

## The Te Mwaneaba System and People Management – The Kiribati Case Study

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### Abstract

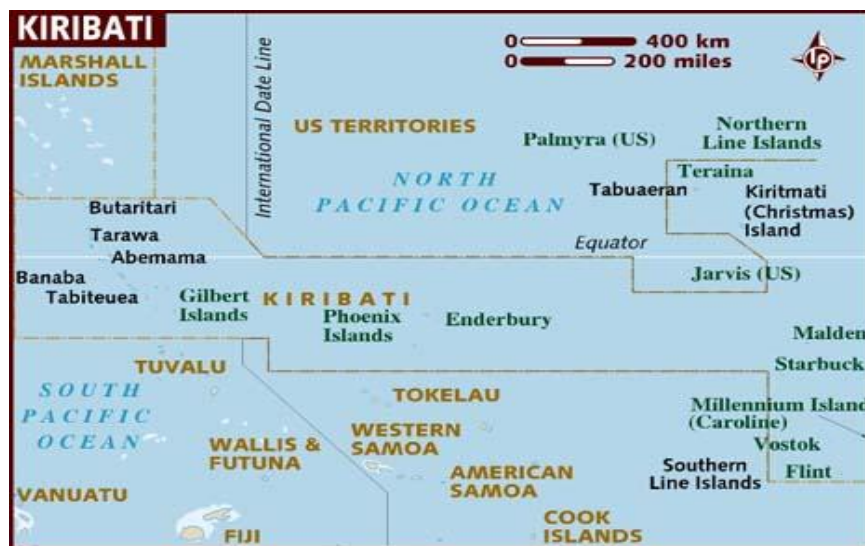
First, the paper primarily seeks to define, explain and apply the concept of Mwaneaba (“The meeting house”; Whincup, 2010: 117) to modern management concepts and practices. And second, the paper also sets to search for the values that perpetuate the Mwaneaba system and ways. And secondarily, third, the paper further seeks to highlight the benefits and relevance of the Mwaneaba system (“still very influential”; SPREP, SPC, GIZ, 2016) in practice. Fourth, the paper next explores the key challenges faced by the Mwaneaba as well as proposes the possible solutions. And finally, fifth, it concludes that the Mwaneaba system benefits or suits the Kiribati setting.

**Keywords:** “Mwaneaba”, “Kiribati”, “values”, “management”, “strategic management”.

### Introduction

The Republic of Kiribati (pronounce “Kiri-bas”) consists of 33 atolls and reef islands (except Banaba Island, a raised limestone island) that form three main groups: the Gilbert, Line, and Phoenix groups. Kiribati spreads over an area exceeding 3.5 million km<sup>2</sup> of ocean across the equator and the International Date Line, forming one of the biggest exclusive economic zones (EEZ) in the world (Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources Development Government of Kiribati; see Figure 1, the map showing the Republic of Kiribati). But the Republic is one of the poorest and most remote microstates in the Pacific (<http://savekiribati.com/economy.php>).

**Figure 1** shows the Map of the Republic of Kiribati (previously known as Gilbert Islands under the British Colony of Gilbert – Kiribati and Ellis Islands - Tuvalu).



Source: <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/maps/pacific/kiribati/?fbclid=IwAR0GUTTXyQc8xWmOknquIgzypWic9a kFd5YGgOi9yIJd760CX6WZ2hgKs2k>

“Every village has a Mwaneaba” (interviewees’ inputs; 100 percent), its location, ordinarily “in the middle of the village is convenient for all people throughout the island” (Tabokai, 1999: 23). Like the houses, it is built in a rectangular shape with the two ends differing somewhat (see **Figures 2 and 3**). The Mwaneaba – is a symbol of local authority; a place where elders (unimane) meet and make decision for their community (Kiribati Local Government Association: KiLGA, 2016). TeMwaneaba (see picture).

**Figure 2** of the traditional Mwaneaba; **Figure 3** shows the modern Mwaneaba) is the people or I-Kiribati's (Kiribati's citizens) own traditional way to "meet, discuss and decide on matters regarding managing and coordinating the people's tasks and roles" (interviewees' inputs; 100 percent). TeMwaneaba ("The meeting house"; Whincup, 2010: 117) represents "the unity", the "cooperation" and "smooth operations and functioning" of the lives of the people of Kiribati.

**Figure 2A traditional Mwaneaba in Tarawa.**



Figure 2 photograph shows the traditional Mwaneaba with coconut leaves roofing in Tarawa, Kiribati.

