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The History of Kiribati

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Table of Contents

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Introduction

Kiribati, an island nation spread across the central Pacific Ocean, is composed of 32 atolls and one solitary raised coral island, Banaba. Scattered over a vast expanse of water and straddling the equator, Kiribati's geography has always influenced its history: shaping migrations, livelihoods, interactions with outsiders, and the very survival of its people. This book, "The History of Kiribati: Kiribati from its earliest beginnings to the present day," aims to explore the rich and complex story of these islands and the I-Kiribati people who call them home.

From the distant past, long before any written record, groups of Austronesian and Micronesian navigators began settling the islands that would become Kiribati. Their extraordinary seafaring skills allowed them to traverse immense distances, founding communities that developed distinct forms of governance, art, and belief. Over many centuries, the clans and tribes of Kiribati constructed a society deeply interconnected with the rhythms of the land and sea, marked by traditions of sharing, storytelling, music, and extensive environmental knowledge.

The arrival of outsiders brought both opportunity and upheaval. European explorers, whalers, and later missionary groups entered the scene, initiating profound changes. New faiths, technologies, and economic activities began to transform daily life, sometimes undermining traditional customs but also offering new sources of knowledge and resilience. As European colonialism swept through the region, Kiribati became a focal point for competing powers, drawn both by its strategic location and its rich natural resources, particularly the phosphate deposits of Banaba.

The events of the twentieth century—most notably the devastation wrought by World War II and the resulting drive for decolonization—further shaped the character and destiny of Kiribati. The fierce battle for control, especially the tragic and heroic struggle on Tarawa, left indelible scars and encountered with global events. In the postwar era, I-Kiribati voices grew in strength and number, eventually leading the islands to independence and the establishment of the modern Republic of Kiribati in 1979.

Kiribati today stands at another critical juncture. The immense challenges posed by climate change, economic vulnerability, and the demands of modernization test the adaptability and unity of the nation. Yet the people of Kiribati have repeatedly demonstrated remarkable resilience, innovation, and pride in their heritage. As this book will show, each era of Kiribati's history—marked by navigation, encounter, struggle, and renewal—testifies to the enduring spirit of the islands.

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In tracing Kiribati’s journey from its ancient beginnings through colonialism, war, independence, and into the realities of the present day, this book invites readers to discover a story of transformation and survival. It is a chronicle not only of challenges faced and overcome, but of the enduring connections between people, place, and history in one of the world’s most unique island nations.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Islands of Kiribati: Geography and Environment

Kiribati, a nation whose very name dances on the tongue like the shimmering waters that surround it, is a geographical marvel. It is a country almost entirely defined by the ocean, a collection of 32 atolls and a single raised coral island, Banaba, strewn across an area of the central Pacific so vast it nearly rivals the continental United States in sheer aquatic breadth. Imagine scattering 33 tiny specks over 3.5 million square kilometers (1.35 million square miles) of ocean, and you begin to grasp the sheer scale of Kiribati’s watery domain. This remarkable dispersion means that while the land area is small, the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) is enormous, a critical factor in the nation's contemporary challenges and opportunities.

These islands are not merely scattered; they straddle the equator, a unique geographical distinction that places Kiribati in both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres and results in a climate largely characterized by consistent warmth and abundant sunshine. The consistent tropical climate, however, does not always translate to predictable weather, as the Pacific is a dynamic and often volatile environment. The sheer isolation of many of these islands has also played a crucial role in shaping their unique ecosystems and the distinct cultures that have evolved upon them.

The majority of Kiribati's landmass consists of atolls. For those unfamiliar with the term, an atoll is essentially a ring-shaped coral reef, island, or series of islets that nearly or entirely encloses a lagoon. These fascinating geological formations are the remnants of ancient volcanoes that have subsided beneath the ocean's surface over millions of years, with coral growth building upwards to form a living cap. The resulting land is typically very low-lying, often rising just a few meters above sea level, making the islands exquisitely vulnerable to the whims of the ocean.

This low elevation is a defining characteristic of Kiribati’s geography and a primary driver of many of the challenges the nation faces today, particularly in the context of climate change. The soil on these atolls is often sandy and porous, limiting agricultural possibilities to hardy, salt-tolerant crops such as pandanus, breadfruit, and taro, the latter often grown in excavated pits to reach the freshwater lens beneath the surface. Coconut palms, those quintessential symbols of tropical paradise, thrive here, providing not just sustenance but also materials for shelter, tools, and cultural artifacts.

The lagoons enclosed by the atolls are typically calm and sheltered, offering ideal

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conditions for fishing, traditional canoe travel, and protection from the open ocean's powerful swells. These lagoons are teeming with marine life, forming vital ecosystems that have sustained the I-Kiribati people for millennia. The vibrant coral reefs surrounding the atolls also act as natural breakwaters, dissipating the force of incoming waves and protecting the fragile coastlines. However, these delicate ecosystems are also highly sensitive to environmental changes, including ocean warming and acidification.

Beyond the atolls, there is Banaba, also known as Ocean Island. Banaba stands apart as a raised coral island, a geological anomaly in comparison to its atoll brethren. Unlike the low-lying atolls, Banaba boasts a higher elevation, reaching approximately 81 meters (266 feet) above sea level at its highest point. This elevation, while modest by continental standards, provided a stark contrast to the other islands and, crucially, harbored something far more valuable than coconuts for the colonial powers: rich deposits of phosphate. The story of Banaba's geology, therefore, is inextricably linked to its economic and colonial history.

The climate of Kiribati is tropical marine, generally hot and humid, but moderated by trade winds. Rainfall varies significantly across the islands and throughout the year. The northern Gilbert Islands and the Line Islands tend to experience more rainfall, while the southern Gilbert Islands are often drier. The nation is also susceptible to periods of drought and, conversely, to the occasional severe weather event, although it is generally outside the main cyclone belt. The El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) phenomenon can significantly influence weather patterns, bringing either prolonged droughts or periods of intense rainfall.

The vast ocean itself is perhaps the most dominant geographical feature of Kiribati. It is not merely a boundary but a highway, a larder, and a fundamental part of the I-Kiribati identity. The ocean currents, the prevailing winds, and the celestial navigation points were, for early settlers, the very maps and compasses that allowed them to traverse such immense distances and connect disparate island communities. Fishing remains a cornerstone of the economy and daily life, providing essential protein and a significant source of national revenue through commercial fishing licenses.

The marine environment surrounding Kiribati is incredibly diverse, boasting extensive coral reefs, seagrass beds, and open ocean ecosystems. These habitats support a wide array of species, from colorful reef fish and turtles to sharks, dolphins, and whales. The rich biodiversity of these waters has traditionally provided a bountiful harvest for the I-Kiribati people, who possess an intimate knowledge of their marine environment, passed down through generations. However, overfishing and pollution, alongside the broader impacts of climate change, pose significant threats to these precious resources.

Understanding the geography and environment of Kiribati is not merely an academic

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exercise; it is fundamental to understanding the nation's history. The limitations and opportunities presented by the land and sea have shaped everything from migration patterns and settlement locations to social structures, economic activities, and the very worldview of its people. The fragility of these low-lying islands, their isolation, and the bounty of the surrounding ocean are the constant threads woven through the tapestry of Kiribati's past and present. The story of Kiribati is, in essence, the story of people living in profound harmony, and sometimes challenging discord, with their unique island world.

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