn’t take over” [R18]. The trauma of watching so many children die during the tsunami may have at least temporarily further drained the spirit of the community, especially the *unimane*. The shift away from reliance on the *unimane* and decision-making at the community level was mentioned by middle-aged respondents and was apparent in the Titiana *maneaba*. The discussion was driven by two middle-aged women and several *unimane* did not speak or chose not to attend.

Growth in the power of the church accompanied and likely accelerated the decline in the power of the *maneaba* (Table 2). Gilbertese respondents directly stated and indirectly implied that the community had greater respect for the church than the *unimane*. Two respondents suggested that had the tsunami relief been organized through the church, for example by the government granting relief lands to the church, the displaced Gilbertese families might have been better served.

Another sign of cultural change was the decreased frequency and more informal nature of dance performances. Dance is a central means of expression in the Gilbert Islands; the songs and dances tell old tales of the community, and require weeks of intense preparation (Whincup, 2005). In Ghizo, dances are still prominent but performed only on holidays, special occasions, or as part of a weekly show at a hotel in the town center. The dances and costumes have “more or less been modified to entertain the audience” [R10], and are performed by people who know the words but not “what they mean” [R28].

It is important to note that similar cultural changes have occurred in parts of Kiribati, especially the relatively urbanized capital of South Tarawa. In Tarawa, the church plays the central role in community life (Kuruppu and Liverman, 2011); church *maneabas* made of imported materials are the central hub for community activities ranging from movies to church services (Whincup, 2010; Donner, pers. obs.). Although the sense of communal existence persists in much of modern Kiribati, the power of *unimane* and many traditional skills are declining (Kaiteie and Hogan, 2008). In addition, dances in Tarawa are often a hybrid of traditional and modern music, and feature costumes made with imported materials. In the words of one key informant with experience in Kiribati and the Solomon Islands, “They [Gilbertese in the Solomon Islands] haven’t been assimilated, culture has been kept intact, but it is disintegrating the same way as in Kiribati” [R1].

Interviews with key informants and the Melanesian respondents connected to the Gilbertese community in Ghizo suggested the degree of cultural change was also partly a matter of perspective. Respondents frequently

referred to the strength of the Gilbertese community, the respect for elders and the adherence to the language. These observations reflect that, regardless of changes over the decades, the communal nature of Gilbertese society is still distinct from the immediate family focus of Melanesian and European culture. The distinction was described by the Melanesian husband of a Gilbertese woman:

*“They sort of believe everything is for everybody, like food, any of your property, they must be shared with the whole extended family . . . That’s why I tell my wife. Try not to let your parents give everything, sharing [laughing]. It’s good at times but not everything most or all of the time. It would be hard for our nuclear family life. We have to work hard for our own family”.* [R43]

Despite the cultural differences, most Gilbertese respondents, including the elders, identified as Solomon Islanders. The original migrants interviewed all spoke of the Phoenix and/or Gilbert Islands to their children and grandchildren; however, none of the respondents maintained a strong link to Kiribati, and only a few encouraged their children to visit the ancestral home. Modern Kiribati was more a curiosity, a place mentioned in the news or a place to maybe visit one day out of curiosity. In the words of one elder, “Only in an argument, then you tend to show where you are from” [R6].

### 5.3. Political representation

There were concerns about a lack of political representation and political power in general (36% of Gilbertese respondents), and the effect on educational and livelihood opportunities for the Gilbertese community (Table 2). The concern about political influence and lack of opportunities was a reversal from the early days of resettlement when the Gilbertese were reported to have a higher literacy rate than the local population and be more successful at obtaining commercial and administrative jobs (Cochrane, 1969; Knudson, 1977). One key informant from a regional agency suggested the Gilbertese had become “second-class citizens” [R6]. Six different Gilbertese respondents spoke of a bias in selection for educational scholarships and government jobs that was discouraging young people from furthering their education, for example, “It’s who you know, not what you know” [R13]. Two key informants noted jealousy in Ghizo of the Gilbertese settlers in Wagina Island of Choiseul Province, which has a burgeoning seaweed farming business; this was confirmed anecdotally by Gilbertese respondents.

### 5.4. Food security

The one issue for which there was little concern in the community was food security. Food was mentioned by less

than a third of respondents, and generally was to welcome the diversity of food options in the Solomon Islands in contrast to the Gilbert and/or Phoenix Islands (Table 2). As in Kiribati, the Gilbertese in Ghizo rely heavily on fish and other marine resources for subsistence and also for income; marine resources and marine tenure was surprisingly not mentioned as a recent concern by any of the Gilbertese respondents. However, the Gilbertese diet includes a wider range of vegetables and fruits than are available in Kiribati. Those with limited gardens use income from fishing and other activities to buy produce in the town market. The one food security concern mentioned in interviews was linked to the land tenure and tsunami recovery, that is, that people will need to become more proficient gardeners in order to continue living uphill from the coast.

Other changes in the diet reflect the decline in traditional practices over time, and mirror changes that have occurred in Kiribati. For example, the traditional root crop *babai* is now generally only eaten on special occasions in Ghizo and in Tarawa. Instead, imported white rice is the common starch in both places, although locally grown root crops like potatoes and cassava are also consumed in Ghizo.

## 6. Discussion

When asked about his birthplace, an 83 year-old veteran of both resettlements remarked:

*“The Gilbert Islands are, what you call, now, dangerous, high tides and flood. It’s alright in the Solomon Islands, there are mountains”.* [R2]

His words, inspired by stories about Kiribati and climate change in the local news, capture the fundamental promise of migration as a response to climate change. Another island or another country may appear safer. It may be less vulnerable to sea-level rise, have fewer resource constraints, or provide more opportunities for the next generation. Yet community resettlement and individual migration are best viewed as an extreme last option because of the negative consequences for identity, culture, and rights to land (and marine) environment.

