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Labor Circulation and Changes among Seafarers' Families and Communities in Kiribati

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This paper critically examines the social and cultural elements involved in seafaring and explores how a seafaring lifestyle has affected aspects of the *te katei ni Kiribati,* the "I-Kiribati way of life." The decision to undertake contract labor requiring a work life apart from families is one way to maximizing socio-economic benefits, where the hardship of being away from home over extended periods is endured in order to maintain and benefit families at home. This paper explores how seafarers are perceived in Kiribati's communities, and how different aspects of their employment alternating with vacation at home are affecting family relationships and the I-Kiribati culture.

Introduction

A publication in the journal *Pacific Perspective* in 1980 stated that seafarers returning to Kiribati acted in ways disturbing to the community, and that "concern has … been expressed at the social implications, the extent to which seamen dehumanise, distort local customs, and cause envy and resentment in the rest of the local population" (Toatu, 1980:32). Fieldwork almost twenty years later, however, revealed much less envy and resentment than were expressed during the 1980s, although there was some disturbance regarding the behavior of some (but not all) seafarers, all of which were men until 2003.[1] In fact, it has been observed that there remains

[1] There has been a small number of women employed in catering on ships, mainly in the cruise ship sector since 2003.

a strong affinity among the I-Kiribati (people belonging to or being from Kiribati) seafarers, many of whom have been circulating between their employment on merchant and fishing ships and Kiribati for more than ten years.

The decision to undertake contract labor requiring work apart from families for up to two years at a time is one way to maximize social and economic benefits, where the hardship of being away from home, over extended periods, has to be faced in order to maintain families. Thus, most families regard it as a blessing when one of their family members – usually a son or husband, but more recently also a daughter – has the opportunity of waged employment onboard foreign ships.

Training for seamen going aboard German merchant vessels started in 1967, and this was then followed in 1989 by fisheries training for Japanese tuna vessels. Currently three agencies are involved in the employment of seafarers, the South Pacific Marine Service (SPMS), which employs men for work on merchant ships, and since 2006 also a very small number of women as cooks and stewards; the Kiribati Fishermen Services (KFS) employing men onto tuna vessels; and since 2002 the Shipping Agencies of Kiribati recruiting men, and recently also women, onto Norwegian and US American cruise liners. As of November 2006, a total of 1,433 registered seafarers were working overseas, according to data from the three shipping companies. Seafarers' time away from home varies from 10 months up to two years at a time. Time at home and between contracts also varies and is usually a minimum of three weeks up to several months. Recently, due to increased global competition in the labor market for seafarers, this unpaid off-work time depends on job availability. Back in 1999, when the interviews for this paper were conducted, men usually spent between three weeks and six months at home. Today, global competition forces seafarers sometimes for up to more than a year for deployment on board; only a small number of specialized seafarers that are in greater demand have shorter off-work time, and need to use this shorter time in order to secure their jobs.

Despite the relatively long history of employment of workers from developing countries onboard foreign ships, it is only within the last decade that the consequences of this type of transversal labor circulation for seafarers and families at home has gained attention among scholars (e.g., Sampson 2005; Sampson and Thomas 2003; Thomas et al. 2003; Kahveci 2002; Borovnik 2003; 2004; 2005). The isolation of seafarers, the effects on their own well being and the consequences for their families has been discussed by Sampson and Thomas (2003) and Borovnik (2003). It has been recognized that separation from partners and families induces stress on sailors; during times of worry about family difficulties, this stress could have serious consequences for the health of seafarers. Stress factors have

increased with the dynamics and pace of globalization processes, where both sea-passages and turnaround times in ports are of shorter duration (*see* Lane 2001). The increase in work-related stress factors has been exacerbated by the limited time for sailors to touch base with their families, or to build and maintain relationships on shore. The difficult social situation during voyages is usually harder on board vessels that are "flagged out" ships, i.e., registered under the flag of nations, which do not provide much protection and welfare to their crews. Multinational crews, however, have proven to be a new peer-community for seafarers, who share the restrained labor conditions and restricted space on board the same ship (Sampson, 2003; Borovnik, 2004, 2005).

Research Objectives

This paper focuses on family relationships between seafarers and their households in Kiribati. It examines the socio-cultural aspects that seafarers and their families are involved in. Given the back and forth movements of seafarers between their work environment and their families, this paper discusses the consequences of this cycle of separations and returns are taking place in family and community networks. This paper outlines how these issues are intertwined with cultural changes, particularly, how they affect family dynamics.

Related Literature

A similar study addressing the family relationships of seafarers has been discussed by Sampson (2005), who undertook fieldwork with women married to seafarers in South India. Sampson (2005:62) writes that although we can assume that there are similarities in the experiences of seafarers who are employed under similar conditions, there are also significant differences that make family experiences unique to the region and culture they belong to.

Aspects of well-being, which are generally linked to the tensions engendered by migration, the economic benefits for families and the frequency of contact, are discussed in Hadi (1999). The author distinguishes several variables that influence how well households left behind can continue to function during times when family members have to search for employment away from home over extended periods of time. The following aspects were found significantly important for the well-being of household members and the functioning of households: the amount and regularity of financial contributions in the form of remittances; the duration of stay abroad; the frequency of contact with those left behind; and the number of

people in one household (*see also* Zlotnik, 1995; De Haan, Brock and Coulibali, 2002).