**Figure 3A modern Mwaneaba in Tuvalu**



Figure 3 photograph shows the modern Mwaneaba with zinc-sheet roofing in Tarawa, Kiribati

### ***Paper's Aims and Objectives***

This author conducted a literature survey and uncovered that not much has been written of the Te Mwneaba system in the present-day context, hence his motivations to contribute on the topic.

The aim and purpose of the paper is primarily, one, to find out the whys and the practices of the Mwaneaba in the Republic of Kiribati. And two, the paper also seeks to search for the values that perpetuate the Mwaneaba system and ways. And secondarily, three, it also seeks to highlight the benefits and relevance of the Mwaneaba in practice. Four, the paper also explores the key challenges faced by the Mwaneaba and it proposes possible solutions. And finally, five, it concludes that the Mwaneaba system befits or suits the Kiribati setting.

### ***Research Methodology***

This paper is primarily based on secondary literature reviews, and the researcher's observations as well as his talking or interviews with the local I-Kiribati or Kiribati islanders/ citizens; he spoke to twenty-two (22) locals who were administrators, teachers and civil servants in Kiribati. And they came from various islands and different parts of Kiribati. The majority of the researcher's interviewees, 81 percent consisted of the researcher's MBA students who come from Tarawa as well as from the Republic's various outer islands.

The remaining 19 percent are working adults who are professionals and managerial in composition [Overall, all the interviewees can be considered as representative of Kiribati's people]. Here, observational research is a method of data collection that has become associated with qualitative research (Richie and Lewis, 2003). And the key advantage of observational research is flexibility.

What is done is the triangulation of data from the 3 sources: secondary literature reviews, observations and inputs/comments of the interviewees. [Triangulation means using more than one method to collect data on the same topic. This is a way of assuring the validity of research through the use of various or a variety of methods to collect data on the same topic, which involves different types of samples as well as methods of data collection. Triangulation of data strengthens your research (write.com, 2018).]

The study was made during the period from mid-March to mid-April 2019. And the interviews conducted with the twenty-two (22) interviewees were intermittently managed (each time, about 10 to 15 minutes, the longest consisting of 20 minutes) before, during and while in the class sessions as well as outside class hours.

Interviews are a far more personal form of research than questionnaires, and the interviewer works directly with the interviewees. It is the interviewer's job to strike a balance between ambiguity and specificity in their question asking (Seidman, 1998). And these questions were asked in the interviews:

1. What, in your views, are the reasons for the people of Kiribati to adopt the practices of the Mwaneaba?
2. What are the key functions of the Mwaneaba?
3. What roles do the Kiribati's culture plays in ensuring the good functioning of the Mwaneaba ways?
4. What values help to contribute to maintain the Mwaneaba system or ways?
5. In what ways can the Mwaneaba relevant to the modern world? And why?

### ***Literature Survey***

The traditional Mwaneaba ("in the centre of the village"; <http://www.janeresture.com/ki33/culture.htm>) is central to the I-Kiribati way of life), defining, maintaining and reflecting attitudes to spirituality, hierarchy, community, patterns of expression and hospitality (Whincup, 2009). The final "authority of the maneaba aims to protect individual and collective rights, to ensure the communal participation of everyone in social and economic activities and to perpetuate the tradition of the maneaba itself" (Tabokai, 1994: 24).

The Mwaneaba (Capital 'M' to denote a proper noun, used when referring to the system and ways in which it functions especially to the House of Assembly (Kiribati) or Government of Kiribati, the latter is referred to as the Mwaneabani Maungatabu, or supreme maneaba; without capital "m", the word is used by the locals and in the past when the importance and benefits brought about by the mwaneaba were not really seen or be made aware. Also, then the word was spelt as maneaba. Sometimes, there is no difference and the word is interchangeable with or without capital 'M') system of governance is favourably looked upon in Kiribati (SPREP, SPC, GIZ, 2016: 10; KiLGA, 2016); it helps to build a strong community bond amongst I-Kiribati; it helps "promoting collaboration" as well as "the feeling of closeness and connection amongst villagers" (interviewees' inputs; 100 percent).

For example, 81 percent of the population surveyed in Abaiang valued this traditional practice of collective action in each village. "There is a coordinated coconut tree planting throughout Abaiang" (interviewees' inputs; mentioned several times). "Despite these strong traditions, progressive solutions can be embraced: 78 percent surveyed felt that new ways of solving problems are always accepted by the community. Many also believe that women and youth actively participate in decision-making processes." (SPREP, SPC, GIZ, 2016: 10).

