

# The Origins of the Bahá'í Faith in the Pacific Islands: The Case of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands

GRAHAM HASSALL

## *Abstract*

“Modern religious history” in the Pacific Islands generally refers to the conversion of Pacific Islanders to Christianity by Catholic and Protestant missionaries. In the case of the British colony of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands (GEIC—today the independent states of Kiribati and Tuvalu), the introduction of the Bahá'í Teachings in the 1950s perplexed secular and religious authorities alike. This paper uses colonial records and other sources to examine the ways in which the arrival of a new and little-understood religion disturbed the delicate church-state relationship operating at that time. The possibility exists that these interactions were experienced in similar ways in other colonial environments that had comparable sociopolitical conditions.

## *Résumé*

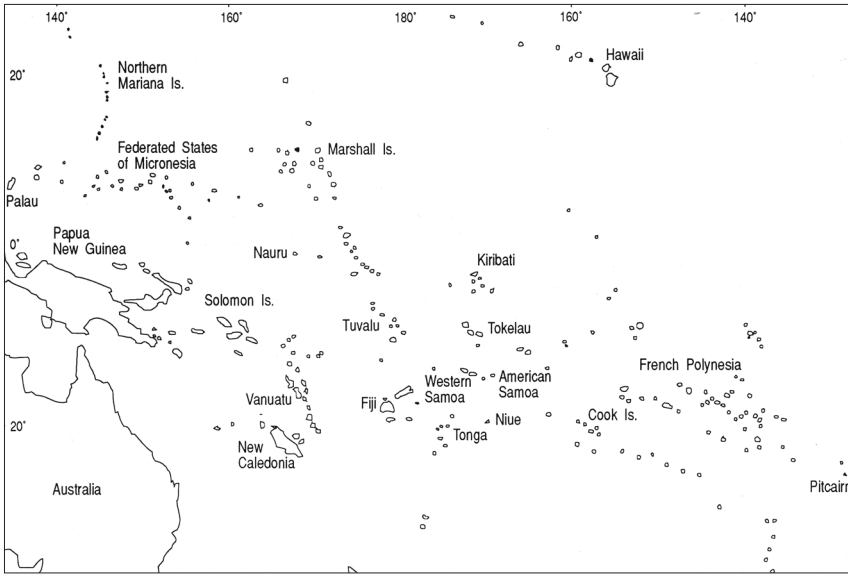
« L'histoire religieuse contemporaine » dans les îles du Pacifique s'entend généralement de la conversion au christianisme, par les missionnaires catholiques et protestants, des habitants des îles du Pacifique. Dans le cas précis de la colonie britannique des îles Gilbert et Ellice (les États indépendants actuels de Kiribati et Tuvalu), l'introduction des enseignements bahá'ís au cours des années 1950 a laissé perplexes aussi bien les autorités laïques que religieuses. À l'aide des archives coloniales et d'autres sources, l'auteur examine comment l'arrivée d'une religion nouvelle et plus ou moins comprise a perturbé la délicate relation qui existait alors entre l'Église et l'État. Il est possible que d'autres milieux coloniaux ayant des conditions socioéconomiques comparables aient vécu le même genre d'interactions.

*Resumen*

La "historia religiosa moderna" en las islas pacíficas generalmente se refiere a la conversión de isleños pacíficos a la cristiandad por misioneros católicos y protestantes. En el caso de la colonia británica de las islas de Gilbert y Ellice, (CIGE— hoy los estados independientes de Kiribati y de Tuvalu), la introducción de enseñanzas de la Fe Bahá'í en los años 50 dejó perplejas tanto a las autoridades seculares como a las religiosas. Este papel utiliza expedientes coloniales y otras fuentes para examinar las formas en que la llegada de una nueva y poca entendida religión estorbó la relación delicada iglesia-estado que funcionaba en aquel momento. La posibilidad existe que estas interacciones fueron experimentadas de maneras similares en otros ambientes coloniales que tenían condiciones sociopolíticas parecidas.

All Pacific Islands societies have rich religious traditions that include a mythical past and strong attachment in more recent times to Christian beliefs. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, Catholic and Protestant missionaries sailed into the region, and even in the twentieth century made extensive use of sailing vessels to ensure the spread of the Gospel throughout the islands scattered across the vast Pacific Ocean. In a great majority of instances these missionary efforts resulted in the creation of Christian communities well before the establishment of colonial governments by the Western powers—notably Britain, Germany, France, the United States of America, and Spain, which annexed the islands during the era of global colonization—mostly in the late 1800s.

By the mid-twentieth century the authority of Christian churches in the realm of religion and of the colonial powers in secular rule was pervasive and apparently secure. The various Pacific Island groups gave an appearance of stability and calm, and a sense that the people had consented to the replacement of much traditional belief and culture by the beliefs and practices of modern Christianity. This view was also conveyed by much scholarship of the time, which relied greatly on the patronage of the missions and the colonial authorities for access to the field and to official records. Indeed, anthropologists were often much involved in the colonial project, contributing their knowledge of indigenous cultures and languages to the



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processes of pacification and “modernization.” Missionaries, too, collaborated with colonial authorities toward these ends.