Women's well-being is positively associated with the amount of decision making and household participation a woman is allowed to have (*see also* Mkhanya, 1997). Yeoh, Graham and Boyle (2002) extend these factors to a transnational framework by arguing that in building a multifunctional family network, migration can be a resourceful way of strengthening the family (*see also* Willis and Yeoh, 2000; De Haan, Brock and Coulibaly, 2002:44). Some authors show, however, that the stress of family separation for those left behind can lead to "mental disorders among women and children, lower levels of school-performance and impeded social and psychological development among children and the abandonment of the elderly" (Yeoh, Graham and Boyle, 2002:5). These authors also mention marital instability and a higher incidence of divorce among migrants (*see also* Brown, 1983:372). By developing a "transnational family" where migrants bridge their activities home and abroad, family ties can be strengthened. Strengthening ties might mean arranging families in different ways, such as moving family members closer to the migrants' work or encouraging members to migrate. The option to migrate, however, is not available for seafarers' families who are regarded to be on the "edge" of transnationality (Sampson, 2003; Borovnik, 2004), where seafarers travel onboard ships instead of settling at one place onshore. It is known that some seafarers have taken their wives onboard ships and that this has improved the quality of their relationship. However, this chance is not given to all seafaring nations in the same way. Indian spouses of seafarers, for example, had this opportunity (Sampson 2005). Only very few wives have the privilege to join their husbands onboard. Being able to take a wife and children onboard has been found to enhance family relationships in the study by Thomas, Sampson and Zhao (2003:74), who recommend more facilities for wives and children on board ships.

The situational difficulties of wives living with their husbands' parents and the problems that can occur while they are separated from their husbands, including marriage break-ups, has been one of the consequences, which can be compared internationally; examples are the studies of seafarers' wives in India (Sampson, 2005) and Botswana (Brown, 1983).

Absenteeism and separation between spouses may cause feelings of jealousy. It is discussed in Kristjansoon (2002:136) that jealousy can be an "expression of pridefulness," which can act as an important guardian of self-respect. Long-distance relationships may be particularly vulnerable to emotional stress, jealousy or marital dissolution. Foster and Caciaoppe (1986 in Thomas et al. 2003:60) have found that 25 percent of Australian seafarers' wives believed that their partner was having, or had had an affair.

The question of whether women are powerless, being forced as they were to stay at home while their husbands have the choice to migrate (e.g., O'Laughlin, 1998) is valid. Some authors argue that the left-behind wives have increased decision-making and management roles (e.g., Hoodfar, 1997; Lawson,1998; Boyle, Hafacree and Smith, 1999; Stevenson, 1997; Sweetman, 1995). Li, Findlay and Jones (1999:173f.) emphasize the dichotomy of women who live in "heavily structured traditional" personal relationships in the face of modern influences promoting awareness of the rights of women. Although men seem to enhance their masculinity by the act of migrating, and women have less control over their own career, the role of women is beginning to change. Women begin to identify themselves more as strong and become more independent from patriarchal control (Lawson, 1998:46).

Methodology

The data for the paper came from five focus group discussions and a total of 136 individual interviews with seafarers, seafarer wives and parents, government officials, church leaders, medical hospital staff, and other key informants. The interviews sought to explore views on family or community changes created by over thirty years of seafarers' employment. These interviews and focus groups were conducted during doctoral fieldwork in 1999 on three different islands of Kiribati: the urbanized main island of Tarawa, and Beru Island and Abaiang Island of the Southern and Northern Gilbert groups, respectively.

Focus groups were conducted with the *Aia Botaki Buuia Kaimoan Kiribati* (the Seamen's Wives Association) in Tarawa, several groups of *unimane* (the eldest men) and *unaine* (the eldest women) on Beru Island, a group of nurses working for the Foundation of the South Pacific on Tarawa, and a meeting of youth leaders of the Kiribati Protestant Church in Antebuka, Tarawa. Data from several interviews held with government officials, church leaders, and youth leaders on Tarawa during a second visit in 2004 suggest that the material gathered then is still current. Also, some of the trends that were initially recognized, such as the increased options for consumption on urban Tarawa and the increased number of underemployed youth entertaining themselves in the streets, had accelerated.[2]

The semi-structured interviews and focus groups focused on people's stories surrounding their relationships to seafarers, families and communi-

[2] The author revisited Kiribati in 2006 and spent only a very limited time on Tarawa, talking to agencies and government officials.

ties, economic and health issues. The sessions conducted on the outer islands, where most of the seafarers' parents lived, were held with the support of interpreters, all of whom were local women and men, who not only helped in translating questions and responses but often interpreted the meaning of questions and responses between researcher and participants. This cultural interpretation was helpful, because it could prevent a certain scope for misunderstanding that cross-cultural research brings along. Interviews that were conducted with the help of a translator will be labelled as "interpreted interview" in this paper. While the names and / or position of government officials were recorded and are identified in the paper, the names of non-government participants have been replaced with numerical codes.[3]

Kiribati: A Background

Economic Profile

The Republic of Kiribati gained political independence in 1979. It consists of 33 atolls with a land area of 810.5 square km. The three main island groups, Gilbert, Phoenix and Line groups, are scattered over 3.5 million square km of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), extending 4,000 km from west to east and about 2,000 km from north to south. Kiribati's natural resources are very limited and the population of 97,000 people, as estimated in 2005, live generally at an economic subsistence level. The main form of economic exchange after the exhaustion of Banaba's phosphate mine in 1979 has been the Revenue Equalization Reserve Fund established by the British colonial administration in 1956, the sale of fishing licenses in the Kiribati EEZ, aid and remittances. Only approximately 9,200, or 23 percent of the total adult population, are wage / salary earners. Of these, 68 percent are employed by the government and 14 percent are seafarers; the private sector in Kiribati offers only limited employment opportunities (ADB 2002, Borovnik 2006). Every year only a small number of jobs become available for a large number of school leavers; unemployment schemes do not exist.