The links between Mwaneaba and the Island Council are strong (SPREP, SPC, GIZ, 2016). It is interesting then to note that the Kiribati Local Government Association (KiLGA) through the Mwaneaba system and ways came up with the Strategic Plan 2016 to 2020. And this Strategic Plan was endorsed by the KiLGA's General Meeting of 29 March, 2016 at Tenimanraoi Mwaneaba, Betio, Tarawa, Kiribati (KiLGA, 2016).

Te Mwaneaba (the traditional meeting-house) is central to social existence on the out-of-the-way coral atolls that form Kiribati. It is a place of tradition and ritual, changing only slowly since the establishment of "the original prototype mwaneaba of Tabontebike" around 1650 (Maude, 1977: 10, also cited in Whincup, 2010). In te Mwaneaba, the seating positions of the old men of the village (unimwane) reveal their hierarchy. It is also a place of formal or official decision-making and important social events.

### ***The Findings***

What is the Mwneaba? And what are the reasons for the people of Kiribati to adopt the practices of the Mwaneaba?

The data collected and findings are:

Interviewees' comments	Number of Interviewees (%/ Percentage)
The Mwaneaba is “the practices of our ancestors”; “the people, with the elders, used to gather under the Mwaneaba (a traditional meeting place, the Western equivalent of a town council meeting) when making decisions.”	22 (100)
“There is much respect for the Mwaneaba and the people acknowledge its authority. The people also feel the ‘Divineness’ of the Mwaneaba”; they believe that when one offends the Mwaneaba, one is cursed (‘mavaia’).”	22 (100)
“Key functions of the Mwaneaba – “serve as a meeting place” “allow for public gathering of the people for social/ cultural events (such as dancing competitions; briefing/ training villagers), special occasions and celebrations as well as when meeting government visit teams and workers” “govern the community” “ensure law and order and peacefulness of the village/ constituency” “The house of entertainment” “welcomes important guests”; Tabokai(1994: 23).	22 (100)
“Other functions of the mwaneaba – “trace family history”.	22 (100)
The Mwaneabasystem also makes for “a one-stop for any issue (problems) to be discussed and more critically, resolved.”	22 (100)
The Mwaneaba is a place to “connect” with others and “finalise decisions” and “policies” as well as “execute decisions”.	22 (100)
“The Mwaneaba serves as a court house or a house of law – helping to solve people problems or disputes”. “The house of justice”; Tabokai(1994: 23).	22 (100)
“The Mwaneaba also metes out punishments or penalties to offenders in the village.”	22 (100)
“The Mwaneaba can also be a consultation place.”	22 (100)
“The Mwaneaba can also be a meeting centre to sit and relax.”	21 (95)
“Learning and training also takes place in the Mwaneaba”; “cultural knowledge and traditional skills such as rope-making, weaving can be passed from one generation to the next” through the Mwaneaba.	21 (95)
“Building and construction skills as well as knowledge can be passed from one generation to the next” and the Mwaneaba ways can help to fulfil this role.	20 (90)
The Mwaneaba “can help to preserve the culture (and traditions) of Kiribati”	20 (90)
“The Mwaneaba can be like a hotel where one, coming from the outer islands, can stay.” “The house of accommodation”, “accommodates needy people”; Tabokai, (1994: 23).	17 (77)

### ***Analysis and Discussions***

Although things are changing, “the maneaba was all that to the Gilbertese (**the old name for I-Kiribati**), and much more; the traditional clubhouse of the aged, a pied a terre for the stranger; and a sanctuary for those in flight. All behavior under its roof had to be seemly, decorous, and in strict conformity with custom, lest the maneaba be matauninga (offended) and the culprit maraia (accursed)” (Maude, 1977, also cited in Maude, 1980: 1, **bold; author’s**).

#### ***The Values that Help to Maintain the Mwaneaba System***

These values were confirmed by the interviews and its findings. This author would take it that the elders or leaders in the Mwaneaba would strongly believe in their Kiribati culture and its values, and they would stand for them. Here, we can take it too that since these leaders uphold certain values and convictions, they work on them (Low, 2014); these actions on values are indeed like providing the solid foundations as well as supplying the materials for building a magnificent castle. Values serve as a leader’s, to borrow Jones’s (1995: 19) words, “internal anchors”, seeking approval not from people but from the Higher Self, God or the Universe.

Besides, values too thus aid or assist in the leaders’ own ways of self-disciplining themselves. “All great leaders have understood that their number one responsibility was for their own discipline and personal growth.” (Maxwell, 1993: 161-162; also cited in Low, 2014). Ray Croc once said (cited in Low, 2014), “The quality of a leader is reflected in the standards they set for themselves.” And this leads to the next pointer, that is, the values espoused become the leaders’ standards.