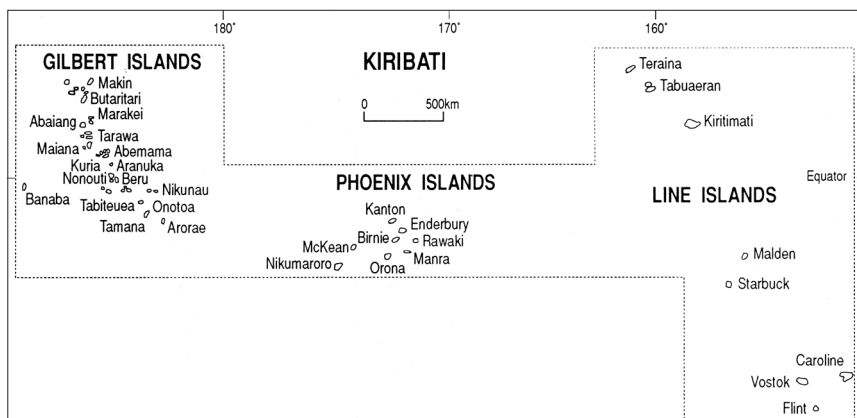
Juxtaposed with this “official narrative” of Church-State collaboration in the cause of social and political progress is another, which records considerable resistance to the imposed colonial rule, considerable conflict between traditional authorities and the new religious leaders, and much sectarian conflict among the adherents of the new religions.

The emergence of Bahá'í communities in the Pacific Islands provides an additional layer of complexity. For one thing, the first Bahá'í pioneers to the Pacific were not part of (and did not see themselves as part of) the “westernization” and “colonization” of Pacific peoples. They were not schooled in the Christian missionary tradition, and were for the most part unaware of the extreme rivalries between the missions themselves, just as they were unaware of the rivalries between church and state which pervaded the interactions between these two sources of authority within the colonies. Bahá'í pioneers were, in contrast, advocates of a global

worldview premised on the subordination of nationalism and of race inequality. The distinction between these two approaches to religious conversion is profound, and the premise of this paper is that in the Gilbert Islands, in the 1950s, their collision produced widespread confusion concerning the true motivation of the pioneers and the first islanders who chose to become Bahá'ís.

This paper thus examines the establishment of a Bahá'í community among the Polynesian and Micronesian peoples of adjoining archipelagoes in the North Pacific Ocean known as the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. From 1892 to 1976 the British-controlled Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (GEIC) combined the inhabitants of sixteen islands of the Gilberts group, who are ethnically Micronesian, with those of the eight inhabited islands of the Ellice group, who are Polynesian. Together, the landmass of the widely scattered islands amounts to just 788 square kilometers. In 1978 the Ellice Islanders gained independence as Tuvalu, and the following year the Gilbertese established the independent nation of Kiribati: they now constitute two of the smallest independent nations in the world and, as low-lying atolls in the midst of the Pacific Ocean, are increasingly vulnerable to the rising sea levels due to climate change.

Roy and Elena Fernie brought the Bahá'í Teachings to the colony in 1954 in response to a specific objective of the World Crusade (1953–1963) (Hassall, “Bahá'í History”). Their intention to settle in the islands permanently, and to impart the Bahá'í teachings at a pace consonant with the gradual establishment of mutual understandings with their neighbors and with those in authority, was thwarted—ironically—by the sudden and widespread interest in the new religious ideas they promoted among the Gilbertese. This response culminated, after a tumultuous first year of residence, in Roy Fernie's deportation from the colony by the British authorities, at the urging of the established missions. Although these events occurred little more than fifty years ago, oral histories concerning them have contained a number of errors that I will seek to correct in this article. Efforts by theologians and historians of religion have provided some insights into the episode, which I will



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attempt to enhance through the use of previously unexamined historical records.

#### SCHOLARSHIP AND THE GROWTH OF TWO BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITIES

To date, scholarly references to Pacific Islands Bahá'í communities are few in number and brief.<sup>1</sup> The most complete accounts are those of Hassall (“Pacific Bahá'í Communities” and “The Bahá'í Faith”) and Williams. Of these accounts, the one by Ieuti contains the most focus on the Bahá'ís of Kiribati and Tuvalu.

Official reporting on religious change in the two countries has been similarly unresponsive. Until 1973, for instance, the official biennial reports of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony produced by the British administration stated: “In 1954 two representatives of the Bahá'í Faith arrived in the Gilberts and there is now a small Bahá'í community” (Foreign and Commonwealth Office)—a summary that ignores the rapid consolidation of the Gilbertese Bahá'í community, and its indigenization and integration with sister Bahá'í communities in other Pacific Islands.

In 1959 the GEIC Bahá'í Community had assisted in the establishment of the Regional Spiritual Assembly of Bahá'ís of the South Pacific, and in 1967 had established the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'í of the

Gilbert and Ellice Islands. By 1963 its membership had reached 521 (1 percent of the population) and spread across fourteen of the Colony's thirty-three islands (McArthur and Craig, table 12).