Social welfare is covered by the system of *bubuti* that obligates family members to share with each other in times of need. This system functions on the basis of "request" where family members with financial or other means cannot refuse to follow up this official form of request (*bubuti)*. Income in the form of remittances from seafarers has been found to be a significant

[3] A prefix of 100, 200 or 300 has been used for seafarers, 400 and 500 for seafarers' wives, 600 and 700 for parents and siblings, and 900 for other interview partners.

contribution to the welfare of families in Kiribati (Borovnik, 2003, 2006; Borovnik and Chamberlin, 2004). Official annual remittances are currently between 12 and 13 million Australian dollars, contributing to 12 to 15 percent of national income (*see* Borovnik, 2006).[4]

Cultural Background

Kiribati's culture is based on the proud recognition of being *I-Kiribati,* also described as living according to *te katei ni Kiribati,* the I-Kiribati way.

> [The] I-Kiribati are recognized by others by their way of life, *te katei ni Kiribati,* the unique identity which distinguishes them from others (…) Even though there have been many changes since the coming of Europeans, I-Kiribati are still I-Kiribati. Not only by *te katei ni Kiribati* but their blood and heart. There is national pride in the evolving I-Kiribati identity (Itaia, 1984:121f).

Itaia develops the meaning of *te katei ni Kiribati* as: being part of a Kiribati genealogy; following social obligations and being tied to their kinship; treasuring properties like land, canoes and houses; keeping skills and knowledge secret; not embarrassing someone in public; and having a strong character or sense of identity, or *te aomata.*[5] There is a strong sense of belonging in the meaning of *te katei ni Kiribati,* which places each individual into a family system of welfare, where the needs of the family and the wider community take precedence over individual needs. This deep sense of belonging or 'rootedness' (Borovnik, 2005:143) compels individuals to feel responsible for one's extended family; this strong bond means that family members in need will be looked after. In this context, even though a seafarer might be travelling in a 'criss-crossing' way (Gilroy, 1993) and over a long time, he is drawn to the need to come back and re-strengthen his role and place at home.

Responsibility, especially in the context of seafaring employment, can be looked at from different angles. There is the responsibility to send goods and money to family members in need. Loyalty and maintenance of family ties are expressed in the *bubuti* custom, as part of the I-Kiribati's collective values. A family group is self-reliant and economically independent when this system is intact. Individual needs and desires are subordinated in

[4] This information has been updated and confirmed during a brief fieldwork period in 2006.

[5] T*e aomata* includes to be respectful, to follow the advice of elders, to keep away from danger, to be loved, to maintain good relationships and to remain close to one's group (Itaia, 1984:123).

favour of the needs of a family group and then in a wider sense to the needs of a village community (*see* Geddes et al., 1982). Throsby (2001:3f.) argues that the "cultural underpinnings of Kiribati society" must be recognized in the economic structure of the country. Since these values are common and important for Kiribati, they need to be recognized, because they influence all layers of the Kiribati society and are part of any political or economic decision (*see also* Grimble, 1952, 1957).

The roles that each member of the society fulfils are based on a patriarchal, vertically structured family and village system, which can be traced back through ancestor lines. The eldest men or *unimane* are guidance providers and are at the top of the hierarchy (*see* Connell, 1983). The older people are most respected and younger adults must be obedient and follow strict duties (Iobi, 1985; Teiwaki, 1985). Women are usually under guidance of either their parents or, after their wedding, their husbands and their husbands' parents. Women are expected mostly to follow the lead of their husbands and to look after their household duties. It is customary not to communicate or discuss emotions or to show love openly to each other, especially not between husband and wife, but instead to put fulfilling their roles within a family system and the common good before personal needs. The responsibility to look after land and property usually requires that men and women work in a clearly defined role distribution in order to maintain their part of the family's grounds. Seafarers then have to establish strategies to fulfil these obligations albeit from a distance. The following sections explore how these issues are being dealt with by communities, seafarers and their families, the challenges that arise, and how some of the ideals of the *te katei ni Kiribati* have been affected.

Perceptions of Seafarers by Communities

Seafarers, more precisely 'seamen,' as they are called by the general I-Kiribati population, are perceived as a unique group in Kiribati. This is due to the opportunity of working overseas, sending remittances, and having cash available right after coming back from overseas. More generally, seamen are distinguished by their irregular presence and absence in the community. According to Amon Timon, former Social Welfare Senior Officer (Interview, August 1999), seafarers were "temporarily not part of the community." Seafarers were especially associated with economic prosperity. During a focus group session with a group of young people (held in August 1999), a seaman was described as having "more money" and "more stuff" such as "video and tapes" and "motorcycles."

> Boy 1: Because he has more money. Whatever he needs, he buys it straight away.

MB: He looks as if he has pockets full of money?

Boy 1: Yes. That's the main idea. He looks like a… rich man! Yes! And another [thing]… the skin colour changed! <laughter> It changed to white! So you can point at him and say that's a seaman. You know from the skin.

Girl 2: And they are drunk in the bus. They spend some time in the bus.

Boy 1: Drinking in the bus. But I think it's the money. That makes them different. Wherever you see them; like at the dance. [A seaman] looks very rich.

