TE UMWANIBONG, CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT IN KIRIBATI

Heritage Matters Report

TE UMWANIBONG
Museum & Culture Centre

Arts & Humanities Research Council

museum of archaeology and anthropology
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Culture is one part of development. We need to cope with the changes in technologies and new ideas but we also need to maintain our identity.” – South Tarawa resident

What role can a museum or cultural centre play in sustainable development? How can a museum respond to a nation’s intractable challenges?

Museums are institutions of civil society. In general, they are institutions that already support people and serve their needs, but they can do more. Museums have the potential to play vital roles as people negotiate the changing social, economic and environmental climate.

Local tangible and intangible heritage are important in defining attitudes and approaches to work, resource management and social relations. This heritage informs our identity and our attachment to place. The roles of customary culture, represented and valued through museums, are especially important for nations such as Kiribati, which face major economic and environmental challenges.

Te Umwanibong, the Kiribati National Museum and Cultural Centre, is currently doing essential documentation and preservation work but without support runs the risk of being viewed as an organisation of historical value only, its relevance and potential relevance to the present or future largely ignored. Te Umwanibong aims to preserve, protect and promote culture, but its role in championing sustainable development is yet to be fully articulated and acted upon.

There is much to be gained in developing Te Umwanibong and its activities. A museum and cultural centre that integrates community life can better support education and community cohesion. Therefore, whilst Te Umwanibong is supported by a large number of local community cultural groups, Te Umwanibong can also support these groups and reach out to other interested persons. It can be a forum and create spaces, both physical and social, in which there can be ongoing dialogue to explore the development of local culture and heritage as well as other sustainable development goals. Te Umwanibong can facilitate social change in a sustainable way where economic development does not come at the cost of culture. This report shows that there is evidence of the need for a public organisation to play a more prominent role in supporting and promoting culture and heritage in Kiribati.

This report, developed out of numerous conversations and meetings with people around the country provides nine suggestions through which Te Umwanibong can expand and strengthen its work. The suggestions focus on how the museum can maximise their existing resources and programmes. A central idea is that the museum can be of greater use to I-Kiribati if it gives greater attention to communication and education. Recommendations include improving the publicity of the museum on and off site, delivering varied museum activities and exhibitions, engaging with the dispersed I-Kiribati populations, developing a closer relationship with schools and the curriculum, expanding the existing research permit for international researchers, and opening a handicraft and art shop.

The recommendations are offered to assist Te Umwanibong to enhance its in-country contribution to sustainable development. We hope that this report will be of use to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and to social and cultural organisations looking to support national wellbeing in Kiribati.

Lucie Hazelgrove Planel and Nicholas Thomas, February 2018
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Preface

“They treat it like an office there but they don’t know that that’s the heart of the country.” – South Tarawa resident

Te Umwanibong, Culture and Development in Kiribati is a report written as a result of the project entitled Heritage Matters: Culture and Development in the Pacific based at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA). Funded through the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), the Heritage Matters project benefitted from a Research Innovation Award under the Translating Cultures and Care for the Future themes through the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). These themes recognise the complex webs of connections we live in and aim to create new understandings of the past for the future. The Heritage Matters project draws from museums and local cultural heritage in order to research how these can support sustainable development in Kiribati and Solomon Islands. Existing relationships between the MAA, Te Umwanibong and Solomon Islands National Museum, relationships that arose in part out of the MAA collections of artefacts from Kiribati and Solomon Islands, made this project feasible.

Museums are institutions of civil society and have the potential to play vital roles as people negotiate the changing social, economic and environmental climate. Heritage Matters sought to explore the possible role of museums in Kiribati and Solomon Islands through working collaboratively with people in each country to identify local perspectives on sustainable development and the challenges they face. The comparative orientation of the project draws attention to the heterogeneity of Pacific Island settings and highlights the importance of local approaches developed with local communities. This report focuses on the situation in Kiribati. It summarises the ideas raised through the research and outlines specific suggestions through which the museums can enhance their contribution to in-country development. We hope that this report will be of use to the Ministry of Internal Affairs in preparing a strategy plan for Kiribati Vision 20, which will outline aims for the museum to work towards over the next twenty years. International partner institutions should also find the report of interest.

Methodology

The evidence for this report was gathered through consultation with a number of people in and around Kiribati, for whose participation and ideas we are very grateful. Staff from the MAA undertook a research trip to Kiribati in June – July 2017 to work with Te Umwanibong and its stakeholders in order to explore the role of the museum and how it can contribute locally to sustainable development. A Facebook group entitled ‘Heritage Matters: Culture and Development in the Pacific’, has also enabled discussions and has brought together a network of people with an interest in Kiribati both within the country and abroad.