Additionally, some values upheld make the leaders set the example when working with the people; and they’re to be their examples and role models (Low, 2018; 2013; Jones, 1995). And of great meaning and importance, next, certain values espoused also embrace the fact the people are paramount, and leaders exist for the people (Low, 2012); they must truly serve the people and attend to their needs. Leaders feel for their people, very much as “Jesus personally felt other people’s pain” (Jones, 1995: 247), and here, there are compassion, understanding, love and empathy as well as service, separating true leaders from fake leaders, non-leaders or glory seekers.

In the Mwaneaba (the focus of village life and the embodiment of the basic principles and values of Kiribati society; Maude, 1980) meetings, it is said that “the village elders discuss, collaborate and go for the decision(s) that addresses the issue(s)” (interviewees’ inputs; mentioned 23 times). Besides, “not only one person decides, but rather all the village elders, after making conscious efforts to hear inputs and feedback from the people, make the decision(s) based on majority votes” (interviewees’ inputs; mentioned 21 times).

Some countries (companies) have a strong (high-performance) culture; and that aids and facilitates good strategy execution (Thompson, Peteraf, Gamble and Strickland, 2016). Here, one would say that in the Mwaneaba system in Kiribati, there is “a strong sense of involvement, if not there’s a high emphasis on obligation on their part” (interviewees’ inputs; 90 percent). Kiribati’s Mwaneaba system has or shares a set of strong values, and these core values include:

#### ***The Value of Peace and Harmony***

A strong belief in peace and harmony also exists among the I-Kiribati. I-Kiribati want the Mwaneaba to work to ensure peace, harmony and “law and order” (interviewees’ inputs; 100 percent) within the constituency. And “there is much respect to the decisions made by the Mwaneaba” (Interviewees’ inputs; 100 percent).

#### ***The Value of Unity***

The family, the basic cell, is an important unit of the I-Kiribati society (<http://www.janeresture.com/ki33/culture.htm>). [Within the family, the woman was always the man’s companion rather than his slave. The wife was not expected to do hard manual labour, she had only to attend to household tasks and those jobs she could do without over-exhausting herself – such as going with her husband to help with certain types of fishing, helping him to build the house or prepare the *babai* pits (<http://www.janeresture.com/ki33/culture.htm>)]

The Mwaneaba, “a unifying structure and symbol” (interviewees’ inputs), “represent(ing) the interests of the people” (Tabokai, 1994: 24) promotes and fosters unity among the citizens and families of Kiribati; and thus, it contributes to a stronger Kiribati – after all, unity is strength. “The idea of unity in the maneaba is very much based on the political concept that people must meet together to decide on their own welfare and solve problems. This is the nature of politics we have inherited from our ancestors.” (Tabokai, 1994: 24).

### ***The Value of Teamwork/ spiritand Collaboration***

Of course, this is changing though essentially, “the maneaba embodies the monoculture and non-class systems which exist in Kiribati. Society is basically egalitarian and is maintained through ideas perpetuated in the maneaba” (Tabokai, 1994: 27; McDonald, 1996).

Teamwork or team spirit is valued, practised and perpetuated in the Mwaneaba system. The elders discuss issues among themselves, and make decisions. In team spirit, one often talks about firstly, the spirit of cooperation and coordination among equals (“everyone is equal”; interviewees’ inputs; mentioned 25 times) and secondly, inclusivity or inclusiveness. Here, one interviewee opined these:

To me, I like the fact that the Mwaneaba has no walls which signifies the importance of “no borders” or “boundarylessness” which ensures inclusiveness and that everyone can be heard (or will be listened to) in the community and be allowed to be a factor or make significant contributions to improving the community (society) living.

Interestingly so, such a value is to be appreciated. This is more so, as research showed that inclusion too has the potential of many positive individual and organizational (national) outcomes such as reduced turnover (citizens migrating out), greater altruism (helping one another), and team engagement. When employees (or citizens) are truly being included within a work setting, they are more likely to share information, and participate in decision-making (Riordan, 2014).

“We are relationship-centred” (Interviewees’ inputs; mentioned 25 times). There seems to be a stress on the value of relationships – Theory Y (versus tasks/ Theory X; Maslow, 1943) concomitant with this value of team spirit. However, it can be said the I-Kiribati perceived that they were relationship-based (perhaps more of socialisation or that of being told that they were as such), and this was more of a self-perception, and what they liked to be attributed to. The latter is based on anecdotal experience and the observations of the author; they were, in fact, to the author, more task-based as well as getting things done; nonetheless, it would be better if they were actually aware of these themselves.