MB: How can a man look rich when he is at the dancing? What do you mean?

Boy 1: I mean… [they] go and buy more drinks - on the table, and for more people.

Girl 2: And he always wears the long pants.

On arrival, many seafarers still wear their ship uniform or casual western style long trousers, which they usually change soon after arrival on Tarawa to more customary garments, such as the *lavalava*, a long cloth worn around hips. Quite a few of the men wear long or a different hairstyle when they come back. Long hair, although customarily not approved of, has become a symbol for the seamen and their lifestyle, and is now almost accepted on Tarawa, but it is unwanted on the outer islands.[6] Seafarers going on Japanese vessels distinguish themselves by using a different hairstyle to those from German ships. One of my interview partners, for example, a 29-year old tuna fisher, had his hair in Japanese style, short, asymmetric and with some red colouring (Borovnik, 2005:146).

Another difference between German and Japanese seafarers is the use of different eating utensils. "You know those who come from Japan, they use the chop stick. And those that come from Germany they use the fork and knife. It is their way to show off" (Interview 703, 1999). This perception of seafarers as 'show offs' was rather common among the people. However, the notion of 'showing off' can mean, on the one hand, a slightly critical view

[6] There have only been a small number of women back from shipboard employment. It will be interesting to compare the women's situation with the seamen's.

of the Westernization of these young men; on the other hand, it contains a small amount of pride in all I-Kiribati for "their boys" going abroad onboard ships for physically hard work, and being in some way ambassadors of their country. Seafarers were expected to come back and show (off) some of the foreign ways they learned, but only to a certain degree and amount of time.

Men spend the first few days after arrival in the urbanized capital South Tarawa, generously shouting drinks and distributing money and the goods that they have brought back. In some cases, this behavior extends longer than just a couple of weeks. Some men come back home without or with only small amounts of money, usually due to spending too much money on alcoholic drinks while abroad; these men are regarded as those who use their money 'unwisely.' The quote below, taken from an *unimane* meeting of a village on Beru Island, summarizes how seafarers were perceived by the elder men on an outer island.[7] As the quote below suggests, people were tolerant toward some of the features linked to seafarers to a degree, beyond which, seamen were expected to live up to their responsibilities.

> The changes that the seamen brought with them are like they are more well off than the people here. Because when they come back they build the concrete houses and they have all these things, video and … you know things like that. So they are better off than the rest of the village people.
>
> Another change is like when… yeah, they have long hair. You know, when they came back they wear long hair. Well, and some of them change for the better, some of them change for the worse. Like those who used to be not very good, you know. And then when they came back, and because they have all those things, they are more careful with the use of these things. But some of them, you know were worse. When they get the money and when they come back, they just use the money unwisely. Like, when they have their wives left behind, and when they come back they just stay in Tarawa and waste all the money. Not coming back to the wives [is not very good].
>
> Some boys they are single. And those are the good ones, like when they come back, they come to their parents. And some [are not so good] they just stay in Tarawa and waste their money. They didn't come here. They just stay there until they go back overseas again.

[7] This focus group with the "old men" was held in May 1999. The comment was made by an interpreter who assisted at the meeting.

The seafarers' status in the villages on the outer islands rises due to the communities' perception that they were wealthy. One mother who lived on an outer island, for example, proudly shared that her 38-year old son was paying the school fees for all his nephews and nieces and for her grandchildren. He also wanted to help his younger brother by buying him a boat, a big tape recorder and a video recorder (Interpreted interview 623, 1999). Seafarers' regular contributions to their families are often shared with village and Church communities. The seafarers' ability to purchase land, *babai* pits,[8] pigs and buildings were perceived positively. These seafarers, the 'good boys,' were handled with greater tolerance than other community members on the outer islands because of their economic contributions, which shows that they care for their families and communities. One of the fathers, for example, shared with pride the two hundred Australian dollars of monthly allotments[9] sent by his son (Interpreted interview 614, 1999).

Different perceptions apply in the case of the 'not so very good' seafarers – i.e., those who live in intemperance and fail to save money, tend to stay on the urban South Tarawa Island until their finances are depleted and then take up further employment overseas, without having visited their families on the outer islands, or those who have ran out of cash and return to the home islands to be supported by their families. In the last case, the family, instead of gaining from the seafarer's income, has to cope with the stress of looking after their son and the added stress of not being able to fulfil the family's obligations to the community. The community expects each family with potential cash income to contribute generously to community gatherings. Even though a son might not live up to this expectation, families usually feel obliged to follow up (Toatu, 1980). Participants in the study saw, however, a difference between single and married men. Married men were seen as having a greater sense of responsibility for their families because they have a wife and children to look after. One father related that his son used to spend money on beer and going out with girls when he came home, but had improved his conduct since he got married. "When the boy hadn't got a wife, he would go around and spend a lot of money. But when he got a wife, he can give some money to his wife and some to the baby and children" (Interpreted interview 620, 1999).

[8] *Babai* is a giant swamp taro. Ownership of *babai* pits, beside land ownership are seen as great status symbols, not only because of the food supply, but also because *babai* is one of the special items served at community feasts (*botakis*), such as weddings or funerals.

[9] In Kiribati remittances are referred to as allotments as people receive their money as "allotted to them."