Working on Tarawa, Abemama and Butaritari islands, we held workshops and consultations with I-Kiribati and expatriates from a range of different social groups and backgrounds. Whilst some meetings arose out of pre-existing relationships between staff at the MAA and people in Kiribati, many others were facilitated by staff at Te Umwanibong and in the Island Councils, as well as chance meetings. I-Kiribati interns, particularly in the outer islands, offered invaluable linguistic, cultural and transportation assistance.
Workshops gathered together groups of 2 to 20 people according to their age or professional activities: such as creative sector workers, Island Council staff or youth group representatives from different churches. With the help of pop-up exhibitions of photographs of historic I-Kiribati artefacts from the MAA and the British Museum collections, as well as brochures from a recent exhibition on I-Kiribati armour held at the MAA and community books created especially for people in Kiribati as part of the Pacific Presences project at MAA, workshops explored the role of museums. Discussions considered the importance of maintaining local culture, identified people’s concerns and the challenges they face, and offered practical suggestions to lift up Te Umwanibong and increase its relevance throughout the islands. Workshops were a two-way conversation between I-Kiribati and the workshop facilitators as we were able to answer some of their questions about the use of storing artefacts and create awareness about the social role of some museums in other countries – such as the Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta. Workshop attendees were remunerated for their time and collaboration as is the common practice in Kiribati.
MUSEUMS AND GLOBAL CHALLENGES

The 2010-2020 Regional Cultural Strategy of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (2010) sees culture as the underlying foundation of the four regional objectives to achieve economic growth, sustainable development, good governance and security. This strategy aims to promote cultural development and development in a culturally appropriate and culturally sensitive manner. As Basu and Modest have argued, we should be looking “beyond both the economic and instrumental value of cultural heritage for development, and to explore its intrinsic value in reimagining development as a cultural project” (2015, p. 26). The question is not what culture can do for development, but what development means for different cultures. This is particularly important for Pacific Island countries, where culture is significantly embedded in national economic and political life (Hooper, 2000).

Museums, as heritage institutions are ideally placed to address issues of development. They provide the physical spaces and material artefacts that encourage active minds to ask questions and discuss ideas about change, heritage and identity. They can also promote cultural development through encouraging local economic and social growth, where cultural practices and artefacts can be both sources of income and sources of social wellbeing. In the Pacific, a number of global challenges are having local implications: urban-drift, over-population, unemployment and climate change are some factors changing our ways of life and our environments. There is therefore the potential for museums, as public institutions that work for their communities, to play an important role in facilitating how people react to and address these challenges; to “get beyond the institutional format and find new relevance for society” (Voogt & Kitungulu, 2008, p. 6).

For around 20 years, research has suggested that museums need to develop new roles and functions in order to meet the needs of local communities (Eoe, 1990; Voogt, van Dartel, Hardon, & Legêne, 2008). Particularly in museums that were established during, or as a result of colonisation, the very idea of a museum may appear foreign. Some however argue that museums bear similarities to men’s houses in Melanesia and other Pacific Island indigenous structures where objects of value are stored (Mead, 1983), with museum curators the equivalent of a local ‘big-man’ (Stanley, 2007). This may provide a more interesting avenue of development for museums in Oceania.

The Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta (VKS) provides a particularly interesting regional example of how a museum has redefined its role within the nation through instigating innovative new ways of working. Created by the condominium government, in the 1970s the VKS extended its focus on artefacts to research and document contemporary practices in the country (Rousseau, 2011). Following a successful Oral Tradition Training Program funded by the South Pacific Cultures Fund, a fieldworker network was created for ni-Vanuatu to research their own cultural heritage. In addition to research, they work “to promote kastom (leftemap kastom), to make it alive again (mekem hem i laev bakagen)” (Bolton, 1999, p. 5). Fieldworkers work on a voluntary basis, but receive training and research equipment. Some fieldworkers undertake projects in their local area to revive a local ceremony, reconstruct a village, or create a dictionary in the local language, for example (Tryon, 1999). Annual workshops at the VKS suggest themes of study for the following year and allow fieldworkers to exchange ideas and experiences and collate their material. These annual workshops enable the VKS to gain an up to date perspective on life on the outer islands and inform policy. It is therefore in a better position to “address the needs of the communities it serves” (Bolton, 2006, p. 13.1).