This study reveals some of the ‘secondary’ effects (Birk, 2012) that can arise years after resettlement. Though occurring decades apart, the failure of the Phoenix Islands Resettlement Scheme and the tsunami-related struggles of the Gilbertese in Ghizo were both rooted in the gaps in knowledge and lack of experience with a new environment at the time of settlement. The Phoenix Islands settlements were susceptible to drought and isolation because of the colonial administration’s ignorance of the local climate and environment (and arguably hubris), and led to a poor assessment of the social and financial costs of resettlement. Similarly, decades later, the legacy of a lack of knowledge

of the natural hazards in the Solomon Islands not only left many Gilbertese dead (McAdoo *et al.*, 2009), but also left many of the survivors traumatized and with nowhere to go. Had the original settlers known about the earthquake and tsunami risk, they may have requested some additional land at higher elevations for safety.

The changes, actual and perceived, in the Gilbertese social status and land rights after the Solomon Islands achieved independence from Britain are reminders that large-scale political events, in addition to natural disasters, can alter the fate of resettled populations, especially if resentment over economic opportunities and rights to land and resources persist. Tensions with the host communities over resources, land rights, and employment are common after resettlement in the Pacific Islands (Connell, 2012). Such tensions may dissipate over time, but they may also worsen. Initial Melanesian concerns over Gilbertese taking employment opportunities were replaced by Gilbertese concerns about being disadvantaged in employment and education. Gilbertese land rights, supposedly guaranteed by the British, were compromised by later changes in laws. Almost 60 years after the Gilbertese first settled Ghizo, issues such as land tenure, political representation and (possibly) food security, which appeared to be resolved long ago, became prominent again.

Over the decades, the experience of the Gilbertese in Ghizo emphasizes that land tenure will likely be the unifying challenge facing future communities that relocate due to climate change. Uncertainty over rights to existing land and ability to procure further land for the growing population was linked to almost all other community issues raised in interviews, including post-tsunami recovery, political representation, education and employment opportunities, tensions with the other communities, and cultural changes. In a survey of community relocations in the Pacific, Campbell *et al.* (2007) similarly noted that land rights were commonly the source of friction with the host community, cultural changes, and challenges with maintaining a sense of community.

Current international resettlement policies, like the World Bank's Involuntary Resettlement policy, recognize the complexity of land tenure and the need for thorough inventories and assessments of traditional rights in advance of resettlement (World Bank, 2004). The history of Pacific resettlements suggests that unforeseen land and resource disputes between relocated communities and First Nations or local governments may be inevitable. For example, the new Fijian constitution of 2013 ambiguously recognizes unclear customary ownership of Rabi, home to the resettled Banabans since the 1940s (McAdam, 2014). While repossession of the land purchased by the Banabans 70 years before is extremely unlikely, there is now technically no barrier to a future Fijian government infringing on Banaban land or resources. Such potential conflicts over land tenure are the core reason that Australia and New Zealand, rather than other Pacific Island nations, are

considered the most viable destinations for climate migrants (Wyett, 2014). The Gilbertese and Banaban cases may be legacies of a passed colonial era, yet should still serve as a warning that land or resource agreements between a relocated people and any present-day government, whether the Solomon Islands, Fiji or Australia, must be robust and long-term in order to be resilient to future political change, not to mention future climate-related disasters.

Although the struggle to find a balance between cultural traditions and the customs of a new country are familiar to all immigrants, some aspects of the Gilbertese experience in Ghizo may be more unique. Most notably, the Gilbertese community in Ghizo does not maintain strong links to communities in Kiribati. This disconnect is likely related to the Gilbertese in Ghizo being twice removed from the Gilbert Islands, as well as to being legally and emotionally displaced from their ancestral land; following tradition, the settlers' land in the Gilbert Islands was transferred to others in need after their departure. Despite this apparent disconnect, the Gilbertese in Ghizo are still roughly as observant of cultural traditions as more urban communities in Kiribati itself.

Even in a best case climate scenario, substantial migration from atolls and reef islands may occur in the future due to population pressure alone. For example, the population of Kiribati is projected to increase by roughly 50% to over 160,000 by 2050 (Campbell and Bedford, 2013), further forcing people to settle on marginal land prone to flooding, even without further sea-level rise (Donner and Webber, 2014). Though many migration decisions are likely to occur at the individual and family level rather than at the community level (Connell, 2013), the goal of initiatives like Kiribati's "Migration with Dignity" is to develop intact communities in destination countries. Historical resettlements in the Pacific are thus important underexploited case studies for policymakers developing mechanisms for community resettlement as a response to climate change. The Gilbertese in Ghizo were able to emulate the communal village lifestyle in a way that might not be possible for migrants to urban centers in Australia and New Zealand, but at the cost of continued uncertainty about rights to land and employment opportunities. Their experience shows that the land audits, customary rights assessments, and ongoing monitoring and assessment required of resettlement programmes (e.g. World Bank, 2004) are necessary, but not sufficient. Resettlement programmes must work with host and migrant communities to establish and finance permanent mechanisms for dealing with land and resource disputes (see Nansen Initiative, 2013). Greater attention to the history of the resettled communities, like the Gilbertese, can help inform resettlement plans and can also disavow the popular notion that there is "empty" land in other countries where atoll and reef island dwellers can easily resettle.

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