In recent decades the Bahá'í communities of Kiribati and Tuvalu have continued to record growth in both membership and institutional development. In 1979, 8.77 percent of the population was recorded as Bahá'í, and by 1986 there were ninety Local Assemblies and a total of 140 towns and villages that included Bahá'í communities. In Tuvalu, Bahá'í statistics indicated that 5.8 percent of the population was Bahá'í by 1987, and in 1991 the Universal House of Justice noted that the Bahá'í community had attained the status of one of the "common religions" in Tuvalu. The 2000 census listed 2052 Bahá'ís, amounting to 2.4 percent of the national population of 84,494 (cited in Tenten, 466).

This rapid growth of Bahá'í communities, in addition to the growth of other new religious groups in Kiribati, has resulted on occasion in calls by parliamentarians and others for bans on "new religions." It has also led, on a more positive note, to a genuine interest among Gilbertese scholars to understand the motivation for religious change. In 1992, for example, a graduate of the Pacific Theological College in Fiji published a thesis seeking to understand these events and calling on representatives of the newer religious traditions to contribute their own histories in the interest of promoting interreligious understanding. Ieuti introduced his study by explaining:

Several new religious movements have come to Kiribati since World War II. Most significant for Kiribati history in terms of their growth and impact on society are the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, the Bahá'í World Faith and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Other religious bodies in Kiribati are the Kiribati Protestant Church and the Roman Catholic Church, both established in the 1800s and some more new religious movements, such as the Church of God and Assemblies of God. None of the older groups has experienced significant growth since World War Two. The Kiribati

Protestant Church has experienced a considerable erosion of membership into the three major new religious movements. (72)

Ieuti's description of the origins and emergence of the Bahá'í community in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands was a serious effort to use oral histories, as well as some source material, to seek clarification about its origins. In the following section I use this rendition to present understandings of the Fernie years as they exist within the Gilbertese Bahá'í community, before presenting new documentary evidence that provides some factual corrections as well as some substantial contributions toward a fuller understanding of the conflict.

Ieuti offers the following account:

In 1954 Roy and Elena Fernie from the national Spiritual Assembly in Panama arrived as Bahá'í pioneers in Kiribati. They went to Abaiang and established their center there. During their stay the Fernies conducted meetings; these brought opposition from the Roman Catholic priest who told his congregation not to attend such meetings. In trying to suppress the Fernies and the Bahá'í Faith, the priest began to criticize them in the Roman Catholic newsletter, *Te Itoi ni Ngaina*, stating that they came to destroy the Christian religion. Timeon Tamaroa, a Bahá'í, told me that the priest actually contributed to the spreading of the Faith in the whole group as the newsletter was read by so many people.

In spite of the Fernies' problems, they managed to convert a Roman Catholic, Kanere Koru, who became their interpreter. The people, because of their curiosity, wanted to know more about this new religion, so they began to flock around the Fernies and to hear their teachings. The Roman Catholic priest did not give up his opposition. He informed his superior in Tarawa, the bishop, to ask the government to send the Fernies away and send Kanere back to his native island, Tabiteuea. In those days, to be a registered religious organization, a group needed 100 members, so the government

approved of sending the Fernies away. However, in a single night nearly 300 people registered. The government issued a certificate of registration on 24 September 1955 authorizing the Bahá'í Faith as a legal religion known as the Spiritual Assembly. Nevertheless, the government managed to send Roy Fernie away in 1955, although his wife Elena stayed to continue the work. She was responsible for the spread of the Faith on Abaiang.

Kanere was sent back to Tabiteuea, his home island. There he converted a Protestant minister who was under discipline by his church. Together they spread the Bahá'í Faith on Tabiteuea.

Elena established a school which attracted people as they wanted to be educated. The Morkiao [Morikao] school on Abaiang established by the ABCFM<sup>2</sup> was full, so parents who saw education as a means of getting good status for their children sent their children to the Bahá'í School. Further progress in education was seen in the establishment of another four Bahá'í primary schools on Tabiteuea Island. The Bahá'ís could not continue these schools as they did not get approval from the Universal House of Justice, and in the late 1950s they were closed down. . . ." (101)

#### ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

This account is an attempt in good faith to reconstruct the origins of the GEIC Bahá'í community. It presents some correct information, but also some errors of fact, as well as some interpretations of events that are open to alternative possibilities. The Universal House of Justice, for instance, was first elected in 1963, so it could not have "closed down" Bahá'í schools in the Gilbert Islands in the 1950s: these schools closed for lack of finances and competent teachers. But perhaps most importantly, the article glosses over the tumult and intrigue that accompanied the Fernies' first months in the colony. It doesn't explore the role of personality and the interests and attitudes of other central actors in the islands in the 1950s: colonial administrators, both Catholic and Protestant missions, island-level leaders, and individual Gilbertese. Most significantly, it



overlooks the possibility that Gilbert Islanders had made individual and community choices to change their religious affiliation, just as it neglects discussion of their right to do so, and the consequences they faced as a result of exercising their rights. Ieuti suggests, for instance, the Fernies “managed to convert” Kanere, in a way that dismisses the initiative taken by Kanere to investigate the introduced religion, and subsequently embrace it (as described below). Kanere was born the fourth of nine children at Tanaeang, North Tabiteuea, on 3 March 1920 (Groves). In 1933–38 he studied at the Catholic seminary at Buota, Abaiang, but decided against the priesthood and became a wireless operator and later a teacher. At the time of his declaration his bishop had been trying to persuade him to rejoin the Church and enter mission employment. Kanere had seen Esslemont’s book *Bahá’u’lláh and the New Era* on the Fernies’ bookshelf, and had insisted on reading it. Kanere subsequently remained an ardent promoter of the Bahá’í Teachings until his passing some three decades later.