### ***The Value of Respect for the Elders***

Much respect for the elders still exists in the villages (interviewees’ inputs); these coincide with MacDonald (1996) works.

[“The *maneaba* is well adapted to the island climate and to its function. Its roof is supported on shoulder-high stone pillars and even the king has to stoop to enter” (<http://www.janeresture.com/ki33/culture.htm>). And these coincide with the interviewees’ comments, that is, “each time one enters the Mwaneaba, one has to bow to show respect; after all, the thatched top is lower at the sides or edges”.]

Seniority is much appreciated or valued for their experience and wisdom. This also means that there is respect for the aged and care for them. Filial piety is also regarded highly. The children should look after their parents when they are old and/ or ill-health.

### ***The Value of Learning***

There is much synergy: “The young can learn from the old”; and “the old and the experienced can assist the young”; and the “young respect the old” (interviewees’ inputs; mentioned 20 times). These would also ensure the transfer of values from one generation to another.

Further, it is wisely said that as parents and/or teachers, “two of the best things one can give one’s children (**the young generation**) are roots and wings”. At the base level, when one instils the right values and perhaps wisdom to one’s children, these values would certainly help to guide one’s children as well as to trigger, motivate, develop or grow their ambitions to strive for their respective personal, academic and professional excellence, thus making them good persons and citizens **as well as growing their independence** (Low, 2011; **bold, author’s words**).

### ***The Benefits and Relevance of the Mwaneaba***

One key benefit of the Mwaneaba system and ways is that it helps to foster much unity, and indeed it helps to bring about or preserve the strong cultural identity of and among I-Kiribati. A “strong community bond” (interviewees’ inputs; 100 percent) exists. Besides, the values emerged, upheld, practiced and cascaded, in most ways, show or reflect the relevance and benefits of the Mwaneaba.

Another benefit is that the Mwaneaba’s managing people ways also “allow grievances to be heard” and “resolve issues, helping to impose remedial actions” (interviewees’ inputs; 100 percent); overall, making the constituents happy or satisfied.

Ineffective communication in an organization may ensue in uncertainty, uneasiness, anxiety and dissatisfaction, these results to, poor productivity. It is therefore necessary that managers communicate with employees effectively. The extent to which a manager achieves corporate goals depends on his ability to communicate successfully (Herich, 2008). In strategic management, good communication is thus important so as to cascade or make aware the organization's vision, mission and values as well as the strategy(ies) and the processes/ methods deployed. The te Mwaneaba system shares the goals and issues and discuss future planning of the village (constituency); and strategically, this is good as there is backing and cooperation from the people in terms of the purpose, the goals and the implementation of the strategy(ies).

In terms of the inclusiveness of the Mwaneaba(having “no walls”; interviewees’ inputs) system, “anyone can come to the meeting”, and this is indeed cherished; such an open system is very relevant. To draw the modern day practice and parallel, one can cite the Honda case in which traditional barriers between management and workers that existed in other companies were not found in the United States then. All associates, from line workers to plant executives, wore white overalls: the company-issued green and white hats were optional. There were no reserved parking spaces or executive dining rooms; all facilities were shared equally (<https://ohio.honda.com/>; <http://www.lmmiller.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/The-Honda-Way.pdf>).

TeMwaneabais indeed applicable when one sees that it can actually serves as a conduit when getting the consultation, the consent and support of the villagers or constituents when and where new initiatives and programs are to be rolled off. The Mwaneaba also teaches something that cannot be learned anywhere else – an oratory system. Sometimes people argue on very serious topics, but in the end, they shake hands. It is a mature approach in discussing vital issues, not rationalising or excusing them so that in the end, the majority win, but to debate and explore issues to the limit of possibility so that a consensus is attained and everyone enjoys the feeling of having reached an agreement accepted by all (Tabokai, 1994).

The Mwaneaba managers/ elders need to be less of a manager, and more of a leader. Leaders need to be persuasive or influential (Low, 2018; 2013). Just like the Mwaneaba, storytelling is a very old technique although the latter even dates back throughout most of human history. Stories can be persuasive; “stories are also told or related in the Mwaneaba” (interviewees’ inputs; mentioned 16 times);story-telling can really be a good or powerful tool when managing or leading people as it evokes visual images and heightened emotions. Often (business) leaders who can tell a good story have tremendous impact (Emmerson, 2018; Morgan; Dennehy, 1997). Interestingly, storytelling is important to leaders and managers alike; they are helpful in far more situations than most leaders and managers realise. The five most commonly used are undoubtedly these: inspiring the organization, setting a vision, teaching key lessons, defining culture and values, and explaining who you are and what you believe (Schawbel, 2012).

