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**‘You know, what we don’t have  
here, they have it’**

I-Kiribati imaginaries of home and away

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## **Abstract**

This thesis looks into I-Kiribati imaginaries of home and away, basing itself on ethnographic data gathered between July and October 2012 on South Tarawa, the capital island of the Republic of Kiribati. Imaginaries of Kiribati and overseas are simultaneous, multiple and often conflict. Overseas is imagined as ‘better’ than Kiribati, being rife with vocational and educational opportunities as well as having all the goods that Kiribati does not. In contrast, Kiribati is imagined as lacking and taking a lower position than overseas in an imagined world order that ranks nations according to their participation in the global flow of goods. Yet at the same time, overseas is characterised as dangerous, individualistic and money-minded, in contrast to Kiribati, where food is freely available and one can live a secure life in close interaction with others. In a time marked by environmental, social and economic uncertainties, a sense of continuity and security is fostered through the upholding of oppositional imaginaries of Kiribati and overseas, while these are born from a reality in which home and away are deeply and fundamentally entangled. This entanglement finds expression in the fact that the ‘real’ Kiribati is increasingly being located elsewhere, moving from Tarawa to the outer islands, thereby blurring the boundaries between home and away.

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## **Glossary**

<i>Botaki</i>	Feast
<i>Beretitenti</i>	President
<i>I-Kiribati</i>	Of Kiribati ancestry
<i>I-Matang</i>	Of European ancestry
<i>Lavalava</i>	Cloth worn as skirt by men and women
<i>Moimoto</i>	Young coconut
<i>Te aomata</i>	A real person, a real I-Kiribati
<i>Te katei ni Kiribati</i>	Kiribati way of life
<i>Tibuta</i>	Kiribati-style blouse for women
<i>Unimane</i>	Male village elders

## **Abbreviations**

<b>FTC</b>	Fisheries Training Centre
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organization
<b>KNSA</b>	Kiribati National Statistics Office
<b>KPC</b>	Kiribati Protestant Church
<b>OB</b>	Office of the President
<b>PAC</b>	Pacific Access Category
<b>MLHRD</b>	Ministry of Human Labour and Resource Development
<b>MTC</b>	Marine Training Centre

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

For many years of my life, my understanding of the Pacific limited itself to the idea that the Pacific is a large mass of water on the other side of the globe. In my imagination, the Pacific was equated with paradise; swaying palm trees, coconuts, sandy white beaches – my knowledge of ‘Pacific culture’, influenced by film and literature, was limited, to say the least<sup>1</sup>. Later, during my studies in Anthropology, the Pacific became the location of stories of epic fieldwork endeavours. Malinowski, Mead, Sahlins, many of the greats had chosen the Pacific as their area of study. I was (and frankly, to large extents still am) ignorant of the vast array of cultures present within the Pacific, the different existing nations, their locations and their differing colonial and pre-colonial histories.

I encountered Kiribati specifically during my second year studying for a Master in Social and Cultural Anthropology, while doing research on the Alliance of Small Island States, as I was interested in its plight and position in climate change negotiations. Anote Tong, the President of Kiribati, has been very vocal about the effects of climate change on his nation and expects that the migration of many people of Kiribati will be inevitable once the effects of climate change become irreversible. I wondered how such discourse could potentially influence people’s imagination concerning their future in a ‘sinking homeland’.

I decided to travel to Kiribati from the end of July until the beginning of October 2012. I settled to do my research in South Tarawa, the main island of Kiribati; the most urbanised and populated of all islands, it is the centre for much of politics,

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<sup>1</sup> My own understanding of the Pacific at that time was very likely influenced by the popular writings of European explorers of the Pacific, such as Cook, Bougainville or Anson, as well as Gauguin’s portrayal of Tahiti, which in turn inspired the popular representation of Pacific islands in movies and books as places of fundamental beauty with gentle inhabitants (for further reading, check Kahn 2000, Gilkes 2009).



education and religion<sup>2</sup>. Contacting people via Internet, I eventually made contact with the youth coordinator for the Kiribati Protestant Church (KPC) who offered me a room in the church's youth centre at the KPC Head Quarters in Antebuka.

I started consulting literature on the Pacific in general and Kiribati more specifically, in order to prepare myself as well as possible for the journey I was to embark on. Already during this preparatory stage, but especially during my stay on Tarawa, my preconceptions of the paradisaical Pacific were being challenged. My imagination of the Pacific was in continuous transformation, influenced by what I saw, the literature I read, the conversations I had. Similarly, I-Kiribati were keen on discovering what my home was like, often drawing on their own imaginaries of overseas. Their imaginaries, just like mine, were informed by movies, news, the stories told by return migrants and even myself. What is more, their imaginaries of overseas were always drawn up in opposition to imaginaries of home; Kiribati was often portrayed to be the exact opposite of overseas. I decided to make these imaginaries of home and away the topic of my thesis.

### **1.1. Research Question**

This thesis will look at how I-Kiribati on Tarawa imagine home and away. Thus, it will aim at answering the questions of what the reigning imaginaries of overseas are as well as what the reigning imaginaries of Kiribati are. What exactly is evoked when overseas is talked about? How are these imaginaries linked to physical mobility of I-Kiribati, as well as the flow of goods and images? Furthermore, how do these imaginaries comment on how I-Kiribati view their nation's position in the world in relation to overseas? These are some of the questions that will be addressed in this research.

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<sup>2</sup> South Tarawa will be referred to as Tarawa for the remainder of this thesis.

## 1.2. Putting Tarawa in Context

The fieldwork for this thesis was conducted from July to October 2012 on Tarawa, which is part of the Gilbert Islands of Kiribati and is both the urban centre and the capital island of the nation. I furthermore spent 5 days on Marakei, an outer island to the North of Kiribati, in order to familiarise myself (albeit superficially) with life on the outer islands.

The Republic of Kiribati (pronounced *Kirr-ee-bas*) is a small island nation in the central Western Pacific Ocean, stretching approximately 5000 kilometres from west to east, and 2000 kilometres from north to south, lying on the equator and bordering the International Date Line (Locke 2009: 173). Kiribati is made up of 33, mostly low-lying, coral atolls, of which 23 are inhabited (Asian Development Bank 2006: 1).

At the 2010 census, the population of Kiribati was counted to be at 103'058, the foreign population accounting for less than 1% of the total (Kiribati National Statistics Office (KNSO) 2012). Kiribati has seen substantial rural-urban migration over the last twenty years as most educational as well as vocational opportunities are to be found on Tarawa. Consequently, 33.4% of the nation's population lives on the capital island, leading to a population density approaching 10'000 people/km<sup>2</sup> in Tarawa's most populated village, Betio (pronounced *Beso*) (KNSO 2012, Locke 2009: 174). Overpopulation is putting significant stress on local resources, has led to a rise in the number of squatter settlements, is a factor in the insufficient sewerage and garbage disposal systems and is the root of many health problems (Locke 2009: 174).

In addition, while 20% of the I-Kiribati workforce is in formal work, 62% is unemployed and lives off subsistence activities such as fishing (Kiribati Census 2010). As Kiribati has a very youthful population, the number of yearly school-leavers (between 1700 and 2000) greatly surpasses the number of jobs that become available each year (between 450 and 500), further adding to unemployment.

Thus, Kiribati as a whole and Tarawa especially, is faced with a number of specific social, economic, and environmental challenges. Commentators easily resort to arguing that the ‘white man’s influence’ has been detrimental to the Pacific islands (Besnier 2011). Reminiscent of the Fatal Impact Theory, this discourse views islanders as being at the mercy of global forces that are increasingly corrupting the fabric of tradition. However, rather than “pointing accusatory fingers at the allegedly disruptive intrusion of modernity” (Besnier 2011: xiv) and thereby denying I-Kiribati their membership in a globalised world, it is probably more useful to consider how societal change effects the life of I-Kiribati.