#### ROY AND ELENA FERNIE AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE GEIC BAHÁ’Í COMMUNITY

Elena Maria Fernie (née Marsella, d. 2002), originally from Providence, Rhode Island, had trained as a concert pianist before entering the United States foreign service. She pioneered to the Caribbean in 1945 and in 1950 was elected secretary of the first National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Central America and the Antilles. Roy Fernie (d. 1964), whose wealthy family owned the C. Fernie Steamship Company, was born in the Panama Canal Zone and spent his school years in England. In the mid-1940s he returned to the Canal Zone from a period spent in St. Louis, Missouri, and soon after heard of the Bahá’í Faith from his future wife, Elena. He became a Bahá’í in March 1953, and the couple married in May. With the announcement of the goals of the World Crusade that year, the Fernies decided to pioneer in the Pacific. The Central American Assembly was responsible for the entry of pioneers to three island groups: the French overseas territory Tuamotu Archipelago, the

American trusteeship of the Marshall Islands, and the British colony of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. As pioneers were already making plans to enter the first two of these remote island groups, the Fernies focused on getting to the Gilbert Islands, a task made difficult in the first instance by their absolute ignorance as to the islands' whereabouts, and the inability of even the British consul in Panama to assist them with any information concerning means of travel to them. Having eventually found the colony's location to the north of the Fiji Islands, the Fernies departed by boat for Suva, the capital of the British colony of Fiji. After two months of residing with a family of Indo-Fijian Bahá'ís, during which no transportation was available to complete their journey, an opportunity arose when a ship was required to urgently convey a supply of kerosene to the GEIC.

Permission to enter the colony was granted through the generous assistance of a Gilbertese trader named Schutz. The reason for this individual's cooperation has not been established. There were no hotels in the GEIC, and few western-style houses, and when the authorities sought at first to deny the Fernies entry on grounds of lack of suitable accommodation, Schutz assured them that the travelers could reside in his home until able to construct a home of their own. With this guarantee they gained permission to enter, and arrived on the group's main island, Tarawa, on 4 March 1954. Approximately five days later the Fernies traveled on Schutz's trading vessel to Abaiang, where they commenced residence in his home, as arranged. The choice of Abaiang Island may have resulted from no other fact than that it was the only island on which they could obtain accommodation. The extraordinary events of that first day were recounted by Elena Fernie:

[A]fter a five hour trip we landed in the lagoon at Abaiang and I don't know how it was done, the Gilbertese there were ready to greet us and they came out waving and it seems their custom was to take imitangs [*Imatang*] (white people) off the ship and carry them on their back.

[T]here we were with our feet on the shore and some more

Gilbertese appeared on the shore line. One was an oldish man—his name was Abram—which is Gilbertese for Abraham. He had a little boy with him who was related to him in some way and the little boy came on up to me with an egg. I was considerably surprised at receiving an egg but anyway I smiled at him and I took the egg. I no sooner had the egg in my hand when Roy snatched it out of my hand—he was an amateur magician and he could do all kinds of tricks so he snatched this egg out of my hand pretended to crush it on the little boy's head and then it supposedly dropped out of this little boy's nose. Well this absolutely sent these Gilbertese into shrieks of laughter. They couldn't stop laughing. They laughed for about half an hour and Abaiang was all doubled over with laughter and all the other Gilbertese were just beside themselves they were practically falling on the ground and rolling over and over with laughter.

[W]hen it got dark we suddenly began to hear crackling and outside Gilbertese houses they are all swept clean or else around the houses is nice crunchy gravel . . . and we thought “what on earth is going on?” . . . finally when we looked out we saw faces and faces began to appear about 3 feet up and four feet up—everywhere they could see through the grill, tall ones standing in front, we looked around the three sides and we were absolutely surrounded, there seemed like hundreds of Gilbertese and they were silently without a word, walking all on the gravel peering in at us. . . .

Well we looked at each other and we looked all around at all the sea of faces, brown faces, and we thought “good heavens, what are they doing, and what will we do?” . . . Finally we decided we would greet them. So we said “konemoui” [*Ko na Mauri*] (a Gilbertese greeting meaning “may you be blessed”) . . . and they just stood there and looked at us. . . . Finally Roy said “music is an international language,” so we had a short wave radio and we turned the radio on the and music started playing and Roy went “ah, ah” a big pause and delighted sighs all around three sides of the room and we saw that that pleased them very much. So the music played, and the music played, nothing else was said all dead silence outside still. I don't know how

long this went on but it seemed to us an absolute eternity. . . . Finally there was stir outside and a sense of excitement. All of a sudden a voice said in very clipped English “they would like to see an exhibition of the magic arts.” We said “who’s that?” He said “my name is Peter Koru Kanere” well, we said “come in.” Were we ever glad to hear someone speaking English. We said “what is it they want to see?” he said “they want to see an exhibition of the magic arts.” It turns out that Abram and this little boy had been so pleased with the trick that Roy had performed that the news had gone up and down the island post-haste. Every Gilbertese on the island knew that Roy could do some magic. . . .