Sole and Wilson (2002) identify the role of storytelling as follows:

- **Share norms and values:** Stories act as a means for passing on values and crafting vision.
- **Develop trust and commitment:** Personal stories can convey one's own ability and commitment, as well as communicate openness by sharing something personal. Organizational stories influence the perceived trustworthiness of the company and its management – either positively or negatively.
- **Share tacit knowledge:** Enables the users to articulate tacit knowledge and communicate with feeling, which helps them express more than they realise that they know.
- **Facilitate unlearning:** Unlearning often entails more than rational arguments; it requires an intuitive and emotional anchor, which stories can provide.
- **Generate emotional connection:** Often one connects with stories emotionally and a story that has had an impact on one will be easily recalled long into the future.

All in all, stories can be said to command or influence better; after all, “You can't even successfully order people to ‘follow the rules’ because nobody reads the rulebook. But people will read a good story about a guy who broke the rules and got fired, or a woman who followed the rules and got a raise. And that would be more effective than reading the rulebook anyway.” (Schawbel, 2012). And undeniably, one can lead or manage people better with good stories.

The te Mwaneaba meeting system and ways can pertinently lead to making changes in Kiribati. It can lead to the I-Kiribati's adaptation; it can lead adaptation change(s) in order to reduce the vulnerability of the Kiribati community and society to, for example, the negative effects of climate change. And managing this includes survival/ building skills, bringing about awareness and teaching knowledge as well as causing practical changes such as strengthening coastal infrastructure, adjusting farming systems, and improving water management(SPREP, SPC, GIZ; 2016). The Mwaneaba, for example, can also teach the young what this author calls the Learning Garden where gardening as well as its importance and benefits can be learnt by the younger generation.

When managing people, the Mwaneaba can certainly stress on learning (new and/or traditional) skills; it also help in building toughness and resilience among the citizenry. With the Mwaneaba system and ways, there is much “emphasis on community participatory learning and building on traditional knowledge and experience”(SPREP, SPC, GIZ; 2016: 17).The Village Mwaneabas can help to promote more organic and locally grown food, especially vegetables and fruits which can increase land-based resources and better lives. And where fisheries and marine resources are concerned, among other things, the Mwaneaba can assist in encouraging aquaculture development and developing value adding and other livelihood and income generating alternatives. They may also assist and facilitate the villagers’ working together in controlling the crown-of-thorns starfish.

In housing and energy, through the Mwaneaba system and ways, the islands in Kiribati can help themselves out to develop a land-use plan to regulate or control future land development based on spatial analysis of coastal change, and I-Kiribati continue to support installing and maintaining the energy or solar systems for buildings, households and health clinics.

In educational field, abilities and proficiencies, the Mwaneaba can also facilitate in:

- supporting access to higher education, business and trade skills
- training for adults and youth
- ensuring ample supply of education materials at schools and providing teacher training on climate change
- improving water and sanitation facilities at schools
- promoting weather measurement training, gardening, composting and a healthier diet at schools
- encouraging teachers and students to monitor fish catch and food consumption at home(SPREP, SPC, GIZ; 2016: 15).

And in the area of health, the Mwaneaba system can also assist to raise awareness on communicable diseases, fitness and the benefits of a local diet. It also seeks support or backing for the construction of household sanitation facilities(SPREP, SPC, GIZ; 2016).

The Mwaneaba system can also help to facilitate the development of community traditional medicine and healing techniques among the villagers; thus, building the resilience of the community against illness and other vulnerabilities.

Although the Mwaneaba should primarily assist, facilitate and support as well as build the above basic human capabilities and infrastructure, it can also help out and branch off to the higher order needs of carrying out Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). These, among other things, include:

- having an Ecosystem-based Adaptation (EbA) to reduce coastal erosion.
- planting mangroves, coconut trees, trees, bushes and vines in coastal areas.
- encouraging communities to care for the coastal environment(SPREP, SPC, GIZ; 2016).
- organising community clean-up.

Then again, it is essential that the Village Mwaneaba bring about greater awareness among the villagers that mangroves and coastal vegetation supplies natural protection from coastal erosion. They can also educate and spread the word that the community preference for seawalls may not be good since the latter can cause coastal erosion.