### 1.3. Methodological concerns

#### 1.3.1. Access to the field

In order to be able to conduct research in Kiribati, I obtained a research permit upon arrival, a somewhat costly and complicated but definitely necessary procedure. The permit allowed me to do research within village communities within the Republic in Kiribati and granted me access to the different ministries and their staff, enabling me, for example, to get raw data from the most recent census of the Statistic Office, putting me in touch with Natan Itonga, Cultural Officer, who in turn encouraged me to get in touch with the Office of *te Beretitenti* (Office of the President (OB)) for additional information.

My access to the field was to a very large extent facilitated by Dr. Maria Borovnik, whom I met on my first day in Kiribati<sup>3</sup>. As fortune had it, Maria was my next door neighbour at the KPC Head Quarters and during the next 9 days, she invited me to join her on many of the trips she took across Tarawa for her own research.

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. Maria Borovnik is a Lecturer in Development Studies, with a background in Social Geography at Massey University, New Zealand who wrote her PhD thesis about the impact of seafarer’s circular migration on Kiribati communities and has been doing research in Kiribati intermittently since 1999.

Having a considerable amount of experience, she became a cultural interpreter and introduced me to many individuals who would become pivotal characters in my own research. She allowed me to draw on her network and experience so to successfully lay contacts and hit the ground running. Equally, I found a close ally in the KPC's youth coordinator whose explanations of Kiribati culture and organizational help were of fundamental importance.

### 1.3.2. Interviews

Apart from the people that I met during the first days with the help of Maria, many of my initial contacts were people whose curiosity led them to approaching me on the street; usually, these were confident English speakers<sup>4</sup>. Being aware of the biased perspective this could potentially provide (English skills usually signifying at least partially completed secondary education), I made an effort to get in touch with people who were less skilled in English, asking the less shy to translate. However, my research is, by nature of the shortness of my stay on the island and my lack of knowledge of Kiribati, skewed towards English speakers and thus also, towards the more educated, a bias that needs to be acknowledged.

However, I was able to conduct 8 interviews in the Kiribati language with the help of three separate translators and had many further informal interactions with non-English speakers. Finding a good translator was difficult, but luckily, the last translator facilitated 6 interviews in Kiribati language. In between interviews, she shared stories about her own experiences; her nuanced explanations, comments on and often critical insights into Kiribati society, youth and overseas were of immeasurable help to me. She fervently

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<sup>4</sup> Young I-Kiribati who are confident English speakers are, it turned out, very often Latter-Day-Saints, as the Mormon high school offers one of the best educations on the island. The dynamics between religious affiliation and mobility in Kiribati are very interesting and while not being treated in detail here, invite further research.

refused payment, which led me to occasionally bring gifts when visiting her.

In general, I tried to bring a small gift (usually biscuits or traditional dough-nuts) to every interview I conducted as to display my gratitude for people's kindness and willingness to talk to me. On all occasions however, I received much more than I felt I was able to give. In addition to offering invaluable insight into their culture and opinions, informants also opened their homes to me, often times treating me like an old friend, providing me with drinks, food, and at times, even gifts.

Bringing gifts to interviews and informal visits is potentially testament to a need to 'compensate' for information given by the informant, this in turn potentially being indicative of a real or perceived exploitative relationship between researcher and informant, where an active researcher 'mines information' and then 'gives back' to a passive informant (Pink 1998). Crapanzano (2004: 12) remarks that in anthropological fieldwork, exploitative relationships tend to be unavoidable, "in much the same way as one discovers and even cultivates aspects of oneself through one's lover". The fact that interviews if requested were never denied is indicative of underlying power relationships that oftentimes seemed immutable. Trying to minimise 'extraction', I attempted to make exchanges reciprocal; I aimed for conversations that were led by the interests of the informants rather than dictated by my own agenda and during which they felt free to ask questions back<sup>5</sup>. I left Kiribati richer in knowledge and experience, hoping that the people I encountered also profited from our relationship. However, I was painfully aware that "[f]ull reciprocity – as every lover, however reluctantly, knows – in an ideal that is rarely, if ever, achieved" (Crapanzano 2004 : 12)

Interviews were mostly conducted at informants' homes or workplace. I informed participants of their right to anonymity and to

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<sup>5</sup> On occasion, this would result in conversations that were completely 'off-topic', yet these were often times the most rewarding and informative ones.

not answer questions or stop the interview anytime. While I attempted to conduct the interviews in private settings, this was often impossible. Borovnik (2003) comments that in Kiribati, it can often be perceived as suspicious when two people seek privacy as being in company is the norm. Furthermore, the openness and lack of isolating windows in most homes, as well as the general curiosity of family or bystanders sometimes resulted in situations in which people were eavesdropping on the interview. Privacy thus had to be negotiated case by case, in reaction to the participants' desires and my own appreciation of the situation. Often (especially when interviewing men), I would try to find a place that is in view but out of earshot of onlookers<sup>6</sup>.

In the end, I conducted and recorded interviews with 16 females and 15 males, most of which were between the age of 20 and 35. On most occasions I was familiar with the interviewees prior to the interview. I also conducted four focus groups (with twice three, five and six participants respectively), interviewing a few of the participants individually at a later stage. Additionally, I interviewed a number of government or High Commission employees and officials in order to gain a better understanding on their position on some of the issues that Kiribati is facing. These interviews included an interview with Kura Hakaraia, Deputy High Commissioner of the New Zealand High Commission, two interviews at the Ministry of Labour and Human Resource Development (MLHRD), interviews with Natan Itonga, Cultural Officer of Kiribati, Ikam Moaniba, Senior Policy Advisor of the OB, Rooti Terubea, Press Officer of the OB, Terieta Mwemwenikeaki, Deputy Secretary of the OB. Interviews lasted between half an hour and 3 hours.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> As men are often the driving forces behind physical mobility, their ideas about 'overseas' were of interest to my research. However, interviewing men was difficult as a female researcher. While, in the end, the proportion of male and female interviewees was almost equal, I could not establish the same close relations with males as I could with females.

<sup>7</sup> The research permit I obtained in Kiribati requires me to send two copies of my thesis to the Kiribati government upon completion and in the light of

### 1.3.3. Being an I-Matang

“The Land of Matang, where they dwelt eternally, was the land of heart’s desire, the original fatherland, the paradise sweeter than other paradises, never to be seen again by the children of men. Sometimes its forests and mountains might be glimpsed in dreams, but when the dreamer strove to land upon its smiling shores, they faded away before him and he was alone on the empty waters. Yet, though Matang was lost forever, a cherished tradition said that Au of the Rising Sun had promised to return to his children one day, wherever they might be, with all the heroic Company of Matang around him. So when white men were first seen in the Gilbert Islands nearly two hundred years ago, the people said (I quote the words of old Tearia of Tabiang, which themselves had become traditional), “Behold, the Breed of Matang is returned to us. These folk are also of the Company of the Tree. Let us receive them as chiefs and brothers among us, lest the Ancestors be shamed.” Europeans have been called *I-Matang*; *Inhabitants of Matang* – ever since, and treated always, whatever their faults, with the proud brotherliness due to kinsmen.”

(Grimble, 1955: 34)

Arriving in Kiribati, one quickly comes to realise that as someone from ‘overseas’, one is exactly and irrefutably that – an I-Matang. I-Matang is a highly popular signifier that means ‘white person’ or ‘European’ and is generally used to designate any non-I-Kiribati, European or not<sup>8</sup>. On a daily basis, I would be asked the question ‘I-Matang, Ko Na Aera?’ (‘I-Matang where are you going?’) by both children and adults on the street. Often times, I

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this, participants preferred to remain anonymous. Individuals interviewed in their official positions will however be identified in the analysis.

