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Aramatang – Vegetal presence-absence in Kiribati

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Summary:

This post tells the story of Tawake Eriata as she slowly explores and resists multiple layers of unravelling connections to pandanus in Kiribati. In following these threads, the story considers how the erosion of ancient cultural practices is also a form of pandanus extinction.

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ARAMATANG – VEGETAL PRESENCE-ABSENCE IN KIRIBATI

At first view, little has changed in the past decades in the vegetation of the outer islands of Kiribati. The skyline of atolls is still bristled with a tangle of spiky pandanus leaves and coconut palm fronds, through which the salt laden winds fly hard. Unlike many other domestic plants, fish, birds, or turtles, the survival of pandanus is not currently threatened in the country. Te kaina, or *Pandanus tectorius*, continues to be a part of the dense matrix of coconut forests that have been extensively planted since the ninetieth century to produce copra for export. Stands of the hardy pandanus plants thickly blanket various parts of the atolls. They withstand droughts and temporary saltwater inundations, their heavy heads of long prickly leaves, large fruits, and stubby branches solidly kept in balance by their aerial roots at the base and the aerial prop roots growing from their branches. From June to September, the air is fragrant with te kaina blossoms and fruit. Pandanus is easy to grow, even in the poor and thin soils of low-lying coral atolls. It is found in the harshest places, where even hardy coconut palms won't thrive. Once established, it will self-propagate quite readily.



Little boy harvesting ripe pandanus fruit from Aramatang trees in Tekaman, Tabiteuea North.

Despite this apparent robustness, however, the story of pandanus in Kiribati is a story of loss and unravelling worlds.

The pandanus trees of Kiribati's bush are the descendants of plants that have been intimately entangled with human lives for as long as people have lived on those shores. In Kiribati, pandanus is very much what could be called a cultural keystone species (Garibaldi and Turner, 2004). I-Kiribati, the inhabitants of modern day

Kiribati, once called themselves “pandanus people” (Grimble, 1933), and used to worship Auriaria, the spirit of the ancestral pandanus (Luomala, 1953:83). Human and vegetal lives were so intricately woven through one another that when Tawake describes the erosion of cultural practices on her native island of Tabiteuea, she speaks of pandanus extinction.

Tawake is an Assistant Cultural Officer at the Kiribati Museum and Cultural Centre in South Tarawa. The young woman is part of the team of cultural workers sent on regular missions to outlying islands of the Gilbert Islands Archipelago to fight the seemingly unstoppable vanishing of culturally important practices. She documents and promotes the conditions and skills that underwrite the distinctive ways of being in the world that are unique to this Micronesian society. Te kaina is central in her work.

This short piece follows Tawake’s personal story of loss and grief as she confronts the acute fragility of environmental and cultural worlds embodied in transformed pandanus lives. It draws on material she collected for her research on Aramatang, the pandanus from her home village of Tekaman on Tabiteuea North.

When she started her job as a cultural worker, Tawake underwent a decisive change of heart. Prior to that, like most young people of Kiribati, she had no nostalgia for the hard-won subsistence life of the past; a way of life that was held in the world in interactions of obedience, endurance, and labour. But a growing sense of loss overwhelmed her as she began collecting interviews from elders and when she started to look for te kaina in the gardens further inland, te buakonikai, where it used to be cultivated, alongside coconut palms and giant swamp taro. The pandanus trees left untended made her aware of how inextricably entangled she and people of her generation are with the altered plant bodies.



Woven baskets of pandanus leaves in which fertilizer and mulch is placed around the bases of giant swamp taro plants in North Tarawa.

Like the aramatang of Tekaman, pandanus used to have many names in Kiribati, each linked to the land that nourishes people and their trees. Hundreds of different names were told in stories and celebrated in songs. The unique taste of their fruits and the specific colour, the strength, and the texture of their leaves as well as the properties of their timber were recognised by members of other clans, who associated names to their human communities.