Roy Fernie proceeded to perform a full magic show with the aid of some lanterns strung between breadfruit trees, following which Elena treated the crowd to their first experience of a piano recital. (“Roy and Elena Fernie”)

The subsequent dynamics between the Fernies, the Gilbertese, the British authorities, and the Christian missionaries appear to have been set by the events of this one remarkable day. Shoghi Effendi had advised all pioneers to establish themselves firmly in their new environments before attempting to promote the Bahá'í Teachings in an active way. It made sense to become familiar with their new surroundings, and for their neighbors to learn something about them personally, before they introduced what were potentially radically new ideas. The Fernies followed this advice as best they could (Hassall, *Messages*). They did not seek to discuss religion with anyone, but concentrated their efforts on establishing their home. However, the warmth of their reception, and their ability to immediately connect with the affections of the island’s population, gave them an instant profile which they could have scarcely anticipated. Within weeks of their arrival the Fernies attracted to their Sunday magic and music shows audiences of such magnitude as raised the ire of the resident Catholic priest.

In April 1954, one month after arriving on Abaiang, Roy Fernie offered to assist the Island Council establish a school. He informed the District

Officer that the Island Council had agreed to the idea that each village would build a dormitory at Buota, south of Tuarabu, where the concrete floors and cistern still remained from a school formerly operated there by the Catholic Church. The secretary to government wanted to discuss the idea with the senior education officer at Bikenebeu (Bikenibeu). Prior to the Fernies' arrival, the British administration had been consulting the Catholic and Protestant missions about provision of schooling. Following generations of conflict between Catholic and Protestant communities, the government now sought their cooperation in establishing a network of schools that covered the population more evenly and that reduced the tendency for competition and conflict between rival school systems. The London Missionary Society (LMS) had decided to cease offering village-level schooling. In April 1953 the colony's highest officials had expressed the hope that the Sacred Heart Mission could be persuaded to "accept responsibility for the establishment of island type schools in predominantly Roman Catholic islands, rather than compete with government in the establishment of island schools elsewhere" and had assured the London Missionary Society that the Government would "start to take over their amalgamated village mission schools as soon as the island type schools (had) been properly established."<sup>3</sup>

Preliminary arrangements had been made in 1954 for the establishment of Island schools. The people were to pay half the teachers' salaries through their cooperative societies. When island councils agreed to these conditions, the government went ahead with the building of the school. Abaiang had been the second island to apply under this scheme but was not given a high priority for government action, as it already had Marist and LMS "higher" schools. In this context, Roy Fernie's enthusiasm for establishing a school was perceived by some as a threat to what the delicate negotiations had achieved.

On 15–16 April 1954 Roy Fernie spoke with J. B. McCaig, acting for the District Officer at Bairiki, about his proposed school. It would teach English, and he would contribute sixty pounds per month for a minimum of five years, an offer McCaig did not take seriously, describing the American as a "crank." The District Officer did not want to turn down

Abaiang Island Council's request for a school but felt Fernie's proposal was "too unwieldy" for one man to accomplish. The Officer also reacted adversely to his reported comment that he would bring in plenty of American "wild west and comic strips" to arouse in the boys an interest in reading English: "I can't quite balance this enthusiasm," McCaig reported in his official correspondence, "with the apparently sound standing of the missions. If the people are so keen on higher education are they dissatisfied with that provided by the existing training schools etc? Has this scheme been brought to the notice of the Missions? If so, what is their reaction; and if not, I do not think we can help. Our own position with regard to the Missions is difficult enough and such a step as Mr. Fernie suggests seems to me to be the start of a bigger rift, especially with the SMH."<sup>4</sup>

The District Officer, F. N. M. Pusinelli, sought the advice of the Magistrate on Abaiang about the situation and the following day received a telegram indicating that Abaiang Council had already approved the establishment of the school and that the Fernies would be in charge. It would be a nondenominational school for males and females who had reached sixteen. The magistrate requested the District Officer's assistance in gaining approval quickly.<sup>5</sup>

On the same date, 31 May 1954, the senior education officer at Bikenibeu wrote to the Secretary to Government to report the contents of a letter just received from Rev. E. Jones, head of the LMS Headquarters for the northern islands:

The Abaiang "old men" are much agog these days because of the hypnotic allurements of Fernie's proposals for a technical Utopia on the island. Before local free labour is conscripted in the name of local government, I think that the whole thing needs close investigation. Everybody interested in education would support a programme of technical training, but, as the Greek Sophists often stated: "The reality of an object is not always what it appears to be!" One would not like to see an aftermath of folly and disillusionment. However, I am sure that His Honour is fully aware of such dangers!<sup>6</sup>

In June the Abaiang magistrate further reported to District Officer Pusinelli that the Fernies had attended a meeting of the Island Council on the morning of 12 April, attended by just eleven of its twenty-six members, but also attended by all the members of the land's court. Fernie had written to the Council:

I hear that you are thinking about a school on your island, and the reason for our visit is to study the customs and character of the people. While we are here we would like to spend our time here among you in helping you in this scheme for your people's advancement. We shall not leave you until your school is well established and we shall stay a long time among you. The school to be built will be Abaiang's school for everyone irrespective of whether they are Catholic, Protestants or Seventh Day Adventists. Every one can be admitted to the school from age 16 until they are adults. Abaiang will control the school and make the rules and punishments for breaking the rules.<sup>7</sup>

By October 1954 the school had been established on land leased by the Fernies. English textbooks had been purchased from the Panama Canal Zone government, and a "sizeable library" had been established. "Several serious-minded boys and their wives have also settled on our land," the Fernies wrote to Bertha Dobbins, who had recently settled in the New Hebrides, "and are studying English every day in preparation for future studies in other subjects"<sup>8</sup>

In the same period that the school was being established, a number of Gilbertese became Bahá'ís, and Bahá'í Assemblies were established. With growth in adherents, "practice" assemblies were formed, at Tuarabu, Tebero, and Kuria, a development that perplexed the missions as well as the colonial government. The Fernies were evidently focused on the extent of their success rather than the social turbulence it was evoking. Elena wrote to the Australian-based Asian Teaching Committee: "So you see we are now head over heels in teaching work. Roy spends every night at the new Bahá'í centre, or visiting other centres. The 'practice assemblies' come to the house and I instruct them. Almost all of our waking moments are

engaged in teaching the Faith. . . . the Faith is tearing through the islands like a flame and we watch the marvel. . . ." (*Bahá'í Bulletin* 5).

Near the end of 1955 "over 230 Gilbertese" had "declared their intention to be Bahá'ís" (Fernie 4). In August Roy Fernie sought to register Tuarabu as the first Bahá'í Assembly in accordance with the GEIC Religious Bodies Registration Ordinance, but his efforts in this, as in the establishment of the school, provoked skepticism from British colonial officials. District Officer I. G. Turbott explained to Fernie the legal procedures entailed in registering a religious body, and after the pioneer had returned the following day with the completed application, reported:

Whilst Fernie says it is the people's wish, etc, Fernie typed the letter and it was then accepted by the nine Bahai assembly. Fernie claims he knew the requirements of the law and was therefore helping them. He regards himself as a 'steering committee'. Both A. A. O. Tabunawati and myself formed the opinion that the people really did not know what their Bahá'í religion was about but I suggest in the circumstances it might be wise to concede to the request for registration. Fernie gave me the impression that he was doubtful if it would be accepted by the government as he is of the opinion that government are against Bahais and prompt registration might alleviate his fears in this respect.<sup>9</sup>

Tuarabu's memorandum dated 30 July was accepted, and in terms of the law, that Assembly became the head of the Bahá'í community throughout the colony.

#### OPPOSITION AND EXPULSION OF ROY FERNIE

Why were the Catholic mission and some British officials so opposed to Fernie's initiatives? Given the shortage of educational facilities in the colony one would have thought that offers of material assistance such as that made by Roy Fernie would have been welcomed. The answer, it seems, concerns long-standing efforts to change and control Gilbertese



culture and society, which Fernie's unanticipated intervention had rapidly begun to disrupt. As a novice to Gilbertese society and history, Fernie was most likely unaware of the extent to which the Church was discouraging cultural practices that it judged to embody "sorcery and magic." As recently as March 1949 a District Officer had reported to the Secretary to Government efforts by Bishop Terrienne to suppress Catholic involvement in Maneaba, or community meeting house, activities:

His Lordship was asked, recently, the reasons for his more latterly change of attitude towards these traditional Gilbertese dances [*batere, ruoia, kamei*] and he replied that, although *batere* in itself may not be a pagan practice there is a tendency for natives to undergo certain magic rites in order that they might perform well at the dance and so attract the attention of a member of the opposite sex. . . . His Lordship has announced that *maneaba* are places of evil and that converts to Roman Catholicism should not frequent them.<sup>10</sup>

As if Fernie's innocent magic tricks were not enough of an irritant to the Church's anti-magic campaign, his efforts to establish an English-language school, and the fund-raising activities he organized in Turaubu to accomplish it, were perceived as threats to the capacity of Catholics at Turaubu to raise funds to match those of their rival village Koinawa.

Pressure appears to have been put on Abaiang Catholics to have the Fernies removed from the Island. Landowners who had leased them land on which they built a house requested that they move, and Abaiang Island Council, the members of which had been working with the Fernies to establish a much-desired school, unexpectedly voted to expel the Fernies and Kanere from the island. A Catholic priest wrote a derogatory article in *The Star of the Gilberts*. Two officers were sent to investigate rumors that Fernie wanted people to become like Americans (and therefore to reduce their need for the British).