<sup>8</sup> Such terms are prominent all over the world, for instance *palangi* (Westerner) in Tonga (Besnier 2011) or *bule* (literally meaning albino) in Indonesia (Fechter 2007).

would be identified as someone's 'I-Matang friend' or 'I-Matang sister'. I was frequently made aware of when and where the I-Matang (AusAid Volunteers, church volunteers, High Commission staff) meet and was encouraged to join these meetings. Furthermore, I was regularly referred to as 'te I-Matang' (the I-Matang) by people who knew my name. Tending to be alienating, this depersonalization often did not leave any room for explaining what my purpose on the island was<sup>9</sup>. Due to the historical legacy of the I-Matang label, I was, consciously or unconsciously, linked to a history of colonialism and structural geopolitical inequalities. "[W]esternness implies a particular, dominative relationship to power, colonial expansion, belonging to centre rather than margin in a global capitalist system and a privileged relationship to institutions" (Frankenberg 1993: 265). Fieldwork is not simply carried out 'upon subjects', but is based on very intricate relationships that are always embedded in history and power differentials (Loftsdóttir 2002). Anthropology is clearly linked to its colonial history; it was and still is carried out within the secure arrangements that the unequal power relations between researcher and researched provide. "The colonial power structure made the object of anthropological study accessible and safe – because of it, sustained physical proximity between the observing European and the living non-European became a practical possibility. It made possible the kind of human intimacy on which anthropological fieldwork is based, but ensured that that intimacy should be one-sided and provisional" (Asad 1975: 17).

In the context of Kiribati, Asad's assertion that the anthropological study is somewhat sheltered by unequal power relations in the field certainly holds. Colonial legacy in combination with the general adherence to the notion of *te katei ni Kiribati* (Kiribati way of life) leads to I-Matang being treated, in the aforementioned words of Grimble (1955: 34) "with the proud brotherliness due to kinsmen". While the element of brotherliness is

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<sup>9</sup> Burnett reads the exclamation 'I-Matang Ko Na Aera' as an act of resistance, a reaction to the history of colonial depersonalization of I-Kiribati as natives devoid of personal identity, thus deploying the same strategy for 'te I-Matang' (2010: 29).



generally present, (I was often called sister), distance is always created by putting the I-Matang in the position of guest. While for an anthropologist the position of guest is not entirely desirable, I quickly came to understand that my position as guest on the island was inevitable.

The I-Matang, just like the guest, is put in a position of great respect; “the texture of experience” of being one, “is generally smooth and gentle” (Loftsdóttir 2002: 311). By virtue of being white, I was invited to innumerable events, always being ushered to the front, sitting on a chair rather than the floor like everybody else my age would. Normal patterns of behaviour are suspended for the I-Matang. Being an I-Matang, I ate with the *unimane* (male village elders) before everybody else during my stay in Marakei (one of the outer islands), and similarly, ended up sitting with the ‘important people’ during all of the events I attended. ‘Going native’ is consequently difficult if not impossible, especially with the limited timeframe of the fieldwork<sup>10</sup>. However, as the following quote by Wilding (2007: 334) suggests, ‘going native’ is often considered an important part of carrying out ‘good fieldwork’.

“Good participant observation requires living in the village and participating ‘in the lives of local people, living as they live, doing what they do’ (Metcalf 2005: 11). It is expected to occur over an extended period [...]. This might involve the researcher accepting a shift in status [...]”

Thus, ideally, the anthropologist ought to spend a long time with and become a part of the community that is being studied. However, it is doubtful that existing power relations can be negated while doing fieldwork, unless it is carried out for many years at a time. During my fieldwork, power relations were

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Going native’ was long considered undesirable for it was thought incompatible with objectivity. However, the postmodern advocacy for the collapse of boundaries between observer and observed has made ‘going native’, or participant observation (emphasis on participant) an ethnographic ideal (Sluka and Robben 2007 : 14).

incredibly obvious and often articulated. Being an I-Matang was often advantageous; I was able to gain access to many people of varying status, from fishermen's wives to the Deputy Secretary of the Republic. At the same time, my relationship with research participants never felt entirely egalitarian. These power relations thus made fieldwork simultaneously easier (providing easy access to ministries for example) and harder (creating a separation between researcher and participant), but their constantly felt presence was useful for making and keeping me aware of the political and historical dynamics I inevitably was a part of.

The very real impacts the researcher's identity has on her fieldwork notwithstanding, binaries such as coloniser and colonised, researcher and researched should not be reified. These discursive categories are a part of a wider historical legacy, embedded in power relations that are very real. At the same time, they are not static. Identity, analogous to ethnicity, is fluid and relational (Barth 1969). As such, identity contests coherence and changes depending on context (Loftsdóttir 2002). As the ethnographer's perception is changed by every succeeding encounter with the subject, the subject's perception of the ethnographer changes as well. The dialogical process of the encounter between two essentialised individuals transforms both. In this process, identities and power relations are destabilised (Tedlock 1991, Murphy 1999). As I was investigating I-Kiribati's imaginaries of overseas, I became very aware that my every action or utterance was potentially shaping their understanding of what people from overseas are like. Thus, the ethnographer being an I-Matang adds to the imagery and phantasies that 'the overseas' evokes within the minds of many I-Kiribati<sup>11</sup>. While I believe that this act of mutual influence is the case in virtually all fieldwork situations, I tried to avoid actively influencing perceptions of overseas. While I was often asked to make a

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<sup>11</sup> For more examples on the implications of the ethnographer's race, class or gender, check for example Murphy (1999) and Loftsdóttir (2002). Murphy analyses the implications of being a 'gringo' researcher in Mexico, Loftsdóttir investigates the power relationships between her and her WoDaabe research participants in Niger.

comparison between my home and Kiribati, I portrayed my life in a nuanced way that felt appropriate to me, trying not to draw on popular dichotomies used in the Pacific context (such as individualism vs. collectivism, monetary exchange vs. reciprocity and barter).

#### **1.4. A note on binaries**

This being said, in this thesis, a fair amount of oppositions are used: traditional and modern, Kiribati and overseas, ‘good’ and ‘bad’. Structuralist anthropology, spear-headed by Lévi-Strauss, saw binary oppositions, the opposition between two paired terms, such as nature and culture, as the basic structure of human thought (Bloch 2002). Binary oppositions have been the subject of criticism from within anthropology as well as other disciplines, the argument being that “binary oppositions conceal intertwined histories and engagements across dichotomies” (Prakash 1994: 1486). Similarly, Crewe and Harrison (1998) critiqued the use of binaries for its role in overly simplifying and thereby blackboxing more complex realities and interrelationships, arguing that it is for these reasons that such oppositions have been left behind in anthropological analysis. While it is certainly true that an understanding of social life should not be based on given static oppositions that “edit, suppress, and marginalise everything that upsets founding values” (Prakash 1994: 1486), oppositions as such, should not be discarded. Often, those who aim to deconstruct binaries end up reifying them (see Yarrow for examples in the academic analysis of development). What is more, critics negate that these binaries play a very clear role in everyday life, they have “practical effects within the world” (Yarrow 2008: 429). They are more than a mere artificial academic construct, but play a very important role in the framing as well as the reflection of reality. According to Yarrow (2008: 438), oppositions, such as global and local, are used by actors on a variety of scales in a relational way in order “to make a variety of contextual distinctions and to perform a range of shifting identities”. I-Kiribati often invoke oppositions (Kiribati is traditional, overseas is modern, or outer islands are traditional, Tarawa is modern), positioning themselves in relation to someone or something else. Yet, these paired oppositions

are far from static but are highly dynamic as they are employed by different actors for different social and discursive reasons (Yarrow 2008). In the specific context of this fieldwork carried out in Kiribati, oppositions are continuously invoked by I-Kiribati as well as I-Matang. This does not mean that people are not aware of complexities; in fact, the way in which these are employed often point towards hidden complexities. Binaries are tools with which to deal with complexity, and thus their use gives clues about imaginaries, about which kinds of knowledge or information is emphasised and which kind of knowledge is put to the background (Yarrow 2008).