Multi-dimensional partnerships between communities and heritage institutions are emerging as a central theme in recent research into museums, cultural heritage and development. These partnerships are beneficial for both communities and their local cultural heritage. Whether preserving heritage from a changing climate (Harvey & Perry, 2015), creating health and well-being benefits (Chatterjee & Noble, 2013; Silverman, 2010), promoting peace (Apsel, 2016; Coombes, Hughes, & Karega-Munene, 2013) or respect (Atkinson, 2014), to name just a few topics, it is clear that museums can address global challenges and produce tangible benefits within their communities.
**KIRIBATI, A BRIEF INTRODUCTION**

“Now we are coming to develop Kiribati…. the best thing is to keep the culture.” – South Tarawa resident

The Republic of Kiribati lies in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, straddling all four hemispheres. Three groups of low-lying coral atoll islands - the Gilbert Islands, the Phoenix Islands and the Line Islands – together with Banaba, a raised coral island also known as Ocean Island, are spread over 3 million square kilometres of ocean with a total landmass of just 811 square kilometres.

Just over one hundred and ten thousand people live in these islands, with half of the population now living on South Tarawa (National Statistics Office, 2016). Tarawa is now facing difficulties due to overcrowding, which is stretching the infrastructure and water resources to its limits (Human Rights Commission, 2013). Throughout the country, the thin strips of land that make up the atolls have few natural resources and there is little to protect them from the ravages of the sea. Climate change is increasing the rate of coastal erosion, saltwater intrusion and storm surges, whilst increasing the intensity of other weather events such as El Niño and La Niña, causing flooding and droughts in turn (Office of the President, n.d.). Life itself in Kiribati is vulnerable to these climatic events and this is one of the reasons that Kiribati remains classified as a Least Developed Country by the United Nations (United Nations Conference on Trade And Development, 2014).

The low Gross National Income rates are also a factor in the classification of Kiribati as a Least Developed Country. The population is young and in 2010, 54% of youth were unemployed (Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, 2016). The lifestyle of I-Kiribati is in a period of rapid change as new technologies emerge and circumstances change. There is also a growing rate of out-migration as people look for new opportunities and a more secure future. Cultural heritage can support people through these changes and so there is a great need for increased awareness of the value and role of cultural heritage in the present. As a cultural centre and museum, Te Umwanibong is an ideal institution to support the present generations of I-Kiribati with a view to the future.

“I-Kiribati don’t have anything – but their history is their wealth.” – South Tarawa resident

**PHOTO 4. HONOURED GUESTS VISITING A SHRINE AT TARATAI, NORTH TARAWA. JUNE 2017**
TE UMWANIBONG

HISTORY

Te Umwanibong, the Kiribati National Museum and Cultural Centre, also known more informally as Aobitin Katem abara, Office for Our Culture, was created for the new nation’s independence. The Resident Commissioner V. J. Anderson was interested in setting up a cultural centre from 1965 but was prevented by a lack of available funds (Radio Kiribati, c.1990s). A 1971 UNESCO meeting on Oceanic Cultures in Suva also motivated people to create a cultural centre (The Tungavalu Society, 1975) and in 1973 the Tungavalu Society, based in Tarawa, was established, bringing together islanders and expatriates with an interest in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands (Radio Kiribati, c.1990s). The society aimed to create awareness of the culture and history of the islands and to promote anthropological and archaeological research in the region (Tungavalu Society, 1975). A monthly newsletter, Banan Tungavalu, reporting on different aspects of the culture, environment and history of the islands as well as short folk stories aimed at children was produced and distributed amongst Tungavalu Society members from September 1974. In addition, the Tungavalu Society held a handicraft competition and their first exhibition in 1975. They published the valuable record, “Proceedings of H. M. S. ‘Royalist’, May-August 1892, in the Gilbert, Ellis and Marshall Islands”, of Admiral Davis’ voyage to Kiribati to declare the islands a British Protectorate in 1976.

A Cultural Centre was however seen to be crucial to the much-needed cultural heritage work in the country. A small number of artefacts gifted by I-Kiribati and international workers and researchers in the 1970s were to form the future museum’s collections (Umwanibong, n.d.) and it was anticipated that the museum would obtain the repatriation of a number of cultural artefacts as it developed and grew (Government of Kiribati, 1979). In 1974, Anna Craven, recently appointed Curator at the Solomon Islands National Museum, was invited to the Gilbert and Ellice Islands by the U.K. to assist with the establishment of a museum and the creation of national cultural policies.