When orders were given that Roy Fernie be deported, some two-hundred additional Abaiang residents declared their position in the days

prior to his departure on 25 November 1955, by announcing their wish to become Bahá'ís. "For Roy it was truly a tragedy," Elena wrote later. "He loved the Gilbertese people with all his heart; had he not been deported he would have remained all his life in those Islands" ("Elena Marsella Fernie" 310). Elena Fernie stayed despite her husband's deportation until approximately June 1957.<sup>11</sup> Fellow pioneer in the Gilbert Islands Mabel Sneider wrote to the Australian-based "Asian Teaching Committee":

Roy has been deported because of attacks by the Catholic Church, and is now in Hawaii. Elena has remained, it is certainly obvious that they believed she would go with her husband and the Bahá'í Faith would bother them no longer. She has remained and they have some 250 persons who are ready to declare themselves Bahá'ís, however Elena states that perhaps 100 have had enough teaching to be ready to be declared. Not only the huge problem of teaching that many people but also a lone woman against the three priests who are on the island! (Sneider).

The authorities may have expected her to leave with Roy, but she remained in the Gilbert Islands for at least another year.

Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, wrote to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the British Isles:

In spite of the fact that Mr. [Fernie] has been expelled from Gilbert and Ellice Islands, the remarkable progress of the Faith there has been a source of great satisfaction. It shows that a spiritual receptivity, a purity of heart and uprightness of character exists potentially amongst many of the peoples of the Pacific Isles to an extent equal to that of the tribesmen of Africa. It is indeed an encouraging and awe-inspiring sight to witness the spread of our beloved Faith amongst those whom civilised nations misguidedly term "savages," "primitive peoples" and "uncivilised nations." He hopes that your Assembly will do all in its power to ensure that Mrs. [Fernie] remains

in the Islands. Although for some period at least this may entail separation from her husband, he believes that these two dedicated and exemplary pioneers will be willing to accept this sacrifice in view of the extraordinary work they have accomplished and are accomplishing. The community there must not be abandoned, particularly by its "mother," so to speak. It must be well and profoundly grounded in the Faith before such a risky step can be taken. He hopes that you will deal most wisely and co-operatively with the Colonial Office officials in this matter and any others that may arise. Their esteem, their good-will, and their co-operation are practically indispensable for the future work in many islands throughout the Pacific area, and nothing but the frustration of our objectives can be gained through alienating them in any way. This should be impressed upon the pioneers and the local Bahá'ís as well. (365)

For Kanere, subsequent events were tragic. On Tarawa, waiting for his wife to give birth and for a ship to take them to Tabiteuea, Kanere received a deportation order from the administration prohibiting him from remaining on either Tarawa or Abaiang. Kanere's wife was denied adequate medical treatment and died soon after childbirth. Kanere returned to his home island of Tabiteuea in the Southern Gilberts and proceeded to spread the Bahá'í principles there, so that by 1960 there were forty-seven Bahá'ís on the island.<sup>12</sup> He remained an active advocate of the Bahá'í Teachings until his death some three decades later.

Did the experience with Roy Fernie affect the attitude of the British administration toward the Bahá'í community? Although Roy Fernie was not allowed to return, British officials distinguished his case from that of the Bahá'í community as a whole. In Solomon Islands, a British protectorate further to the south where a Bahá'í community had recently been established through the efforts of Gertrude and Alvin Blum, a conference of District Commissioners was told: "The Colony was having some difficulty with a few individuals, one of whom was a Bahá'í. His Excellency briefly explained that Bahá'í was not a militant or political

religion and that as a religion there was no objection to it. . . .”<sup>13</sup> In a subsequent dispatch a senior government official mentioned in writing to the District Commissioner on the island of Malaita, where a Bahá'í community was soon to emerge: “The Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony’s news is to the effect that a man called Fernie, a follower of the Bahá'í faith, has protested strongly about the Deportation Order made out against him on the grounds of his generally undesirable conduct. His representatives in London have raised the cry of ‘persecution’ and have classified the Colony with Persia, where followers of the Bahá'í faith have had a thin time lately.”<sup>14</sup>

Within the GEIC, the British administration changed its attitude toward the Bahá'í community once it became more familiar with the religion’s tenets and method of administration. By 1956, when the Community comprised four Local Spiritual Assemblies, and five groups (Shoghi Effendi, *Messages* 97), the Assemblies sought legal recognition under GEIC so that they could acquire and own property.

Legal recognition required the registration of at least one Local Spiritual Assembly, and Tuarabu Assembly registered under the relevant law on 24 September 1955. The annual change of “board of trustees” which resulted from the requirement that Assemblies elect their members annually resulted in much paperwork for the British administration and to the reluctance of the Administration to entertain the idea of further registrations. Thus, when other Assemblies sought similar registration the Resident Commissioner felt the situation was “getting out of hand”: “Surely it is not necessary to register each separate assembly provided the parent assembly is registered? If so, we should also register each separate LMS congregation and the work involved would be fantastic.”<sup>15</sup>

The District Commissioner came to realize that the Bahá'ís desired to be a “registered body with pan-Colonial interest.”<sup>16</sup> and when explaining to the Resident Commissioner that the parent assembly was in Suva, the capital of the Fiji Islands, offered the observation: “It would seem that the Bahá'í system of giving self-administration to each of its Local

Assemblies is similar, in some respects, to government's aim of increasing the responsibilities of local bodies."<sup>17</sup> The Resident Commissioner consequently agreed to register a body named "Bahai World Faith GEIC" (registration took place on 22 December 1959). The Catholic Church, after all, had all twelve parishes registered separately, and it was "not anticipated that the number of Bahá'í assemblies seeking registration will be numerous."

