

# Kiribati (Gilbert and Ellis Islands)

## Pacific

Teaching the Bahá'í Faith

Bahá'í Geography - Kiribati

# Gilbert and Ellis Islands

The Gilbert and Ellis Islands Colony in the central Pacific Ocean were part of the British Empire from 1892 to 1976, mainly of interest for phosphate mining on Ocean Island (Banaba). They were legally separated in 1975 just before independence, with the Ellis Islands becoming **Tuvalu** in 1978 and the Gilbert Islands becoming **Kiribati** (pronounced kiri'bas) along with the Phoenix and Line Islands in 1979.

# Kiribati



# Kiribati

There are 16 atolls in the Gilbert Islands, in a north-south line crossing the equator, and another 16 in the Phoenix and Line Islands, plus raised coral Banaba Island. The land area of Kiribati is 811 km<sup>2</sup> spread over 35,000,000 km<sup>2</sup> of ocean.

Gilbert  
Islands

Kiribati



# Kiribati

The people of Kiribati are Micronesian, population 57,000 (1968), 120,000 today, including 50,000 on Tarawa.

The Japanese occupied the islands during World War II, when the Americans established bases in the Ellis Islands prior to the battles of Tarawa and Makin in 1943.



Butaritari Atoll, Kiribati

Tarawa  
Kiribati



airstrip

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2023







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Kiribati

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Taro cultivation on Butaritari, Kiribati

# Kiribati

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# Tuvalu

Tuvalu consists of 6 atolls and 3 reef islands, with a land area of 26 km<sup>2</sup>, highest elevation 4.6m, an exclusive economic zone of 900,000 km<sup>2</sup>, half way between Hawaii and Australia, west of the International Date Line.

Funafuti is the largest atoll, 25 by 18 km, with the capital and airport. The population was 7,000 Polynesians in 1968, now 11,200.



# Tuvalu





Funafuti, Tuvalu

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Funafuti, Tuvalu © Gregory C. Dahl



Bahá'ís on Funafuti, Tuvalu

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# The Pacific Islands

*A party speaking their languages, severed, holy, sanctified and filled with the love of God, must turn their faces to and travel through the three great island groups of the Pacific Ocean—Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia, and the islands attached to these groups, such as New Guinea, Borneo, Java, Sumatra, Philippine Islands, Solomon Islands, Fiji Islands, New Hebrides, Loyalty Islands, New Caledonia, Bismarck Archipelago, Ceram, Celebes, Friendly Islands, Samoa Islands, Society Islands, Caroline Islands, Low Archipelago, Marquesas, Hawaiian Islands, **Gilbert Islands**, Moluccas, Marshall Islands, Timor and the other islands.*

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan*. Tablet to the Bahá’ís of the United States and Canada, 11 April 1916)

# Knights of Bahá'u'lláh

The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh for the Gilbert and Ellice Islands were Roy and Elena Fernie. Roy Fernie (1922-1964) was American raised in the Panama Canal Zone. Elena Marsella (1913-2002), born in Rhode Island, learned of the Bahá'í Faith from her aunt and joined in 1939. She pioneered to the Dominican Republic in 1945. She worked for the U.S. Foreign Service and was a concert pianist. Roy became a Bahá'í in March 1953, married Elena two months later, and they prepared to pioneer to the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, although they did not know where the islands were and how to get there from Panama.



Roy  
Fernie



Elena  
Marsella



# Kiribati

Arriving in the islands, there were no hotels, but a trader let them stay in his home, and they settled on Abaiang Island in the Gilberts group on 4 March 1954. They arrived in the lagoon and were carried ashore on people's backs. Roy was an amateur magician, and when a little boy gave him an egg, he pretended to break it on the boy's head and had it drop out of his nose, making the people laugh for half an hour. One man who spoke English asked for more magic, and friendships were established.





Kiribati

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# Kiribati

Shoghi Effendi told them not to teach the Faith, but to make friends and attract them with love. The Fernies helped to build a school on the island and taught English. Roy put on magic shows, played the piano and sang to attract attention. The missionaries warned that the Fernies were dangerous and persecution began. A Catholic priest wrote articles against the Faith, which spread knowledge about it. Peter Kanare Koru, who had been a Catholic mission teacher, accepted the Faith in June 1954. The government forced them out of their building, and charged Peter with influencing people with magic.



Kiribati

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# Kiribati

In June 1955, Peter was exiled to his home island with 24 hours notice. "Peter bore his persecution with such fortitude and returned so much good for evil that over half the village threw off (their) faith, and came en masse to our house one morning at 3:00 a.m. asking for teaching in the Bahá'í Faith.

The next day about 90 people appeared, and since it was Peter's last day on Abaiang, he taught the people the Bahá'í Faith directly for the first time.... Peter was so happy to achieve his heart's desire - freedom to teach his beloved Faith. The people... saw with perfect clarity that the new religion, Bahá'í not only talked about love, but practiced it constantly."

(quoted in Earl Redman, *The Knights of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 204)



Kiribati

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# Kiribati

With over 100 Gilbertese declaring their intention to become Bahá'ís, the Fernies helped them to form three practice assemblies, and finally 225 desired to be Bahá'ís. White people could not be banished, but the Fernie's were called to Tarawa by the Resident Commissioner. Roy was deported in November 1955 for being a 'divisive influence'. Since only his name was on the deportation order, Elena remained at her post. With the great influx of new Bahá'ís, the Faith became officially recognised on 24 September 1955. By late 1956 there were 200 Bahá'ís in ten villages with 3 Local Spiritual Assemblies. Elena served alone until 8 February 1957 when another pioneer joined her.



Buariki, Tarawa, Kiribati

# Knights of Bahá'u'lláh

By October 1958, Roy and Elena were helping Knight of Bahá'u'lláh Virginia Breaks on Truk in Micronesia. Roy kept trying to return to Kiribati until his death in 1964. Elena served on National Spiritual Assemblies of Central America and Hawaii, was a Counsellor for Northeast Asia 1973-1980 and passed away in Hawaii in 2002.





Bahá'ís of Kiribati

# Kiribati and Tuvalu

Atolls are rings of coral reefs around a lagoon, growing up from a submerging volcano to stay at sea level. They are vulnerable to sea level rise with climate change.



Coral built up on top of underwater mountains

Then sandy soil built up on these reefs

Rain water filters through sandy soil & floats on top of denser sea water

Rising seas are infiltrating & contaminating this fresh water lens

# Flooding in Kiribati from sea level rise

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## Flooding in Kiribati

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