In 1977, when the Gilbert and Ellice Islands became self-governing, the Cultural Unit was formed and Bwere Eritaia was appointed Cultural Officer, leading the division from its beginnings until 1990 (Eritaia, 2007). At this time, the Cultural Unit was part of the Ministry for Education, Training and Culture and was based in a small office within the ministry at Bairiki (Itonga, 2018). Eritaia was joined by an Assistant Cultural Officer in 1981 (Radio Kiribati, c.1990s). The Cultural Unit organised and documented island to island cultural festivals throughout the nation, a program called te runga ni mwaie, a crowd assembled to dance, where representatives of an island would perform and share their culture with another island in the archipelago. The island to island cultural festivals were however abandoned, possibly due to a lack of funds, and were replaced during Te Bororo Situ’s presidency by te rei taki, dancing competitions between government ministries (Itonga, 2018).

In 1979, a display of Kiribati artefacts was arranged in celebration of independence. Letters were sent out to island councils requesting artefacts for the temporary exhibition and to formally found the museum collections (Eritaia, 2007). The persons and families donating artefacts were given the choice of whether to send objects on loan for the duration of the exhibition only, or whether to gift them permanently to the museum. These gifted artefacts would become national property and would be kept in Te Umwanibong. The governments of Fiji, Samoa and Tokelau also presented Te Umwanibong with gifts to mark Kiribati’s independence in 1979 (Umwanibong, n.d.). This has resulted in the museum having collections from around the Pacific region.

The museum, as a distinct organisation within the Cultural Unit, was “started in 1987”. This was with the help of two New Zealand Development Aid Officers, who provided assistance to what was then called the Cultural Centre. Further training for museum staff was given after 1991.

New Zealand funded the new dedicated museum building in Bikenibeu (Radio Kiribati, c.1990s), designed and overseen by PWD, the Ministry of Works and Energy. The construction of the museum necessitated building a
sea wall to drain and reclaim the land (Itonga, 2018). The new, dedicated museum building was opened in 1991 following minor leakage problems after completion in July 1990 (Cultural Division, 1990b). Work started on the building of a mwaneaba in the grounds in September 1990; timber was brought from Abaiaang and pillars were cut from coral (Cultural Division, 1990a). Botanical gardens, with a focus on plants used in traditional medicine, were opened in the museum grounds to complement the Cultural Unit’s activities.

The new building raised the profile of the Museum and Cultural Centre and facilitated Te Umwanibong’s aims to document I-Kiribati skills and knowledge and to promote the contemporary use of these skills. UNESCO’s concern with documenting and disseminating oral traditions in the Pacific region in the early 1970s resulted in the Kiribati Museum and Cultural Centre conducting interviews and demonstrations around the islands to produce a series of tape recordings, videos and small books. These books have for the main part focused on subsistence living and the creative arts, while recordings include traditional songs, for example (Cultural Division, 1990a). Research into boti, reserved spaces for families in mwaneabas, was deferred for a number of years due to local disputes. This research has developed into a national cultural mapping survey that looks to safeguard knowledge practices around the islands. Te Umwanibong therefore has also become a research centre for students from local secondary schools and colleges studying local history and culture (Cultural Division, 1997).

Following independence, the Museum and Cultural Centre sought to complete their collections for research and preservation purposes and in 1997 purchased eel traps from Nonouti following a research trip to the island (Cultural Division, 1997). In 1998, Te Umwanibong had about eighty artefacts in their collections (Cultural Division, 1994-1998).

More recently, the museum has started celebrating International Museum Day (since 2015) and exhibits contemporary art from local I-Kiribati artists. Te Umwanibong continues to engage with schools, church groups and youth organisations (Culture Division, 1988).

Tekautu Ioane took over as Senior Cultural Officer in 2006, having worked as Assistant Cultural Officer since 1991. He designed and set up the current exhibitions that are organised according to the skill type. Tekautu Ioane was followed by Pelea Tehumu, who has been Senior Cultural Officer since 2014.

Since its creation, Te Umwanibong has been part of the Cultural Division but has moved several times between the Ministry of Education, Training and Culture; the Ministry of Internal and Social Affairs; the Ministry of Environment and Social Development; the Ministry of Home Affairs and Decentralisation. Currently, Te Umwanibong is under the directive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA).
AIMS

Initially, Te Umwanibong was composed of the Cultural Centre, that promoted I-Kiribati culture, and the Museum, that exhibited artefacts from cultures around the Pacific and beyond. The two are now merged to form a unified organisation that aims to “preserve, protect and promote the Kiribati culture to empower communities and individuals to maintain our cultural identity with pride” (Kiribati Government, 2016, p. 28). Permanent exhibitions, in-country research, workshops and cultural festivals are therefore organised as part of Te Umwanibong’s aims to create awareness of the value of local heritage.

BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND COLLECTIONS

“The objects reflect our priorities, our needs.” – South Tarawa resident

Te Umwanibong consists of a museum building with exhibition, library and office spaces, a large mwaneaba constructed with local materials, and museum grounds with a working botanical garden, see photo 6. Together, these highlight the interdependence between social, material and environmental aspects of life. The museum exhibition focuses on I-Kiribati material culture and presents key elements including: mwaneabas, pandanus basketry, dance costumes, fishing and ancient battles, as well as artefacts linked to folk stories. These are in the main exhibition space and complement a small exhibit of artefacts from WWII, as well as a small quantity of material from neighbouring Pacific Island countries that is stored in the office.

The National Archives, the library at USP and the Radio Broadcasting Archives also hold texts and artefacts that link to the remit of Te Umwanibong. It is also of note that there is a growing interest in documenting and preserving the built heritage in Kiribati, much of which is church related, and Betio Town Council is looking to open a World War Two museum, which may impact Te Umwanibong’s collections.
ACTIVITIES

Te Umwanibong currently has five staff: Senior Cultural Officer, Cultural Officer, Assistant Cultural Officer, Web Advisor and a Registry Clerk/Receptionist (Public Service Office, 2014). There is in addition a live-in security guard who manages the upkeep of the gardens.

The cultural officers are engaged in a large scale cultural mapping project to document and record cultural heritage throughout the country. The mapping aspect of the project is nearing completion and once the reports are finalised and printed the next step will be to protect and restore the cultural sites identified in the project.

Annual festivals celebrating culture are hosted by Te Umwanibong such as the International Museum Day and Culture Day, an important part of the Independence celebrations in Kiribati. The festivals showcase I-Kiribati dancing, singing, handicrafts, food and local medicines and are delivered in collaboration with local associations. In 2017, the President of Kiribati, His Excellency Taneti Maamau, attended Museum Day as a guest of honour along with a number of Ministers from his government.

Te Umwanibong is reaching out to government ministries in order to promote local culture within the government and to encourage consideration of culture in all of the government’s activities. These include: Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Education, Ministry of the Environment, Ministry of Fisheries and Ministry of Tourism.

Te Umwanibong is currently working on producing a website to promote its activities beyond Kiribati.

STAKEHOLDERS

Te Umwanibong is supported by local handicraft associations, artists, canoe associations, local medicine practitioners, dance groups, choirs and youth groups. The close partnership between these organisations strengthens their respective activities. It has however been suggested that Te Umwanibong at times exerts an overly controlling force over some organisations in their representations of local culture in their attempts to promote tradition. For example, contemporary aspects of I-Kiribati culture may be downplayed in favour of contemporary depictions of historic artefacts. This has led to some people questioning what culture or who’s culture is being promoted.

Children and youth are “our most important resource and they will be the ones who will continue with our nation building process” (Maamau, 2016, p. 9). Whilst the school curriculum includes a module on Kiribati Community Studies for Years 3 and 4, the higher years are currently undergoing review and Kiribati cultural knowledge and skills will be incorporated into the new curriculum in Technology, Art and Enterprise sections. School children visit on their own initiative and some classes visit as a group, however there are no dedicated staff or resources to facilitate these visits.

It has been noted that Te Umwanibong could work more closely with the elders of local communities, whom some believe are key stakeholders as the owners or guardians of cultural knowledge.
“From my experience Te Umwanibong is closed. It should be more open to the public. It would be nice to allow people, to provide them with our cultural heritage. It has to be more inviting.” – South Tarawa resident
RECOMMENDATIONS

Whilst Te Umwanibong is already an active institution playing a vital role in Kiribati through its work that documents, protects and promotes local culture, there is room for the museum to expand and strengthen its work. The collections and museum grounds at Te Umwanibong have great potential, as does the expertise and creativity of many I-Kiribati within the country. It is however recognised that Te Umwanibong faces many challenges. Like other museums in the Pacific, insufficient funds and a lack of trained staff severely restrict Te Umwanibong’s activities. The cultural mapping project necessitates a large proportion of existing resources and prevents the museum fulfilling its other aims. The rapidly changing social and economic context of Kiribati exerts added pressure on the museum.

The following recommendations are the outcome of numerous conversations and meetings and are made with these challenges in mind. The suggestions are offered to help Te Umwanibong enhance its contribution to sustainable development within the country and highlight some of the possibilities for partner social and cultural organisations.