### **Key Challenges Faced and (Proposed/ Possible) Solutions**

One key challenge of the Mwaneaba system and its ways is the top-down approach or “top-down management” (“strong gerontocratic, with the power in the hands of maneaba councils of old men [unimane]”; MacDonald, 1996, p. 8), and this may “not allow the people to voice out their views” (17 interviewees’ inputs; 77 percent); and they have to follow their elders’ advice or directions.

Magnanimous or being big-hearted (Low, 2018; 2013; Borg and Riegert, 2008), leaders should not be selfish. This is beautiful. “Lov(ing) thy neighbour” (Lonely Planet, 2011: 29; Jones, 1995; Leviticus 19:18), “Jesus had compassion for the crowds” (Jones, 1995). Leaders should be practicing universal love; they should certainly be compassionate and showing love for themselves and for others.

Successful leadership and management ways can also be fostered. And the elders can also be reskilled and be trained in effective leadership ways. They may want to show more care and concern. They may also want to explicitly show that they listen more to their people; they need to hear them out and listen to their views and inputs.

One can also argue that the old-styled view of the *unimane* (*elderly men*) would no doubt change, and signs of change are already obvious. As more educated and retired civil servants return to their rural villages, they would take their position as *unimane* in the village *Mwaneaba*. Their decision-making role would gradually become broadened not only in dealing with traditional functions but also in contemporary matters involving the village.



Such enrichment of wisdom with knowledge, experience and pragmatism promises well for forming and growing an effective and successful basis for village organizational leadership.

[http://www.janeresture.com/ki33/social\\_structure.htm](http://www.janeresture.com/ki33/social_structure.htm)). But here, there are provisos in that some may have retired, but they may have chosen to rest or relax rather than taking over the leadership role of the Mwaneaba.

These days, with better education, the youth and the people, as a whole, needs to be empowered and engaged. Leaders need to be more facilitating rather than just telling, directing or policing. And yet another challenge is that “the young may not also be familiar, know or be interested in the ways of the Mwaneaba” and they need to “be interested, persuaded; engaged and involved” (17 interviewees’ inputs; 77 percent). Perhaps, some cultural events such as singing ordancing competitions and model sailing canoe contests may be held to attract or entice them to come to the Mwaneaba. Perhaps the Mwaneaba can bring back old games such as katiko with small pieces of coral. It can also draw the children to teach them to do craft and games such as making Moray eel traps, small windmills and toy wind sailers. The boys and girls can also learn and perform the stick dance in the Mwaneaba (Koch, 1986). And in schools too, the Mwaneaba system should be briefed and reinforced to the school children.

Another challenge is that of the participation of the women-folks in the Mwaneaba system. These days too, more and more women are better educated. “In the past, women were also not involved in the Mwaneaba although they have their respective places in the Mwaneaba and they are represented by their fathers or husbands” (interviewees’ inputs; 90 percent). Nowadays “women now get to speak in the Mwaneaba; and they too participate in the decision-making process” (interviewees’ inputs; 72 percent; also see SPREP, SPC, GIZ, 2016).

Nonetheless, it can be taken that the Mwaneaba system does allow for the active participation and engagement of the people in the various projects. And it allows for the involvement and committed support of the people. Indeed engagement of the citizenry becomes surely more and more important. Jack Welch puts (employee or to read as citizen) engagement first in the list, stating “It goes without saying that no company (**country’s**), small or large, can win over the long run without energized employees (**citizens**) who believe in the mission and understand how to achieve it.” (Tosh, 2016, **bold, author’s words**; also see

[http://www.annualreports.com/HostedData/AnnualReportArchive/g/NYSE\\_GE\\_1997.pdf](http://www.annualreports.com/HostedData/AnnualReportArchive/g/NYSE_GE_1997.pdf)).

These days too, another challenge posed to the Mwaneaba is that of the church Mwaneaba. “There exists the church Mwaneaba, and these exist alongside the Mwaneaba in the villages” (Tabokai, 1994: 28; interviewees’ inputs; 72 percent). One can thus argue that the fact the church Mwaneaba system exist show that the Mwaneaba system is an effective people management/ communication system. The church Mwaneabamay certainly compete with the village Mwaneaba. However, it is commendable to note that historically, the church Mwaneaba is indeed foreign when compared to the local Mwaneaba. Besides, the Mwaneaba in the villages/ constituencies, having been long established, enjoys the first-mover advantages – by virtue of being first to ‘market’ (Thompson, Peteraf, Gamble and Strickland, 2014). In any case, the Mwaneaba system “is (being) reinforced” (Tabokai, 1994: 28). Further, one can also argue that much nationalistic honour, cultural pride and feelings towards the Village Mwaneaba would strongly reside in the hearts and minds of the people of Kiribati.