## 2. IMAGINARIES

“My concern is with the role of what lies beyond the horizon, with the possibilities it offers us, with the licit and illicit desires it triggers, the plays of power it suggests, the dread it can cause – the uncertainty, the sense of contingency, of chance – the exaltation, the thrill of the unknown, it can provoke. Imagined, dreamt, projected, calculate, prophesied – so constructed, the beyond always turns on our take on it. Our images, dreams, projections, calculations, and prophecies may give form and substance to the beyond, but, as they do, they destroy it; for, as they construct it, they assure its displacement. And that displacement rattles our assumptions about the reality from which our constructions are made. However foundational, it is not immune to our images of the beyond. I am then particularly concerned with the paradoxical ways in which the irreality of the imaginary impresses the real on reality and the real of reality compels the irreality of the imaginary. These ways cannot be separated. They are in dialectical tension. They are like lovers so entangled in each other that any determination of a singular body – or soul – is almost arbitrary.”

(Crapanzano 2004: 14-15)

Imagination is a fundamental human activity. We project into the future, fantasise, plan. Before taking the step to move somewhere else, whether temporarily or permanently, we create mental pictures of what these places and their inhabitants are like (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2012, Salazar 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). Our minds travel while our bodies stand still (Clifford 1997). I-Kiribati’s imagination of overseas is fuelled by stories from those who have returned from a stay abroad or are still overseas and using modern communication technologies relay impressions back to the islands, as well as imported goods, I-Matang, the Internet and movies

travelling to Kiribati<sup>12</sup>. What is more, as Crapanzano suggests above, imaginaries, while being fuelled by reality, at the same time feed back to it; thus, how I-Kiribati imagine overseas as well as home influences the choices they make and the actions they take.

Consequently, imagination has become a concept of great popularity in the social sciences in general. The scope and way in which humans imagine their lives, the lives of their children, of people they know and do not know, as well as the way in which they imagine their state or community did not become an object of anthropological enquiry until recently. Investigations into *imagined communities* (Anderson) or nations, *modern social imaginaries* (Taylor) and the various *scapes* that are closely entwined with imagination (Appadurai) have made imagination one of the more popular frameworks through which to analyse the human condition in anthropological research. This being the case, Axel (2003) is right in noting the term's growing commonplace character in social sciences generally and anthropology more specifically. The ubiquity of a term such as imagination in social sciences should be an invitation to those eager to utilise it to halt and reflect on its apparent obviousness. "[W]hile we have been other-wise preoccupied (perhaps debating the relevance of "culture" as a category of analysis), the use of the term "imagination" may well have become part of an emergent anthropological normativity" (Axel 2003: 112). This chapter does not aim towards establishing the roots and successively a genealogy of the concept of imagination; this would vastly exceed the scope of this thesis and thus no claim is put on conclusiveness<sup>13</sup>. However, rather than deploying the term haphazardly in the analysis of the ethnographic data, the following sections will discuss the notion of imagination, attempting to establish a standpoint on what is understood under the term, thus delineating the general lines of thought that were followed in the writing of this thesis.

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<sup>12</sup> The mobility aspect of this thesis will be treated throughout the following chapters in dialogue with the ethnographic data.

<sup>13</sup> Kearney (1988, 1998) and Cocking (1991) provide a detailed synopsis of the history of 'imagination'.

## 2.1. A note on the innovation of imagination

It was, amongst others, Appadurai who vastly popularised the notion of imagination, propelling it into the horizon of social scientists. He argues that it is thanks to globalisation that “fantasy is now a global practice” (1996: 54). Globalisation, he suggests, has led to a vast increase in the number of goods, images and ideas that criss-cross the planet every day. Their flow presents individuals with “a rich, ever-changing store of possible lives” (1996: 53), a prism of potentialities, which the individual in turn can imagine, fantasise about, try on and discard at will. Appadurai does not negate the existence of imagination antecedent to ‘modernity’. However, he follows up his argument with the suggestion that antecedent to modernity and the worldwide spread of mass media, “social media was largely inertial”, as “traditions provided a relatively finite set of possible lives, and that fantasy and imagination were residual practices, confined to special persons or domains, restricted to special moments or places” (1996: 53).

Appadurai’s role in outlining the importance of imagination must not be negated. Imagination is indeed a social practice, playing a large role in the manner in which people construct their lives on a daily basis. Nevertheless, his portrayal of the democratization of imagination as novel to modernity is problematic. It is very likely that the imaginative act is one that individuals were engaged in on a daily basis long before globalization, modernity or the arrival of the first colonisers in Kiribati. A history and mythology rife with navigators and discoveries of new lands suggests every person was capable of envisaging the settlement of different islands and encountering new trade partners in alternative places (Besnier 2011). Nonetheless, Appadurai rightly suggests that the way one imagines depends on the world one lives in, and thus also, that the investigation of imagination today depends entirely on the historical and cultural context of this century. “Clearly, imagining cannot be expected to mean exactly the same thing today as it did in the Middle Ages or in antiquity. For one thing, Aristotle and Aquinas never watched television” (Kearney 1998: 5).

## 2.2. A false representation of truths

Prior to the more recent interest of anthropology (amongst other disciplines) in imagination as a part of human experience deserving of scholarly attention, imagination was largely handled with suspicion. To the Greek, Latin and later Christian thinkers, imagination (expressed in *phantasia* or *eikasia* in Greek, *imaginatio* in Latin) carried connotations of imitation, simulation or falseness, and the imagination was thus something that either was to be curbed, or should be done only under close inspection of reason (Kearney 1998). Western philosophy remained ambivalent towards imagination, it being perceived as a trickster-like idea, mediating between dualities. “Many classical and medieval thinkers considered imagination an unreliable, unpredictable and irreverent faculty which could juggle impiously with the accredited distinctions between being and non-being, turning things into their opposite, making absent things present, impossibilities possible” (Kearney 1998: 3). The suspicion towards the imaginative faculty stemmed from the vision that imagination distorts what is real, what is the factual order of the world. Thus imagination was largely viewed with mistrust, considered to make the boundaries between fact and fiction, or the real and virtual malleable. The mistrust inherent in centuries of theorisation about the human imaginative faculty lingers on in notions such as false consciousness and ideology as well as in Lacan’s psychoanalysis. The more recent enquiries into imagination have shifted from this idea of falsification of truth towards its active engagement in the construction of reality (Kearney 1998). If one speaks of the imagination’s active involvement in the construction of reality, it is important to also look into *who* is actually imagining.