Pandanus fruit on a woven mat made of pandanus leaves, Bairiki village, South Tarawa. The black dye used in weaving is prepared from the roots of pandanus trees.

To reproduce these physical characteristics, pandanus had to be drawn into close interrelations with people. Because rikinibeti, the pandanus propagated from seeds, will not bear fruits or leaves that are similar to the mother plant, and will remain weak and will flower late, people propagated and perpetuated te kaina from cuttings from mature trees. Although pandanus requires less careful and secretive tending than the giant swamp taro, the cultivars were nevertheless well looked after. Individually owned trees were planted in proper holes in garden lands or around residences, mulched and covered with black topsoil found around trees liked by certain types of birds, and received compost of different leaves. The soil around the young plants was frequently tamped to obtain low, high-yielding trees that were easy to harvest (Thaman, 1990). Frequent clearing would ensure

that the trees were given optimum light, enabling them to bear fruits soon after planting. Pandanus such as arantebwe could also grow very tall and straight. Their huge logs can still be seen in the antique meeting houses left on the islands. Caring for the pandanus always involved constant walking the pathways of previous generations to “the long-term plants” growing away from the residences. People visited day after day the land that was settled, inherited, inhabited, and protected by their forefathers, improving the legacies of ancestors, perpetuating the trees they planted.



Old maneaba (community assembly house) in Eita village (South Tarawa) with thatched roofing.

Pandanus was intimately involved in multiple webs of interactions and shaped how islanders negotiated their oceanic existences. Pandanus holds together most of the materials that mattered to a decent Kiribati life. This starts with fresh pandanus fruits, that nourish both individual and collective bodies. The first crop harvested at the beginning of a new season is offered to the unimane, or elders, at the maneaba (the large community assembly houses), in a movement that simultaneously renews and acknowledges the givers’ obligations to the community and instates pandanus as a currency of identity. Within this social exchange, it mattered that pandanus was involved because of the plant’s deep vitalizing character and its importance as a valuable of the land. In this sense, the

heavy pandanus fruit is not merely a source of sustenance: it is part of the conditions that ground the possibility of community formation and the existential sense of being I-Kiribati.



Pandanus fruit head in a tree. The head comprises an aggregate of many tightly bunched wedge-shaped phalanges or drupes.

Ripe fruits also participated in the longer-term temporal horizon of surviving droughts on the island. The fleshy parts of the fruits were painstakingly processed to be preserved for long storage as “famine food” and for far away trips. Pandanus also enabled a dynamic mode of inhabiting vast social and oceanic worlds in constant movement. Plaited canoe sails that once enabled the settlement of the atolls later helped maintain vital links between island communities of dispersed clanship. These constant interactions through interisland navigation could at time permit residents of drought-stricken islands to seek temporary refuge with members of their lineage on undamaged islands.

Over fifty other uses of pandanus parts have been recorded by ethnobotanists in Kiribati (Thaman, 1992), including its central role as a construction material. Pandanus timber was preferred to coconut, undoubtedly because mature pandanus logs are smaller in diameter and easier to work (Hockings, 1984). The traditional open-sided houses in Kiribati are an assemblage of carefully prepared pandanus timber, stilt roots, coconut screens, plaited mats, and thatch of pandanus tiles (te rau). The material properties of pandanus give the light pavilions raised on stilts the sensible open structure that shades and shelters from the rain while catching breezes. Pandanus foliage also contributed to store, transport, and exchange things. Once stripped of their thorny edges, the flexible leaves were soaked in freshwater, dried and woven into diverse plaited ware of everyday use. Pandanus leaves and flowers are also drawn into the ancient art of dancing costume preparation: skirts, dancing mats, belts, head, and arm decorations are woven in pandanus (Whincup, 2011).