Naan Imatang, the Secretary of Social Welfare in 1999, remarked that drinking alcohol was not confined to seamen; he considered it as a generally urban problem and noted that even some women were taking up the drinking habit. He compared the drinking behavior of seamen and non-seamen as follows:

> He [the seaman] is lonely, you know, he is an independent person, and also he has a lot of money to spend. So, at the same time, you know, they live in a different world with different peer groups [where] they talk about girls and something else that they are interested in… I think those are the reasons which I feel make them drink heavier, or a lot, as compared to a local. Local drinkers here, maybe the majority is in the area of Tarawa. On some islands drinking is prohibited (Interview, 17 August 1999).

Former Social Welfare Youth Provision Officer Amon Timon[10] also observed the increased drinking and smoking of returning seafarers, as well as their different hairstyles and clothing. The wearing of long trousers was mentioned as something that made them stand out in the community, especially on the outer islands.

> They have their own comfortable type of clothing that they have been used to, you know, they are adopting the clothing from the Westerners and so forth, but they are using a very comfortable way. There is nothing wrong with that. We have been used to that from overseas, [back in time] to our forefathers and so forth, and now we are starting, too. Maybe this is part of becoming more affluent, more money oriented nowadays, [because] they can afford to buy, you know? (Interview, 13 August 1999).

In Amon's view, the seafarers' limited presence in their communities and the extended separation between seafarers and their families lead to "break down in marriages, fights over custody and maintenance of the children." According to him, government workers who also have money may experience such problems to a lesser degree because they "have time, you know, and they live in the community." Therefore they are more immersed in community live and can carefully think over "what they really want."

Tamaetera Teaotai, the director of the Cultural Center in Kiribati in 1999, explained that it would be wrong to generalize about seafarers'

[10] I have talked to Amon again in 2004, then in his position of Deputy Director of the Ministry of Internal and Social Affairs.

behaviors and to assume that some of their behavior was closely linked to their occupation. He noted that seamen are "… like other people, other workers here on Tarawa, who are not seamen, [w]hen they go and have time, and they do not work on Saturday or Sunday then they go, too, to the bars" (Interview, 17 June 1999). While seamen go to bars, Tamaetera qualified that this was usually true during the first weeks of their arrival. When seamen have run out of money they have to remember their cultural duties and go back to their usual "cultural undertakings," like fishing. After some time, it appears that everyone, sooner or later will move back into the position of the *te katei ni Kiribati* that they belong to (*see also* Borovnik, 2005).

In conclusion, different sectors of the society perceived seamen as a unique social group in Kiribati; however, they had slightly differing opinions toward seamen's behavior and the impact of their behavior. There were concerns aired over the social and cultural impact of seafarers, a concern mainly linked to the organization of the 'circulating' element in this occupation, which limited their immersion in their communities and families. The second concern, linked to the influx of 'Western' lifestyles, and as a consequence an increased spirit of independence must be understood with some ambiguity, as it is not only seamen who have access to these 'more comfortable' lifestyles. Rather, it is their economic ability in combination with a new style that makes them attractive and hence influential to the younger community. A third concern, related to the relationships between husbands and wives, which are complicated because of the long 'absence' of men will be discussed in a separate section. In the Kiribati context relationship issues are always linked to the entire family. Therefore, I will first discuss the concerns of parents, followed by an account of the situation of the wives of seamen.

Parents' Concerns

The general atmosphere when talking to parents was one of great pride of having a son who was working as a seafarer. Parents, however, also worried about their sons' well-being, which was intensified by lack of regular communication from their sons.[11] An English-speaking father described how he and his wife heard on the radio about the war in Serbia. He recalled, "And we are a bit afraid… Serbia! If they have a route fare to those places

[11] Letters between ships and outer islands can take up to six weeks.

then we are a bit worried. What will happen if they go there? Are they safe? And things like that" (Interview 619, 1999).

To counter their worry, most parents put their trust in God and prayed. Another strategy for parents is not to think so much about their son. One mother explained, "I don't want to remember him a lot, because it might bring more cursing to him" (Interpreted interview 624, 1999). The interpreter explained that this kind of superstition as "that's the Kiribati way of thinking. Like when you think of him a lot, then something might happen to him. Some sort of accident. She [the mother] doesn't want him to be in trouble." In order to ensure their sons' safety, fathers gave good advice and reminded their sons to behave well overseas and while away from parental guidance.

Parents look forward to seeing their sons getting married as many parents believe that marriage is good for the growth of a man into a responsible person. A daughter in-law is welcomed into the household and she is usually treated as though she were her husband's parents' own daughter. The young woman will have duties and rules to follow but in return, parents-in-law will look after her thoroughly. In non-seafarer households, the married couple stays together in the husband's family's household and a young woman is looked after by her husband. Parents are not too concerned about the private life of their sons as long as everybody fulfils their household roles and is obedient to the eldest. However, when the son is overseas, the responsibility of parents, and especially his mother, to look after the son's wife increases. "As a mother of a seaman it is very hard for her to live with the wives of her son. Because they [the sons] are out there. And she has to deal with the wives. That is her responsibility" (Interpreted interview 631, 1999). This was related by a mother of two seafarer sons, both of whom have been working onboard merchant vessels for more than twenty years, and left their wives under her guidance during their usually eighteen months overseas of every year.