Key Recommendations are:

1. **Improved publicity of the museum on and off site**
2. **Varied, regular museum activities**
3. **Development of the permanent and temporary exhibitions**
4. **Improving national reach**
5. **Creation of a new post to enable and facilitate education outreach**
6. **Extended research permit requirements**
7. **Museum shop selling local handicraft work of high quality**
8. **Extended opening hours**
9. **Improved accessibility for all visitors**

1. **IMPROVED PUBLICITY**

“We’re not aware that the museum can be visited or not… we thought it’s just an office” – South Tarawa resident

“In Kiribati, they don’t visit Te Umwanibong. In Tarawa, it’s very hard for them to go inside Te Umwanibong. Some people say it’s very… they’re afraid to go there.” – Abemama resident

There is a noticeable lack of awareness concerning the public nature and role of the museum throughout Kiribati that limits the numbers of I-Kiribati visitors to Te Umwanibong. Improved on-site publicity of the museum through large and inviting banners and posters could serve to promote the museum and invite visitors. These may also create a more welcoming façade, which is currently considered oppressive.

Around the outer islands too, greater awareness of the museum and its aims to preserve, protect and promote culture would be of great benefit, although this would require alternative means of communication. **Off-site publicity, through social media sites, radio or interventions from or through Island Councils or local churches** has had great success in other Pacific Island countries and it is recommended that Te Umwanibong creates awareness of its work through such programmes and collaborations. Social media especially can simultaneously enable Te Umwanibong to reach a dispersed population and involve younger generations. Examples of such publicity from the Pacific include the half hour weekly Kastom mo Kalja radio programme produced by the Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta, which engages many ni-Vanuatu in discussions about their heritage, and the Fiji Museum’s Facebook page, which is widely followed. Within Kiribati the current government has notably doubled its budget to the churches to $1 million in recognition of their social role within the community (Maamau, 2016, p. 12). Groups such as Teitoiningaina, the Catholic Women’s Centre, run outreach programmes throughout the country and it is therefore recommended that Te Umwanibong collaborates with church groups to support their
cultural activities. Te Umwanibong’s aims to promote and publicise local heritage can be facilitated by similar programmes and collaborations, which would require minimal resources.

2. Museum Activities

“Skills must be kept and retold and retold because that’s what makes us Kiribati. But if your skills are half gone, then you are half Kiribati.” – Abemama resident

Te Umwanibong can engage more people if it is inviting and truly representative of I-Kiribati culture. There is a strong feeling in the country that Te Umwanibong is an indoor space that only stores historic collections; this contrasts with the local understanding of cultural heritage as a contemporary, lived reality that is associated with outdoor spaces, skills and knowledge.

Te Umwanibong could therefore organise activities and events in their grounds to enliven the space and collections and give people a sense of ownership of their museum. There is a great interest in the preservation and promotion of skills in Kiribati and more than demonstrations, people would like Te Umwanibong to organise activities in which they themselves can take part. For example, Te Umwanibong could work with the local community to maintain and develop the crops and medicinal plants growing in the grounds. It was remarked that the importance of canoes in local culture is not accurately represented in Te Umwanibong and so the museum has the possibility of organising boat building and boat house building activities in their grounds that could involve the local and outer island communities and perhaps result in Te Umwanibong keeping the canoe and canoe house. Such activities would be of benefit both to Te Umwanibong and its community.

It is important to note that Te Umwanibong faces challenges in organising interactive activities that are reliant on local cultural experts willingly sharing their skills and knowledge. Knowledge is owned in Kiribati and the transmission of knowledge follows restricted paths. Te Umwanibong would need to find willing teachers and be responsive to their concerns on this matter.
Moreover, Te Umwanibong could encourage the use of its grounds and mwaneaba. Artists and craft workers in residence with interests that are in line with could work in the museum grounds to create and promote their own work. Dance and song are central to life in Kiribati and Te Umwanibong could support the practising community by making their grounds available for dance and music rehearsals. It was also suggested that the museum could enable local dance groups and choirs to showcase their work by hosting a dance festival. Dance styles and costume differences from around the country could then be appreciated and the festival would motivate dancers and musicians and encourage conversation about these practices. Utilising the available space in this way would promote Te Umwanibong as a meeting place and forum for reflection and creation.

In addition to developing Te Umwanibong for I-Kiribati, it is also important to improve the visiting experience of Te Umwanibong for visitors from overseas. The Government of Kiribati is looking to develop the tourism sector and Te Umwanibong plays an important role in presenting I-Kiribati culture to these visitors. It was suggested that a model village or household ground be built in the museum grounds to give a better sense of I-Kiribati culture. Live demonstrations of skills such as cooking, massage, boat making and weaving would be housed in this village to create a temporary living museum that could highlight the interdependence of all aspects of I-Kiribati life and provide short-term visitors with a physical experience of I-Kiribati culture and an opportunity to discover both the material and immaterial aspects of life.