## 2.3. Social imaginary

Both Taylor and Castoriadis (1987) analyse the social imaginary, the collective imagining that “is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society” (Taylor 2002: 106). These visions conceive of the social imaginary as something (ie. an ethos) that is shared by a society, which, in turn is conceived of as a homogenous, static, place-bound entity and is one that has been



deconstructed by anthropologists, countering conceptions of unified and bounded societies with notions of heterogeneity and division (Strauss 2006)<sup>14</sup>. Strauss (2006: 326) rightly comments that “[s]ocieties are not creatures who imagine, but people do”. This being the case, society should best not be regarded as the agent producing social imaginaries, but rather as a collection of individuals who all have personal imagination. At the same time, there are some imaginaries that are shared between people of one society or across different societies (Salazar 2010a). Social imaginaries “may be the conceptions of many members of a social group – repeated in multiple or influential social contexts, learned from participation in shared social practices and exposure to shared discourses and symbols” (Strauss 2006: 326), and consequently, can be shared by self-identified groups, which can simultaneously “be fractured with respect to other understandings, which could be shared among people who have had the same formative experiences despite living in different parts of the world and not having a common identity”. This way, rather than doing research into what societies imagine, one should investigate how individuals living in societies imagine, and how these imaginations form into social imaginaries that are sometimes coherent but often also conflicting. If one focuses on individuals, choosing to take a ‘person-centred approach’ as suggested by Strauss (2006: 334), one can also gain a clearer understanding of social imaginaries and their lessons on “who we are, how we relate to others, our origins and fate”.

#### 2.4. Individual imagination

This person-centred approach propounded by Strauss is one that draws heavily from psychoanalysis, more specifically from psychoanalyst Lacan who founded his theoretical understanding on the close study of individuals (Strauss 2006). In opposition to Castoriadis, he believed the imaginary to be the misconception, or fantasy, of an individual, not of an entire society.

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<sup>14</sup> It is not coincidental that Castoriadis speaks of *the* social imaginary, rather than imaginaries, suggesting a unitary meaning (Strauss 2006).

Lacan (1977) coined as ‘imaginary’ one of the three stages of the development of human infants. During this ‘mirror stage’, a human infant looking at its own reflection in the mirror will perceive itself for the first time as a unitary being, in control of itself and as a result, the infants’ ego will start developing. However, this perception of itself as a coordinated, unitary being (which marks the beginning of the child’s subjectivity) is an illusion (or *imaginary* in Lacan’s terms) as in fact the child is not yet in control of its body at all and depends on its mother’s assistance to be held up in front of the mirror (Oona 2007).

“The imaginary for Lacan is precisely this realm of images in which we make identifications, but in the very act of doing so we are led to misperceive and misrecognise ourselves. As a child grows up, it will continue to make such imaginary identifications with objects, and this is how the ego will be built up. For Lacan, the ego is just this narcissistic process whereby we bolster up a fictive sense of unitary selfhood by finding something in the world with which we can identify.”  
(Eagleton 2008: 143).

Two things seem particularly interesting. Firstly, Lacan’s making of the ego suggests that humans necessarily utilise elements of the Other (in Eagleton’s terms, *something in the world*) to construct (at least a) part of the self (Salazar 2010a). Secondly, extending Lacan’s theorization of the mirror stage to the way in which human beings “construct identifications” (Oona 2007: 50) one could argue that when we imagine a thing, we construct an idea that is always, to some extent, a misperception or misrecognition. However, while this misperception leads Lacan to view the imagination suspiciously (in terms of a misrepresentation of the truth), it does suggest that imagination is always based on reality, albeit not necessarily reflecting it. Simultaneously, the fashion in which reality is imagined has a direct impact on reality.

## 2.5. Imagination's relational link to reality

It is clear that imagination (on an individual level) and the creation of social imaginaries occur on separate levels, it would be wrong to suggest that they are not interlinked. Thoden van Velzen (1995) for example, in his analysis of collective fantasies in a maroon society, defines collective fantasies as structures that are outside of human beings but that are in a continuous way both *created* and *changed* by humans. Just as individual imaginations are in constant interaction with reality, permeating and being permeated by the world outside of the individual, so are collective imaginaries connected to the world by a constant feedback loop. If one conceives of social imaginaries as “unconscious or subconscious processes as well as persistent attempts to understand and manipulate the world” (Thoden van Velzen 1995: 722), it becomes clear that Sartre's dichotomization of reality on one hand, and imagination or fantasy on the other is misplaced. If imagination and imaginaries infiltrate reality, their dualism becomes unsustainable.

The link between imagination and reality is also one that is emphasised by Žižek, who suggests that “fantasy [...] gives consistency to what we call reality” and serves “as support for our reality itself” (1991: 44-45). Thus, fantasy, or the imagination, is the framework through which human beings organise and experience reality. According to Žižek (2009: 335) it is by means of fantasy that desires are constructed; “it is precisely the role of fantasy to give the coordinates of the subject's desire, to specify its object, to locate the position the subject assumes in it”. If one links this to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach to subjectivity and perception, which views the body as the connecting bridge between subject and world, one comes to see that imagination is an undeniably important constituent of the human experience that relies on continuously interacting with the world out there (McLean 2007)<sup>15</sup>. Similar then is Appadurai's suggestion that the imaginative act, the act of considering alternative (im)possible lives for oneself, is one that

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<sup>15</sup> This is in stark contrast to Sartre's understanding of imagination as the human competence to escape from reality completely.

hinges strongly on reality. Consequently, the increased exposure to images, goods and ideas from all over the world have also increased the spectrum of what each human being can and does conceive of. Thus, globalization has not introduced the novelty of imagination, but the spectrum of the imaginable, as real or unreal as this may be.

If one then takes imagination to be in perpetual interaction with reality, its constantly renewing nature comes to the fore. As a counterpoint to Sartre's distinction between reality and imagination, Ingold (1988) suggests that imagining (similarly to perceiving for that matter) does not start with an input from the exterior that results in an image being formed. Rather, in Ingold's words, imagination *carries on*, implying motion, yet not distancing, but rather connecting. Drawing on a similar idea, Crapanzano (2004: 15) refers to the imagination as the *arrière-pays*, "which lies elsewhere, *ailleurs*, beyond here one is and yet intimately related to it. It is in an owing relation, a reciprocal one, with there here-and-now, from which it is declared a hinterland".

Thus, to reiterate, when looking into imaginaries of Kiribati and overseas, it is important to take a person-centred approach, trying to understand how individuals imagine these places. Individual imaginaries can be shared by groups, but do not necessarily have to, and can thus lead to social imaginaries that are sometimes coherent but also conflict. The imagination and reality are closely intertwined standing in an "owing relation" (Crapanzano 2004: 15) to each other; imagination is based on reality and is equally the basis for action.

How does imagination then differ from thought or pure knowledge? One could argue that while thought is based on reason and logic that adheres to a coherent set of rules, imagination goes beyond, is not necessarily reasonable, logical, bound by rules, but is an inherently creative act. The ambiguity inherent in imagination is emphasised by Massumi (2002) who believes it to be located between dichotomies, while not so much bridging them as simply *being* between. Scholars in the psychological and anthropological disciplines have outlined "a variety of forms of cognition and

awareness between knowledge of indisputable facts and complete lack of knowledge” including “explicit knowledge of imagined facts, implicit cultural beliefs, and dissociated, repressed and fantasised knowledge” (Scott 2006: 339). This idea of imagination lying somewhere *between* is also vocalised by Crapanzano who analyses the imaginative future tense – what lies beyond. Imagination’s inherent importance for investigation lies in the interaction between openness (possibility) and closure (fixity), between the reaching of horizons and establishment of new ones (Ingold’s *carrying on*). The imaginative is the “realm that gives us an edge, at times wrenching and painful, at times relieving and pleasurable, on the here and now in all its viscous immediacy”; it is about “possibility – [...] hope, [...] the optative, [...] moods, like the subjunctive, borne by our grammars” (Crapanzano 2004: 14). It is the openness, the possibility, that gives a person a perspective of potential that is yet to be achieved, and thus reveals a platform for agency, presenting “moments of transition or transformation” (McLean 2007: 6). At the same time, imaginaries can be a witness of and reaction to closure, the felt impossibilities, barriers and inequalities of daily life.