The responsibility, especially for mothers in-law, increases when there are several daughters from different families living in the same household, while their husbands are overseas. A 'good wife' is obedient to her parents-in-law and will stay at home at all times and do her work. Many fathers and mothers I talked to praised their daughters-in-law. If a daughter in-law, however, does not return to the household before sunset, the situation becomes difficult to handle for parents who are in charge of looking after their son's wife. One father explained that his son's marriage ended in divorce because the daughter-in-law lived with them and she left the parental home without permission from her husband overseas (Interpreted interview 617, 1999). In another case, a mother said that her daughter in-law went her own way when the husband was away (Interpreted interview 622,

1999). When the wife decided to return to her own parents, the parents in-law suspected that she had an affair with another man, so they did not allow their son to see his wife when he returned from overseas. In another family, the parents chose the second wife for their son, because the first wife, who was his own choice was not "good for them and their son" (Interpreted interview 630, 1999). The parents explained that this happened because their son had married out of love a woman that was too young for him. The girl had been only seventeen when he married her, and she most likely became homesick for her parents.

The data suggest that having a son working onboard ships complicates a family situation in Kiribati. It is hard to keep track of the son's location as employment on ships involves a dynamic lifestyle. Parents experience an interruption of their regulated family lives that would usually allow them to grow older while pursuing less activity but a more respected role. Instead they are now required to actively watch over their son's spouse, which adds to their usual concerns and can lead to grief, especially when it is difficult to report to a son immediately. The following section explains how difficult it is for wives to deal with the changes in environment when their husbands are on leave.

Changes in Husband-Wife Relationships

When a husband leaves to work onboard foreign vessels, wives will be left alone in their in-law's home. Since it is common that a couple marries across islands, often wives will be living far apart from their own parents' households. As a consequence, seamen's wives have to cope with a range of problems while separated from their spouses, without the support of their husbands or their own parents. These may include loneliness which cannot be expressed in front of others because of cultural restrictions – where women are not supposed to show emotions. A 38-year-old woman, who had been married to her husband for seven years at time of the interview, said that she found it very hard when her husband left her for the first time to work onboard. It took her quite some time to get used to not having her husband at home, and she would withdraw into privacy to cry.

> I thought 'how is he now? Is he okay? Is he doing fine? Is he been fed well? Is he been looked after properly?' All these kinds of thoughts that come up. If there is something wrong I would not notice (Interview 407, 1999).

Seafarers are regarded as attractive prospects to be married to because of prospects of a regular income, a comfortable lifestyle, and securing the children's careers in the future, which in the long term will benefit a woman.

When children can gain a good education, they have better employment prospects, and they can better take care of their mothers. Parents, thus, play an active role in looking for a suitable husband for their daughter. Land, property, good ancestry and good behavior are also important considerations. However, the ability of a man to earn regular cash income has become a major attraction for parents and their daughters.

It is not uncommon for a woman nowadays to choose her husband independently from the parents' advice. In one example, a 22-year-old seaman's wife explained that she and her husband met while watching a movie in public. The seaman simply approached her and told her that he wanted her to be his girlfriend, and she agreed there and then.[12] According to the interpreter, the young woman did not hesitate "the reason is, because she is not wealthy, so she says [to herself], "I am going to marry a young seaman <loud laughter>" *MB: Because of the money?* "[Yes, because of] the money." This couple married two weeks after they had met. He went back to his ship shortly after the wedding and the woman lived with her parents-in-law in the North while her parents lived in the South. The couple had one child at the time of interview. The husband has not met his baby daughter, nor seen a photograph of her (Interpreted interview 503, 1999). Although many women meet their seafarer husbands in social settings and arranged marriages have decreased, there is a tendency for parents to interfere and suggest a new partner when the first marriage did not turn out well.

Married women on South Tarawa, in distinction to women on outer islands, are often either employed in government jobs and have more freedom in decision making in comparison to those on outer islands. At a meeting with a group of women from the Seamen's Wives Association on Tarawa, seamen's wives explained that they were different from other women of Kiribati.[13] Most of the time they felt alone, but when meeting with other seamen's wives they felt they can share together about their relationships with their husbands; sharing in this way is quite uncommon in Kiribati, where women usually do not share emotions openly or disclose relationship problems. Some women live independently, which usually means that at least some children or one in-law relative stays with them, but not the husband's parents. Living without male protection is frightening

[12] Note that at times the interpreter explains and at other times translates word by word.

[13] This association was established in Tarawa by a group of women in mid 1995. Members are comprised only from women of South Tarawa, the outer island women have been encouraged to join, but are much closer linked to their in-law families, and do not believe a necessity in joining this association. The focus group with the Seamen's Wives Association was conducted in April 1999.

and many women fear "intruders." One showed me a large cutting knife with an impressive blade of a large dimension, which she keeps under her (western style) bed in case of an intruder. Women on their own feel safer in brick houses. To live independently is not the first choice for women married to seafarers; they prefer living with their own parents' family. When this is not possible they feel living on their own is an alternative to avoid conflict with in-laws. Women in South Tarawa explained "We need our own parents. Because our husbands' parents maybe get jealous. That is why all of us want to stay alone with our kids so there is no problem. Often the parents get jealous when you stay with them. Then you must go. [Otherwise] you have no husband [anymore]. That is why we don't trust them."[14]

Conflicts with the in-law families when the husbands are away may contribute to problems in the marriage, including divorce. One way to save a marriage is to be right at the airport when a husband arrives and to talk to him before the parents in-law have the opportunity to.

> Woman 1: If your husband arrives and you didn't want to meet him at the airport, and you just go bye, bye, your husband won't come [back to you].
>
> Woman 2: Sometimes the parents don't want you to go to the airport to meet your husband. But you love your husband, that's why you just meet your husband at the airport. But some ladies find it very hard to meet their husbands when their [in-law] parents say "go away!" It's hard for them.