3. Exhibition Development

“As a local person, there’s nothing interesting. Nobody goes there because there’s nothing to see. It’s not inviting.” – South Tarawa resident

I. Permanent Exhibition

To aid and further understanding of the exhibitions in the museum, drawings and photos of the objects demonstrating their contemporary significance could be placed alongside the displays. These comprehension aids could also present unexpected or little-known aspects of the artefacts and the stories to provoke reflection and to challenge common ideas about the objects.

The existing display texts for the artefacts exhibited could also present more detail about the role and purpose of the artefacts and include more information about who made them, where and when. The contemporary artwork on display makes no reference to the artists, for example.

In addition, although Kiribati largely has a single culture throughout the nation, there are differences between the Northern, Central and Southern groups in the Gilbert group. These differences within the Gilberts, let alone differences with populations in the Line Islands, Christmas Island or beyond, could be represented in the museum. Furthermore, given the current changing climate, migration is now a critical topic and Kiribati is at the very centre of the conversation. Migration is part of the I-Kiribati story: from the origins of Kiribati and how people first populated the islands, to the migrations during the colonial times of I-Kiribati to the Phoenix Islands and then to settlements in Fiji and Solomon Islands due to concerns of overpopulation, to the current promotion of ‘migration with dignity’ as a last resort to deal with the consequences of climate change. Connecting the past with the future, migration is arguably a unique aspect of Kiribati and I-Kiribati would benefit from exhibitions and workshops that explore these topics.

II. Temporary Exhibitions

Temporary exhibitions are frequently used by museums to give greater attention to a particular topic and to attract more visitors. There are many themes that could be explored by Te Umwanibong and these exhibitions could be an opportunity to emphasise the relevance of culture in contemporary life. For example, Te Umwanibong could mark commemorative days that are already celebrated in Kiribati such as Children’s Day or Women’s Day. Artists or representatives of the groups concerned could prepare material for the temporary
exhibitions and showcase their own work and activities. Alternatively, exhibitions could be organised around the harvest times for seasonal foods. Such temporary exhibitions would encourage cultural enterprise.

4. NATIONAL REACH

“Inclusive socio-economic development can only be realised when outer islands are developed and when a trading environment is encouraged.” (Kiribati Government, 2016, p. 24).

The islands that make up Kiribati are dispersed across great swathes of ocean, making outreach programmes to communities in the outer islands expensive and logistically difficult. There is a need for greater connection between Te Umwanibong and I-Kiribati. This can be facilitated by structural changes at the government level, by Te Umwanibong creating links with existing networks within the islands and through expanding the museum’s current activities.

First, Island Councils based on outer islands currently focus on developing and maintaining local infrastructure and economic opportunities: they manage the upkeep of roads and causeways and look out for possible business opportunities for the island, such as running guesthouses. However communities also have cultural needs, particularly in these times when the lifestyle is changing. Outer Island communities would benefit if there were cultural committees on each island that worked with the local Island Council to highlight and work on the cultural needs of the community.

Second, increasing and diversifying the methods Te Umwanibong uses to communicate and publicize its work, as discussed in the publicity section above, is also vital for the museum to have a national reach. Whilst workshops to promote and teach new skills and ideas are relatively common throughout the islands, these are challenging as they are expensive, time consuming and require many staff. Collaborations with existing structures such as local churches, youth groups, women’s groups and schools can provide an interesting alternative for Te Umwanibong to support cultural development throughout the country.

Third, with the ever-increasing number of mobile phones in the country, research and documentation of heritage can be decentralised if communities are encouraged to document or showcase their own activities and traditions through social media.

5. EDUCATION OUTREACH STAFF

Museums are important educational resources and through their collections offer visitors spaces in which to ask questions, imagine and see connections where before there were none. This is in addition to and in complement to their official remit to, as in the case of Te Umwanibong, promote local culture.

The Government of Kiribati is also working to develop national education and the Kiribati Development Plan 2016-2019 puts education first in its vision “towards a better educated, healthier, more prosperous nation with a higher quality of life” (Government of Kiribati, 2016). This includes “sustaining cultural skills and knowledge through promotion of cultural activities” (Government of Kiribati, 2016, p. 20). Te Umwanibong is therefore in an ideal position to support the Government’s aims.

Whilst the national curriculum is in the process of being reworked and updated, schools are already promoting cultural skills and knowledge through their courses but also through school Culture Days, for example. There is however currently little collaboration between Te Umwanibong and local schools not only in school Culture Days and as part of the Kiribati skills aspects of the curriculum, but in the museum too. Materials could be created to facilitate school pupil’s visits to the museum and to create connections between the topics they are covering in school and what they are seeing in the museum. Activities and workshops led by a trained staff member, a dedicated Education Outreach Officer, could similarly be organised on a regular basis. The museum collections are relevant in many subjects and are not restricted only to the Community and Culture learning area of the
curriculum. For example, forces (friction, elasticity, gravity...) can be discussed through looking at and playing with coconut cordage; geometry can be explored through patterns worked into pandanus basketry; food chains and the food cycle can be studied through fishing equipment.