It is also laudable to note that change can also affect cultural change in Kiribati; traditional knowledge and skills may be lost. However, through the Mwaneaba system and ways, it can also help to preserve the culture of Kiribati; learning and training can be done in the Mwaneaba. In the *Whole of Island Approach*, SPREP, SPC, GIZ (2016) spoke of, “preserv(ing) traditional knowledge, cultural values and practices” and this indeed can be done through the Mwaneaba system and its ways.

### ***Limitations and Benefits of the Study***

Several limitations of the study existed. And these included the key limitations in terms of the relatively small number of interviewees and the limited funds available; it would certainly be better if the study is expanded to include more interviewees or respondents and if funds allowed, it is to be a longer study period.

And another key limitation is also that of the people involved; they are Kiribatis; and there could be an element of ethnocentrism, that is, they are proud of their country and culture, thus saying the best things of their country and culture. Nonetheless, it is to be noted that given the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity, they were open and outright, and much learning were able to be derived from their views, comments and inputs, this researcher certainly valued their invaluable views.

Besides, the Kiribati interviewees’ clear and crisp comments and insights derived can be considered as the chief benefits of this study.

Granted that critics may counter-argue and say this study does not contribute to new knowledge by pointing to Maude's (1963; also quoted in MacDonald, 1996, p. 9) research that the "maneaba councils resolved disputes, controlled and maintained community assets, provided hospitality for visitors, and acted as a community court and social centre", the study nonetheless validates the importance and benefits of the Mwaneaba system and the various roles it plays.

What more, Kiribati's private sector and the younger generation also see the importance of the ways and role played by the Mwaneaba, and they "work through the villagers through the Mwaneaba; though slowly but results are gotten" (interviewees' inputs and author's observations); these reinforce the importance of the study made.

The study also strongly verifies certain values upheld by the Kiribati society (at least a snapshot of them in the publication time frame) as well as the challenges faced by the society.

### **Conclusion**

Interestingly, these days, with less talk of migration, and more on reclaiming Temaiku/ Kiribati; the government of Kiribati is pushing for this plan. This plan is "a game-changing project; it's transformative" (Walters, 2019). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), Kiribati started consulting on potential land reclamation – Temaiku – in 2015, and in 2016, it commissioned National Institute of Water & Atmospheric Research Ltd: NIWA to look at coastal inundation and defences in Kiribati in the wider context of climate change, and in 2017 Jacobs was brought on board to carry out a detailed investigation of one site on the atoll of Tarawa and provide a full feasibility report. [That report was presented in late 2018; it will create a village sitting 2 metres above the highest projected 2200 sea level, hopefully buying 35,000 i-Kiribati another couple of hundred years in their homeland.]

Neither New Zealand, nor Kiribati, are able to fund a project of this scale in full, so Kiribati is looking to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's (UNFCCC) financial mechanism, the Green Climate Fund (Walters, 2019). And these add to the ring of positivism as well as a heightened resolve – instead of complaining, "i-Kiribati can do what (they)'re really good at and adapt" (Walters, 2019).

In summary, what the Mwaneaba can do further is to assist government bodies (including convincing foreign sponsors/aids) to:

- commits resources – be it financial, human and technical – and training.
- supports the Government in implementing projects and programs that address development priorities.
- get the villages/ communities to avoid overfishing/ prevent soil erosion, do cleaning, coconut trees/ mangrove (re)planting and other green and/ or "for the overall good of the community" work and other ventures.

Overall, in appealing to the people and showing more care and concern, the Mwaneaba can also engage more women, youth and people living with disabilities in the decision-making processes especially when it concerns their livelihoods.

Clearly, story-telling, dance performances and live demonstrations of music and drama bring people together. And cultural practices such as the Mwaneaba gathering and meeting ways can help raise awareness as well as regulate the use of natural resources on land and below water and ensure these are used in sustainable way. It can help to build the people's self-reliance; indeed the skills and knowledge are to be in control of how one (the nation) makes a living; development is in Kiribati's/ i-Kiribati's hands.

And in the final analysis, the Mwaneaba (the house of survival, unity, cooperation and collaboration), the Republic's cultural heritage, embodies the values of Kiribati, and the Mwaneaba with its core values – quintessentially Kiribati (and becoming the Republic's competitive advantage) should prevail to lead the people to make them move forward as well as to become capable, skilled, adapted and not only strong, but resilient too.

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