Serious problems between wives and their in-law families can put a returning seaman in an extremely difficult position. As a good son (and "real I-Kiribati") he has to follow his parents' advice, but he also loves his wife. When a man has talked to both sides and cannot achieve a peaceful arrangement between both parties, the common cause of action is that he usually keeps the obligations to his parents and separates from his wife. However, in some cases the parents allow him to settle down with his wife independently, and the marriage is rescued – but care of his wife and supervision over her daily movements are severed. This can cause anxiety, jealousy and further problems for a seafarer when he leaves the wife again to work overseas. Choosing his wife over his parents, thus, can strain family relationships. The code of *te aomata,* however, requires of men and women

[14] Seamen's Wives Association focus group, April 1999.

in Kiribati to endure personal hardship, and to put their own personal needs as secondary to the economic benefits of their family.

If a seafarer has been able to save enough money to build his own house, his parents and siblings will recognize and respect his wife usually more than before. This is especially the case when the house is a 'modern' looking, comfortable one. A wife's role becomes more influential when a husband has also started to buy more pieces of land and *babai* pits, or pigs. Because she is now the manager of the house, decisions will be more often put into her hands. She will still consult her husband by letter, fax or telephone, and more recently also by email, to gain his agreement on larger household projects. A wife's influence also grows when she is in wage employment. Thomas, Sampson and Zhao (2003:72), however, have found that some seafarers' wives decided not to work because they felt "this would have a detrimental effect on their children who already had to cope with an intermittently absent father." This situation is different in Kiribati, as long as the in-law family is in agreement with a woman's employment and can look after her children. Hadi (1999:54) found that it reflected positively on women when they were encouraged to play a more active role, which increased when they manage households on their own.

Some women on the outer islands and some who have moved to South Tarawa have few relatives in the neighborhood who could help out. They have to go and buy fish, *toddy* (juice from coconut trees)[15] and coconut if they need to, because the husband who is overseas cannot provide them with it. It is commonly the men's task to go fishing and to climb up trees to cut *toddy* or young coconuts. Without a husband or relatives in the neighborhood women face practical difficulties as it is not good manners to ask unrelated neighbors for help. One wife said that she missed her husband more than ever – because he was away, their three children cannot drink toddy or eat fish. This woman and her husband had decided that she needed to stay in this village because all of her husband's family had moved to different islands, so she was the only one who could look after their lands (Interpreted interview 424, 1999). Women in Kiribati tend not to take over 'male only' agricultural tasks, but hold on to their women's role, and face hardship together with their children when doing without toddy, coconut and fish.

As was mentioned earlier, divorces are perceived to be common among seafarer families, and this was linked to the long periods of living apart from

[15] Toddy is a delicacy in Kiribati which contains many vitamins. Lacking fresh vegetables because of the poor climate and soil conditions of low atoll islands, toddy is an important source of nutrition.

each other. Problems leading to estrangement and divorces are, among others, linked to short periods of face to face communication in comparison to longer periods of being apart. When the husband is present, a couple has to readjust to each other in the limited time spent together. Added to this constraint, both partners can easily be struck by jealousy. This can be of great emotional distress for seamen, especially when there is rare and expensive communication possible. Feelings of jealousy are often fuelled by emotional letters written by a husband's family gossiping about his wife's undesirable behavior. Sisters in-law seem quite influential because ties and love between siblings are high, and sisters can become jealous of the wife who, being married to the income providing son, has gained status in the household. As a consequence some sisters in-law like to undermine the relationship between spouses by providing exaggerated or false information to a seaman overseas.

Adultery, when it happens, is a serious issue in Kiribati (*see* Okimura and Norton (1998). Some seafarers' wives have affairs while their husbands are overseas. Although this is well-known and talked about among the I-Kiribati, women would never admit that they do go out with other men. It had been mentioned during fieldwork more often, that men have affairs with women outside their marriage. The following example concerns a 32-year-old woman with two children, who had been married to her husband for 10 years. Her husband usually spent 18 months on merchant vessels overseas and three months at home. This woman felt quite bitter during our interview because it was only a few weeks before that her husband told her that he was staying with someone else overseas; it was the second time that it had happened. While the shock was bad a few years ago, she was relieved when he came back to her, but this time she was so hurt that she wanted to separate from him.

> He just writes me a letter, he is staying… he stays with another woman in Australia. It is not that he settled down, but he is having an affair. I try not to what? To think about him… about it. And I try to ignore what he did to me and I try to go on with my new life now. What I think is, I [am] better off to stay home with my kids (Interview 414, 1999).

Two of my interview partners explained that their husbands had established relationships with a 'second wife' on Tarawa. The 29-year-old woman in one case was left with her three children on an outer island, while it was her husband's choice whether he wanted to return during his break from work or not. She was informed by his relatives that he was staying with another woman on Tarawa when her last child was only three months old (Interpreted interview 424, 1999). Another 24-year-old woman said that her

husband had told her only a few weeks after her marriage that he was also seeing someone else. When she complained, her husband told her that it did not make any difference to him in regard to his love for her (Interview 502, 1999).