Moreover, it is important to develop Te Umwanibong’s partnerships with higher education institutions such as the University of the South Pacific (USP). There is the potential for the museum to offer training and research opportunities in relevant areas. A partnership with any of the Kiribati USP Centre’s courses, including the Continuing and Community Education Programme, could be particularly fruitful.

“We learn by practise.” – South Tarawa resident

In the context of calls to decolonize education in the Pacific (Kupferman, 2013), it is clear that Te Umwanibong can play a vital role in the national education system. There is room for Te Umwanibong to increase its relevance to school children and to support the national education sector. The creation of a new post to enable and facilitate education outreach, that is a member of staff dedicated to making the collections accessible and relevant to school children through working closely with schools and the curriculum can only be of benefit to the people of Kiribati.

6. Extended Research Permit Requirements

Te Umwanibong can harness the potential presented by research visits to the country by international researchers and non-governmental projects to further its own goals. The existing permit could be extended to ensure that all cultural heritage projects provide tangible benefits to communities or cultural institutions.

The Vanuatu Kaljoral Senta for example has one of the most extensive research policies of the region. International researchers not only have to present copies of their reports to relevant institutions, as per the Solomon Island Research Permit, but they in addition have to produce a short report in Bislama for the National Library, contribute something of benefit to the local community and work collaboratively with local researchers in the area.

7. Museum Shop

Te Umwanibong could simultaneously attract visitors, promote contemporary cultural arts and support the local creative arts sector by opening a museum shop. A museum shop could also be used to help generate funds for Te Umwanibong and its activities.

Additionally, Te Umwanibong could promote the cultural and creative arts sector to its visitors by advertising the work of its stakeholders through a map indicating locations where artwork, handicrafts, local massages etc. can be found.

8. Extended Opening Hours

The museum’s opening hours may also discourage or prevent families visiting. Currently, Te Umwanibong is open Monday to Friday during normal working hours (8am - 12.30pm and 1.30pm - 4.15pm) and has free entry for all, however this makes it inaccessible for working families. Extended opening hours - particularly on Saturdays - would allow families and youth to make more drop-in visits.

9. Improved Accessibility

The museum building and the mwaneaba currently present accessibility challenges for wheelchair users and the visually impaired. Whilst guided tours and activities have been organised to receive classes from the Kiribati School and Centre for Children with Special Needs, the built environment and the exhibitions in Te Umwanibong could be arranged to be more accessible for casual visitors.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

Te Umwanibong is a vital institution within Kiribati. As the sole national cultural organisation, it is essential in protecting, promoting and preserving local cultural heritage; however, as an institution of civil society it’s role is also to be a champion of research, education and wellbeing in the country.

It is clear that whilst Te Umwanibong is engaged in fantastic work, they face many challenges. Insufficient funds are the greatest obstacle and not only limit the museum’s functions but pose a serious threat to the museum’s collections. Comparatively small investments in infrastructure and training by partner social and cultural organisations can have immediate beneficial consequences in this context. For instance, gallery and exhibitions spaces need updating to showcase collections and to highlight their significance; the museum is in need of storage facilities and a cataloguing system for the proper care and development of their collections; they require resources and equipment for the appropriate conservation of artefacts and work rooms in which to undertake these projects. These are essential if artefacts are to be made accessible for study and preserved for future generations. Investments in staff and resources can facilitate Te Umwanibong’s contribution to the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals. As discussed earlier, museums promote cultural development and encourage social and economic growth.

It is important that international museums with significant collections of artefacts from Kiribati support Te Umwanibong and regional cultural development. This can be done by facilitating access to their collections and disseminating information about these within Kiribati. Temporary loans of artefacts and repatriation can of course provide invaluable benefits. Collaborations and engagements in other forms are also to be recommended, notably within the fields of research and education, where the sharing of expertise and co-production of knowledge will have important impact for both institutions and their respective communities.

Nevertheless, beyond the value of Te Umwanibong’s collections, exhibitions, research, events and its possible role in the national economy, the museum offers a unique space for informal meetings and gatherings for its community. The museum environment and the availability of the space is conducive to reflection and creation and it is essential that the museum, its precinct and gardens are maintained and developed as an accessible site for the public.

PHOTO 12. TARATAI DANCERS, NORTH TARAWA. JUNE 2017
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