## 2.6. Why study imaginaries?

Imaginaries are such an interesting subject for study, exactly because they are a possible platform for agency and transformation, and simultaneously are witness to felt and real closures and structural inequalities of everyday life. The investigation into how I-Kiribati living on Tarawa imagine overseas can reveal much about how other places are imagined in relation to home, and at the same time, about how imaginaries of home are constructed in relation to other places. This relation between home and away, the boundary of which can at times be extremely blurry, is deeply embedded within a global context of increased mobilities of persons, goods and images, as well as highly (im)mobilising national and international laws. Thus, imaginaries of home and away of I-Kiribati can also be instructive in revealing how they view their own position within an unequally connected global world.

The sense of possibility in a context of structural restrictions is clear when one looks at I-Kiribati imaginaries of overseas. Infused with the hope for a potential better future, these imaginaries are greatly influenced by the tales of temporary, circular and permanent migrants, the behaviour and responsibilities of I-Matang on the island, movies and media. The next chapter will look more closely at the different sources of I-Kiribati's imaginaries of overseas.

### 3. SOURCES FOR IMAGINARIES

Man: 'If you have ambitions, you should go. If you don't, you should stay here and spend all your life doing something easy.'

Me: 'Why is that?'

Man: 'We can see that here, most people want to move to overseas, that's what they aim for.'

Woman 1: 'For better life. For education.'

Man: 'Because they say that Kiribati.... will soon sink'

Woman 2: '...is kind of boring'

Man: '...Kiribati will soon be under the water in 20 years'

Woman 2: '...to see a different kind of life'.

Man: 'because Kiribati is most affected by the rising level. That's why they try to find another way, to give people a chance to go to overseas. To live there. To permanently live there. It's like they want all I-Kiribati people to move to another country.'

Me: 'Oh really?'

Man: 'Yeah' [Silence]

Me: 'How do they want to arrange this?'

Man: 'They have some ideas about... There's an organisation from New Zealand who offer the... what's the name of that...' [thinks]

Me: 'Oh, you mean the PAC<sup>16</sup>?'

Woman 1: 'Take some of the I-Kiribati people and put them over there. Not for a long time... and all of the I-Kiribati will be there.'

Man: 'It's like the Kiribati government is finding ways in which most people can find job opportunities... It's so difficult for them... because... there are so many people.'

This extract of a conversation I had with three people in their late twenties gives an idea of the very diverse ways in which I-Kiribati explain why people would move overseas. Overarching in most conversations is a sense of hopelessness about the situation at home. The desire to move has to do with ambitions for a better life, education as well as work opportunities. It is believed that the

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<sup>16</sup> PAC stands for Pacific Access Category and is further explained in section 3.4.

government is encouraging people to leave because Kiribati ‘will soon sink’.

### 3.1. ‘Kiribati will soon be under the water...’

Climate change is a hot topic in academic research in the Pacific. Today, one can find studies on its effects on ecology (Thomas 2003), policy (Barden 2011), its intersection with population pressures (Storey and Hunter 2010), its link to migration (Bedford and Bedford 2009, Locke 2009), the notion of environmental refugees (Kempf 2009), and in which academics call for the need of reception studies (Rudiak-Gould 2011, Farbotko and Lazrus 2012). Reception studies stress the ambivalence with which climate change discourse is received in a Pacific context. While I never introduced the notion of climate change during conversations, the topic popped up with regularity nonetheless. When it did so, it was often used as an explanation, along with overpopulation, why perhaps one could not stay on the island forever. The extract below, stemming from a conversation I had with a middle-aged man, gives an idea of the various ways in which information about climate change is gathered.

Man: ‘But scientists are expecting sea rise. You know, Kiribati will be under water.’ [laughs]

Me: ‘Do you think?’

Man: ‘That’s what it says in the newspaper. Local newspaper. [laughs] They said that [Kiribati will be] the first country to be under water after 20 years or maybe 50 years from now...’

[...]

Me: ‘So it says in the newspaper sometimes that scientists say that...’

Man: ‘Yeah! Or on the radio, announcing about sea level rise. And there’s some white... I don’t know... I would say scientists, in Betio, taking... I don’t know what kind of instrument... it’s used for checking of the sea. I don’t know how many months they check. But at the church, at the wharf. They put a kind of ruler. Not a small ruler but a very big ruler.’

Me: ‘And they check if the water is rising?’



Man: 'Yeah yeah.'

Me: 'Do you think that the water is rising?'

Man: 'Some places, you see here, there's no more beach. [...] Some places close to Moroni, the Mormon High School, are flooded with seawater.'

[...]

Man: 'Our government here [...]. It bought land from Fiji. For 9 million. I think 9 million.'

Me: 'Really?'

Man: 'Yeah you check. I heard. In the local newspaper, I read that this president, Anote Tong, bought land in Fiji for the unexpected sea level rise. But then when the government and the newspapers tell you that the scientists say that the sea level is rising but then the Christian belief tells you there will be no flooding. Who do you believe?'

Information from newspapers, the radio, the government, climate change awareness groups as well as observations made in local surroundings are all involved in the formation of a feeling that perhaps, climate *is* changing. The government's international lobbying around climate change does not go unnoticed inside Kiribati<sup>17</sup>. For instance, the story that Kiribati purchased land in Fiji for the resettlement of Kiribati, a story that was referred to frequently, adds to a certain anxiety about future prospects<sup>18</sup>. At the

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<sup>17</sup> Pacific small island states and their plight are increasingly visible in international climate change negotiations. Check McNamara and Gibson (2009) for an investigation into how Pacific nations are imagined by the West within this context and how the nations position themselves within these debates.

<sup>18</sup> The story of Kiribati's purchase of Fijian land for resettlement was often referred to so to make a link between climate change and inevitable migration. This story, reported by Western news as well (cf. Chapman 2012) is however not entirely factual. According to Terubea (personal communication, 25 September 2012), Press Officer of the OB, the purchase of land is an investment, most likely to be used for agriculture to increase Kiribati's food safety. This again comes to show how knowledge is based on both facts and rumours.

same time, these issues are often ‘laid to rest’ with reference to the Christian belief that due to a covenant between God and Noah, Kiribati ‘will never be flooded again’.

In a different interview, a middle-aged woman remarked: “I know that the sea level rises but I don’t believe that Kiribati will be under water. For me, I think Kiribati.... Most of the people in Kiribati are all Christians and we never experience any... like typhoons, cyclones, earthquakes, but yes, we are experiencing the high tide. But for me, I don’t know, I just... For me, I believe that will never happen. I think we are very blessed with our countries [...] I think cause we receive a lot of warnings about tsunamis, and it has never happened. I think we’re just blessed with our countries.”

A real investigation into the belief or disbelief in climate change and its influencing factors would have greatly surpassed the scope of this research. Those who mentioned climate change spoke about it with ambivalence, always concluding that it was probably not going to happen. However, it is important to note that climate change discourse *is* present on Tarawa, was regularly brought up in conversations and interviews and thus, whether believed in or not, should be considered a factor that needs to be taken into account when talking about imaginaries of home and away. The rotating discourse that ‘Kiribati is sinking’ potentially adds to a sense of doubt about the possibility of good future on the island. It should however also be noted that while there is widespread disillusionment and worry about the viability of a future in Kiribati, I-Kiribati do by no means all come to the same conclusions about what strategies they should employ to deal with these issues.

While climate change discourse is in the back of the mind of many I-Kiribati, simultaneously, they are aware that Tarawa is very overpopulated, that opportunities to go overseas are very restricted and hence competitive.