In order to avoid alienation from each other, spouses need to be more open about their love and emotions and to communicate frequently by letter or phone and fax only (*see also* Sampson 2005; Thomas, Sampson and Zhao 2003). It was only since 2006 that employment agencies agreed on providing access to e-mail facilities allowing spouses to communicate more often with each other. Before that, some couples had developed strategies to keep their relationships intact, such as introducing some "Western" ways in their relationship, i.e., by showing more love and affection for each other. This aspect of the "*I-Matang* way" – literally 'the English' or European way – has gradually become more accepted in the I-Kiribati culture, including a certain amount of independence for women while at the same time respecting the authority of the elders. Some couples who have found ways to communicate more openly and frequently with each other have developed good and mature relationships. For example, one couple decided to adopt some I-Matang ways in their relationship. My interview partner, a 37-year-old woman, married for three years, (this was the second marriage for her and her husband) explained as follows:

> Because I think the *I-Matang* culture is very nice. Me and him, we already decide[d], and we plan and we go and follow the *I-Matang* [way]. Half *I-Matang* and half Kiribati [way] and we try now to join. Because I know now that we are happy in that. He spoils me and I spoil him. Yes. Before he left to the bath he comes <mimics a kiss in the air> even when I do the cooking in the kitchen… [to] kiss me. And I give him [the same] like this. I show him that "I love you". And he shows me that he loves me (Interview 417, 1999).

Open communication between spouses and an attitude of tolerance and understanding helps not only to ease stress between partners but also to prevent emotional problems. Seafarers' most frequent complaints, also confirmed by managers of employment agencies, focus on the lack of communication with their wives. Feeling shy, women often resolve in following their duties and waiting for their husbands to come back. Employment agencies, Social Welfare and social volunteer workers, however, have begun to encourage seafarers' families to be aware about the isolation onboard and to engage in more frequent communication. Ten-minute tapes, for example, have become available for families; children are especially encouraged to send a voice message to their fathers. These have been

received quite positively. Email is also now available to some families and their seafarers.

Conclusions

People in Kiribati are measured by others according to the lifestyle they live (*see* Itaia, 1984). This paper argued that all members of a community are involved in dealing with the necessity of the seafaring labor circulation, and although there might be some changes in behavior that are linked to this circulation, people are generally loyal to being a real I-Kiribati (*te aomata)* and living a life according to the code of *te katei ni Kiribati.* Community members evaluate 'seamen' according to their appearance and their manners in terms of fulfilling their duties as family members. Positive repercussions are given for activities that lead to greater economic well-being for families and communities, and that show that a man knows his position in society when he comes back. It is, however, to a certain extent allowed to 'show off' or to have adapted to some of the I-Matang (Western) lifestyles.[16] This tolerance towards some of the seafarers' attitudes includes the ability to build brick houses, buy electronic equipment, and even to celebrate 'coming home' for a few days with peers. Community members, and especially the elders and government workers involved in social matters, are concerned when they see seamen coming back from overseas developing unapproved habits, such as celebrating for too long, spending money more on immediate and individual enjoyment rather than for the long-term benefit of a family and community, and not adjusting back to the usual community lifestyle. One of the symbols of adjustment back in the community lifestyle is the changed outfit from long trousers and long or colored hair, back to *lavalava* or shorts and short hair.

This paper focused on relationship changes and some of these changes have affected the cultural code of *te katei ni Kiribati.* Changes are often linked to an increased 'comfortable' lifestyle, individual decision making, and changed roles within households and levels of hierarchy. Responsibilities are in the hands of parents for longer periods of time, which interrupts their natural retirement into becoming more respected but less active household members. A seaman's wife, on the other hand needs to take on more responsibility, and this gives her a chance to become more influential in her in-law's household, especially when she receives economic benefits through remittances. Difficulties arise for all involved when parents do not

[16] Although vessels nowadays have multinational crewmembers, this continues to be labelled as "I-Matang."

agree with their daughter's in-law behavior, which can lead to parents demanding separation upon the seaman's return. The choice a seaman has to make, between his parents and wife, can place him into a very tense situation. He has to keep to the *te katei ni Kiribati* code of conduct in following his parents' advice, but at the same time, he faces the anxiety of being 'temporarily not being part' of the Kiribati society, where he does not have much influence on the guidance and decision making over his wife. This situation has potential to uproot him from the safety of his masculine role in his family. Increasing discomfort between in-laws and wives, especially in urban South Tarawa, has led to more nuclear households, which in return offers women more individual freedom but also less safety. The institution of the Seafarers' Wives Association has become a venue for women to share their feelings with each other. It is important for women to understand that their husbands are part of a multinational peer community for long periods in their lives, and that this setting is different from their homes. Greater and more open communication between husbands and wives can lead to more stable and positive relationships. This in itself is a major change in the usual I-Kiribati way, where it is not common for women and men to share emotions.

Some government workers have pointed out how seafarers have added to changes in communities in comparison to others in wage employment at home. They argue that changes triggered by seamen are linked to the circulating aspect of their employment, and in particular the long absence and little time to spend at home with families. If there would be increased family time, there could be a greater chance for men to more thoroughly adapt to their home lives and this would as a consequence create fewer problems in family and community relationships. Moreover, better and more options for communications would improve family relationships.

Finally, this paper also has shown that what Toatu (1980) addressed as "disturbing ways" must be interpreted in a more literal and circumscribing sense. Disturbing is the situation of separation from families, as it brings in new and difficult relationship issues to deal with. Thus, seamen are coming back into a system that in some way is 'hybridized,' meaning that wives and families, and in a wider sense communities, now have to deal with changed relationships. As a conclusion, the behavior of some men in not following up their obligations, labelling themselves by new hair and dress styles, and by finding solutions in alcohol, must be seen as a complex "disturbance" that includes the responsibility of families and communities.

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