Traditional attire in woven pandanus for women (Kiribati Museum and Cultural Centre in South Tarawa)

Today, te kaina has lost its central roles in the everyday life of communities. Pandanus shoots are not transplanted as they used to be, fruits are no longer patiently processed for storage, and objects, transactions and encounters take new material forms, appropriated from foreign white societies.

Tawake shares the sadness of her elders for people's separation from te kaina. The decline of pandanus throws people and plants' lives into a place of solitude. Aramatang risks becoming a simple line in a long list of lost pandanus varieties, left to wander alone in the foreign world of conservation records, cut off from their people, their songs, and their land. Severing te kaina from social networks is an unmaking of Kiribati people too. For Tawake, attending to pandanus is therefore not a distraction from the human suffering that accompany the latest wave of change that seeps into this society. It is a vital part of the work to understand and respond to those harms.



Tawake Eriata collecting Aramatang fruits in Tekaman village, Tabiteuea North.

The loss of pandanus is neither a singular nor a sudden event. It is a constitutive part of how I-Kiribati actively negotiate modernity, in patterns of disconnections and new connections in a world made of eroded beaches, breakwater infrastructures, new habits of kava drinking, processed food, dependence on shipments from abroad, European-style homes, and generous copra subsidies.

As one entangled multi-species community slowly slips out of the world, however, what is left is not an empty space. Atolls are heterogeneous landscapes in which the past is never totally the past, and broken-down relations necessarily generate other types of relationships. Pandanus presence is a living memory of the past that changes the present and provides handles to change the future. This is the complex space in which Tawake's work unfold.

Pandanus and their disappearing worlds insist on mattering in this society, but this manifests in new, diffuse ways. Today pandanus is a haunting figure of discomfort. When it comes to the presentation of te kaina fruits to the maneaba, those who can't provide gifts from their land will resort to borrowing or buying them. But what is central to this transaction cannot be compensated for with bought pandanus. The gift of fruit is the expression of values that lie at the heart of all that was deemed worthy in this society: hard work, conformity, respect, care, relatedness, belonging, and intergenerational skills about cultivating and processing pandanus and other crops. Buying pandanus is only pursued because these kinship obligations have been neglected. The traces of pandanus absence are legible here through shame. People will purchase the fruits to be gifted, but they do so furtively, outside of the village. Or they will laugh away the convenience of buying the fruit.

The absences held by the erosion of plant-based skills leaves young people dispossessed but curious and receptive. An important part of Tawake's and her colleagues' work is to respond to this interest by teaching traditional skills and making their perpetuation desirable. They enrol local experts to train youth in pandanus cultivation and demonstrate fruit preservation techniques. Young people attending the trainings marvel at the skills they were not taught by their elders. Those who later chose to pursue the practice apply a simplified version of the knowledge - one that is probably different from the closely guarded secret skills that died with their forefathers and their trees. But it is a starting point for something else to happen; something in which te kaina is involved.

The fragility of pandanus changed Tawake's understanding of the present. In her work, grief and sadness are companions of her commitment. Rather than despair or inaction, however, sadness helped Tawake fill the problem-solving strategies and outreach tools at her disposal with new meanings. Acknowledging the anxiety born out of the declining vegetal relationship, she transforms this attachment into a principled and constructive engagement to resist loss on a volatile atoll, without attempting to mimic a stable, perfect, or certain past. She attempts to elicit a caring response from others that likens her own, based on a strong sense of responsibility to her elders: "The elders can't do the job anymore, they need us to do what they did". New forms of relationship and knowledge can take root, generating new practices of care.



The preparation of pandanus fruit in the form of paste - te tuae - is one mode of preserving the fruit for use when the crop is out of season. The process starts with cleaning the fleshy base of the fruit.



The fruits are cooked.



After boiling, the pulp is grated into a paste, te karababa.



The fruit paste is spread out on leaves in thin sheets for sun-drying. Once desiccated, the paste is cut into small strips that can be kept for years, wrapped in dried pandanus leaves.

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