#### CONCLUSION

Why did Gilbertese leave their churches and become Bahá'ís? The most documented reasons relate to (a) aversion to financial and other obligations from the churches, and (b) a quest for education. Ieuti also refers to the attraction of the lifestyle offered by the Bahá'í Faith as well as other "new religious movements." Ieuti reported the case of a widow "who failed to pay her levy and who was told not to come to church services and not to allow her children to be in the church Youth Fellowship nor to enter and play in the church maneaba. For this reason, according to Ieuti, the widow turned to the Bahá'í Faith to find security and real fellowship" (125–26). Concerning dissatisfaction with the life of the churches, the American anthropologist Lundsgaarde has reported:

As for the reasons in the major shift in religious affiliations among the Buatoa [Buota] villagers, I was consistently told that the converts preferred the Bahá'í faith for two reasons: first, because Bahá'í missionaries did not require monetary contributions from the villages but, in fact, generously contributed both food and medicine to the people; and second, the Bahá'í faith did not require people to observe the Sabbath. On the basis of these rather fundamental changes it would be reasonable to suggest that the maneaba organization at Buatoa is headed for extinction. Subsequent interviews with government officials who have always attempted to ameliorate relations between disputing religious factions led me to suspect that the picture

was, however, far more complicated than this. (“Post-Contact Changes” 75)

While the possibility exists that some conversions were tied to exploration of opportunities for socioeconomic advancement, particularly through access to education, this cannot have been a sustained motivation on its own, since the Bahá'í pioneers and the Bahá'í community did not provide such resources, particularly on the scale achieved by the mission organizations.

In addition to possible socioeconomic advancement, there were motivations for conversion rooted in the distinct teachings of the Bahá'í Faith and pattern of Bahá'í community life. Central among these was the principal Bahá'í teaching of the “oneness of humankind.” For Kanere and others it was the Fernie’s demonstration of impartiality in matters of race that commenced the attraction. The Fernies were buffeted by the tensions that already existed in the GEIC at the time of their arrival. They were ignorant of the tension that had existed between church and state for nearly a decade on the question of state-run schools. Roy Fernie fell foul of local authorities, first through his enthusiasm as an amateur magician and subsequently through their skepticism at his offer to build a school. More broadly, however, a deeper reason for misunderstandings with colonial officials was the vastly different approach to “mission” employed by the Bahá'ís. At a time when most continued to act as though Europeans and Pacific Islanders were unequal races, the Bahá'í pioneers appear to have treated the races equally. Whereas leadership in the Christian missions and churches remained unquestionably in the hands of Europeans, Bahá'ís elected Gilbertese members to local administrative bodies within two years of their arrival. Furthermore, they were electing Gilbertese as delegates to their regional administrative convention within five years. This rapid indigenization of religious authority was novel to the colony and was at first misunderstood by government officials. The Gilbertese, however, saw the matter differently and recognized that here was a religion that not only preached but also practiced an ethic of common and

equal humanity. This finding requires comparison with the experience of the first Bahá'í teachers in colonies elsewhere, both in the Pacific and perhaps also in Africa.

#### NOTES

This research was undertaken in government archives in Kiribati, Solomon Islands, and Fiji, and in the Australian and Fijian National Bahá'í Archives. I am grateful to the relevant authorities who granted permission for their use. I am also grateful to the late Mrs. Elena Fernie for sharing copies of correspondence, and to Joe Russell and Professor Ron Crocombe for their comments on an earlier draft of the paper. The maps appearing on pages 31 and 33 are reprinted by permission of IPS Publications from *Island Churches: Challenge and Change* (Ed. C. W. Forman. Suva: Pacific Theological College and Institute of Pacific Studies, 1992).

1. See Baranite; Ernst; Goldsmith and Munro; Ieuti; Kirata; MacDonald; Van Trease; Wright; and Tenten.

2. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions was established by the General Association of Congregational Churches of Massachusetts in 1810.

3. Kiribati National Archives, Office of the Resident Commissioner.

4. Kiribati National Archives. McCaig.

5. Kiribati National Archives. Pusinelli, 31 May 1954.

6. Kiribati National Archives. Senior Education Officer, 1954.

7. Kiribati National Archives. Pusinelli, 17 June 1954.

8. Australian National Bahá'í Archives. Fernies to B. Dobbins.

9. Kiribati National Archives. District Office Betio.

10. Kiribati National Archives. District Officer, Bairiki 1949.

11. This date has been provided by Joe Russell, who met her in Lanikai, Oahu, in December 1957, having become a Bahá'í earlier that year (e-mail correspondence with the author, 21 June 2005).

12. Fiji National Bahá'í Archives—Suva. RSA to Collis Featherstone, 29 March 1960.

13. Solomon Islands National Archives. Confidential Minutes.
14. Solomon Islands National Archives. Senior Assistant Secretary, Native Affairs, to DC Malaita (Tom Russell), November 1955.
15. Kiribati National Archives. Ecclesiastical. 18 November 1960.
16. Kiribati National Archives. District Commissioner 1959.
17. Kiribati National Archives. Ecclesiastical. Registration. 2 December 1959.

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