### 3.2. ‘...There are so many people’

As local employment opportunities in Kiribati are restricted and cannot respond to population growth, Kiribati is aiming towards the

‘export’ of part of its workforce, either permanently or temporarily (International Labour Organization (ILO) 2009), thereby creating a “safety net” for its citizens (McAdam 2012: 201). The need for such a safety net is exacerbated by the anticipation of rising sea levels, threatening to make Kiribati less inhabitable due to increase in water salinity which in turn will have a negative effect on crops. Although the government’s initiatives of relocation or “migration with dignity” (Kiribati OB 2010) are only said to be “an option of last resort” (Kiribati OB 2010), these are thematised extensively by the population. The government is involved in creating expatriate communities abroad, “lobbying neighbouring States like Australia and New Zealand for migration opportunities” (McAdam 2012: 203), and at the same, is improving the levels of education that can be achieved in Kiribati so that, if worst comes to worst, the I-Kiribati are ‘attractive’ migrants rather than a burden to receiving countries (Kiribati OB 2010). Thus, it is believed that “[m]igration can help to relieve population pressure and fill skills shortages in other countries, thus providing a win-win situation” (McAdam 2012: 204).

These institutionalised channels through which this export is organised are the main gateways for I-Kiribati to move overseas. Other channels for migration are rare, so those who migrate do so in a very organised context. Furthermore, migration that does not occur within the framework of work or other ‘special’ schemes requires a proof of funds or skills that is hard for I-Kiribati to acquire without having moved abroad on a previous occasion. For instance, between 2004 and 2007, of 521 approvals of residence for I-Kiribati in Australia, 10 went through the skilled migrant category, while 447 went through the PAC, a ‘migration lottery’ (Bedford and Bedford 2009)

According to Salazar (2010: 57-58), “[m]igration brokers, gatekeepers and middlemen (most often male) play an instrumental role in reifying the perceived dichotomy between ‘here’ and ‘there’: here things are bad, there things are better (at least so it seems). These Janus-like figures are often returnee migrants themselves”. Many have acknowledged the role return migrants play in informing

homestayors' imagination through "glamorous gifts and exciting stories" (Carling and Åkesson 2009: 137) (ie Carling and Åkesson 2009, Jonsson 2007, Salazar 2010b). Here then, the role that mobilities (physical, virtual or imaginative) play in informing people's imaginaries becomes apparent. Thus, before moving on to outlining the different gateways and brokers involved in the formation of imaginaries of home and away, we will first take a look at the concept of mobilities.

### 3.3. Defining mobility

Mobility has become a potent keyword in social sciences, deployed for the interpretation of changes occurring in societies all over the world (Pellegrino 2011, Hannam, Sheller and Urry 2006). It encompasses more than mere movement; rather, in the words of Gibson (2011: 160), it is "movement infused with meaning". She bases herself on Creswell (2006), who argues that mobility is the "entanglement of movement, representation and practice" (2010: 19) and thus can take multiple forms that are experienced simultaneously, in sometimes paradoxical ways.

Urry (2007: 57, emphasis in original) distinguishes five different kinds of mobility:

- "The *corporeal* travel of people for work, leisure, family life, pleasure, migration and escape".
- "The physical movement of *objects* to producers, consumers and retailers".
- "The *imaginative* travel effected through the images of places and people appearing on and moving across multiple print and visual media".
- "*Virtual* travel often in real time".
- "The *communicative* travel through person-to-person message via messages, texts, letters, telegraph, telephone, fax and mobile."

Mobilities are consequently a good point of departure when considering how I-Kiribati imagine overseas as well as home, as it

allows for the integration of the different factors that influence the imagination; travel of oneself and others, of goods as well as images, the stories told by people, facilitated by media, new technologies of communication and travel. Mobilities provide a lens through which to look at the connection and intersection between the global and the local (where Kiribati and overseas ‘meet’), paying attention to the differing channels that negotiate these encounters, the differing levels on which they occur as well as the meanings they are imbued with.

### 3.3.1. **Sedentarist or nomadic?**

As outlined by Urry (2007), mobility includes the flow of people, goods and images, either in reality, virtually or through communication channels. Urry draws attention to the fact that humans nowadays are interconnected. Thus, by highlighting the different mobilities present in people’s everyday lives, he attempts to denaturalise the centrality social sciences have given to “geographical communities that communicate face-to-face” (Baas 2012: 186). The importance given to localised communities is part of the understanding that sedentarism is fundamental to the human condition. The sedentarist approach purports the factuality of the idea that people and location are linked on a primordial level, this in turn rooting culture in locality (Salazar and Smart 2011, Urry and Sheller 2006, Malkki 1992). Thus, while the sedentarist lens does not negate that mobility is an important part of people’s lives, mobility is nonetheless conceived of as an aberration from the norm. Movement, in this perspective, is often understood as a displacement from home that ideally should be brought back into balance.

The primordality of these taken-for-granted linkages has increasingly been put into question by studies on “deterritorialization, reterritorialization, and scapes; time-space compression or distantiation; the network society and its space of flows; the death of distance and the acceleration of modern life; nomadology; and diverse mobilities” (Salazar and Smart 2011: ii). Social sciences underwent a move from a “sedentarist metaphysics” (Malkki 1992: 32) towards a “nomadic metaphysics” (Cresswell

2006: 26). Rather than interpreting mobility by referring to roots and fixity, the suggestion was to interpret mobility through the lens of flow and becoming (Cresswell 2006). These ‘nomadic metaphysics’, celebrating “the opposite of sedentarism, namely, metaphors of travel and flight” (Sheller and Urry 2006: 210), no longer look at mobility as an aberration; mobility is considered the normal state of affairs for humans.

The critique on sedentarism offered by scholars such as Castells and Bauman (who theorise the ‘space of flows’ and ‘liquid modernity’ respectively) is useful as it busts the idea that the world consists of distinct societies, “bounded entities or sedentary containers of geographical propinquity across which separate ‘cultures’ circulate in a largely face-to-face ‘metaphysics of presence’” (Sheller 2011: 2). The mobilities turn thus marks the move away from the focus on rootedness, criticizing the marginalization of “either past or present histories of human movement and interconnection” (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2012: 3), and instead favours the portrayal of human life as inherently interconnected and mobile, defined by “a generalised condition of homelessness” (Said 1979: 18). Even though humans have always been on the move, it is widely acknowledged that globalization has intensified both the movement of and interconnections between humans (Wilding 2007, Urry 2007, Salazar and Smart 2011, Salazar 2010a). Progress in transportation and communication technologies, their wide availability as well as their reduced cost are seemingly resulting in a contraction of space and time, deconstructing stability and favouring fluidity. “In a mobile world there are extensive and intricate connections between physical travel and modes of communication and these form new fluidities and are often difficult to stabilise. Physical changes appear to be ‘de-materializing’ connections, as people, machines, images, information, power, money, ideas and dangers are ‘on the move’, making and remaking connections at often rapid speed around the world.” (Urry 2007: 5).

Thus, mobility becomes a lens through which to understand all forms of movement, irrespective of who is moving, or what structures, institutions or people facilitate or alternatively temper the

movement, as “[a]ll the world seems to be on the move”. (Sheller and Urry 2006: 207). In addition, this new mobilities paradigm attempts to offer both a methodological and theoretical approach for studies as diverse as “studies of corporeal movement, transportation and communications infrastructures, capitalist spatial restructuring, migration and immigration, citizenship and transnationalism, and tourism and travel” (Hannam et al. 2006: 10). Thus, the new mobilities paradigm aims at grasping mobility by looking at all its facets and forms (Cresswell 2006).

### 3.3.2. Pacific mobility – Hau’ofa’s ‘Sea of Islands’

It is also along these lines that Hau’ofa (2008), one of the most influential Pacific scholars, calls for a reconceptualization of the Pacific as the ‘A Sea of Islands’ whose inhabitants are simultaneously rooted to the land and routed across the sea, having “deep local histories with expansive social trajectories beyond every form of containment” (Clifford 2009: 4). Teaiwa (1995), Clifford (1997) and Lilomaiava-Doktor (2009) equally emphasise the historical roots of Pacific routedness, defying imagery of sedentary islanders. The different levels of rootedness and routedness in the Pacific have also been of concern to scholars interested in the tripartite division of the Pacific (Goss and Lindquist 2000). While Polynesians are said to be biased towards international migration, and Melanesians towards internal migration, Micronesians (which I-Kiribati make a part of), it is argued, show both patterns<sup>19</sup>. The extent to which these classifications are factual and relevant is hard to determine based on the research carried out. However, it can be noted that Nei Nim’anoa, a character from Gilbertese mythology, is symbolic of both roots and routes. According to Teaiwa (1995: ix),

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<sup>19</sup> The ternary terminological split of the Pacific, while an obvious invention (for an account of its genesis, refer to Tcherkézoff (2003)), remains dominant in the discourse of social scientists and is, despite its artificial character, part of the “cultural consciousness of the peoples of Oceania” (Hau’ofa 2008: 40) and beyond (Kiste 1994, Linnekin 1997). It is imperative to remain conscious of the historicity of this Western-imposed division.

“descending from the tree of life, she [Nei Nim’anoa] charted a course from Samoa to Tuarua (the Gilberts), and bequeathed a wonderful voyaging tradition to her descendants”<sup>20</sup>. This “voyaging tradition” is visible in I-Kiribati’s mobility (especially internal mobility), travelling between the various islands of Kiribati for family obligations such as funerals and inter-island marriages.

In a similar way, by emphasising Pacific islanders’ routedness, Hau’ofa counters the image of finiteness and boundedness that is inherent in Western portrayal of the Pacific, as the term ‘Micronesia’ (‘the tiny islands’) – which Kiribati is a part of, aptly shows. The term invokes images of tiny specs of land within vast masses of water that are hard to access and simultaneously hard to leave, giving an impression that islanders are sedentary, localised beings (Appadurai 1988). Discovering the Pacific after having travelled the seas for many months, European seafarers perceived the islands they stumbled upon as “islands in a far sea” (Hau’ofa 2008: 32), remote and minuscule. Geography often being equated with economy, the hegemonic ‘island discourse’ puts emphasis on “the isolation, diminutiveness, paucity of resources, and fragmentation of the contemporary island nations of Oceania” (Kempf 1999: 98). The European obsession with “dry surfaces [...] stresses the smallness and remoteness of the islands” (Hau’ofa 2008: 31).

The ocean, however, is not an insurmountable barrier, not an unproductive area constricting productive space; it is not “the hole in the donut” (Hau’ofa 2000), not ‘nothing’<sup>21</sup>. Water, just as land, is an area of activity; water is a place for navigation and connection with other places, a space for recreation, a source for food; but also a source of identification. Hau’ofa (2008:54) explains: “It is the inescapable fact of our lives”. Teaiwa (quoted in Hau’ofa (2008:41)) concurs: “[w]e sweat and cry salt water, so we know that the ocean

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<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, Nei Nim’anoa is also the name of one of the ships crossing parts of the Pacific, taking I-Kiribati from Tarawa to the outer islands and back.

<sup>21</sup> Tarawa, I came to appreciate during my stay, rather than being in the middle of nowhere, is in the middle of somewhere, that is, the ocean.



is really in our blood”. Taking an Oceanic perspective, Teaiwa draws attention to the totalizing effect the ocean has on the identity of those who grew up surrounded by it<sup>22</sup>. She thus speaks of the “islandness” of islanders’ identities, “a construct of the mind, a singular way of looking at the world” (Conkling 2007: 192), “both as individuals and as a community” (Weale 1991: 81). Weale (1991: 82) further elaborates: “there are polar people, coastal people, and people of the forests. In each case the nature of the community – its mythology, imagination, its very soul – has been sculpted by its geographical circumstances” (1991: 82).

Considering the Pacific to be a ‘sea of islands’ counters the notion of an ocean devoid of meaning and draws attention to “a different kind of relation between island and sea” offering a “culturally specific sense of the contiguity of island and sea, of blurred margins rather than structured oppositions” (Edmond and Smith 2003: 2)<sup>23</sup>. Hau’ofa (1994) believes that Pacific Islanders have come to internalise the ‘bound island discourse’ purported by Europeans, believing themselves to be worthless and helpless. Thus European hegemony in geopolitics as well as discourse has led to Islanders seeing “themselves through the Outlanders’ lenses” (Jolly 2007: 509). Hau’ofa draws on a history of mobility in order to re-instill a sense of agency in islanders, by reframing them as a people of the sea and reconnecting them to a larger Pacific network across the globe (Jolly 2007). Thereby, Hau’ofa rejects an island-bound,

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<sup>22</sup> ‘When will you return to your home island?’ – a question I was asked on numerous occasions – was indicative of a reality that is as obvious as it is confronting. It is confronting as it reveals, yet again, the extent to which environment shapes culture and vice-versa, and the extent to which we tend to take our own living environments (in my case, living nowhere near the sea) to be the norm. Islandness is part and parcel of I-Kiribati’s everyday life.

<sup>23</sup> These blurred margins become obvious when one observes the outgoing tide, uncovering vast amounts of land previously swallowed by the sea. At low tide, Tarawa’s lagoon largely turns into a walkable landmass, uncovering passages and seafood that is readily collected. Island borders are flexible and porous, shifting with rhythmic regularity.

sedentarist vision of Islanders in favour of a mobile understanding of Islanders that is rooted in history.

It is in the interconnectedness of Pacific people emphasised by Hau'ofa and the mobility (of all forms) outlined by Urry (2007) that one finds the source of I-Kiribati imaginaries. Keeping this in mind, in order to answer the question of how I-Kiribati imagine home and away, we will first have to look at what gateways facilitate I-Kiribati's mobility, and what these gateways say about who moves and where they move to. This list of gateways and brokers (of connectors between home and away), is certainly not exhaustive, but aims to provide an idea of different pathways I-Kiribati's physical mobility takes. It is quite impossible to trace all the factors that inform social imaginaries. However, knowing that channels of physical mobility and returnee migrants play a large part in the formation of imaginaries of abroad, they have to be given consideration.

### 3.4. Gateways

**Employment as seafarers** on German merchant vessels or on Japanese fishing trailers provides an option for I-Kiribati men to go overseas. Both women and men have been employed until 2011 on Cruise ships by the U.S. owned Norwegian Cruise Line. These moves are facilitated by the Marine Training Centre (MTC) and Fisheries Training Centre (FTC), which are involved in the training of recruits. The MTC graduates are later employed on German merchant vessels, FTC graduates by Japanese, Korean or Taiwanese fishing vessels (ILO 2009)<sup>24</sup>.

The only scheme enabling I-Kiribati to permanently migrate overseas is provided under the **Pacific Access Category** (PAC), which was launched by New Zealand in 2002 (ILO 2009, Bedford

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<sup>24</sup> For a detailed investigation into the cultural and economic implications of seafarer's international labour circulation, see Borovnik (2003). Chapter 6 is especially interesting as it focuses on the impact of seafaring on *te katei ni Kiribati* and seafarer's implication in the Westernization of Kiribati.

2008). The PAC is a special residence approval programme that allows 75 I-Kiribati to enter New Zealand each year on a visa allowing them to look for work, which, if successfully found, will eventually enable them to apply for permanent residence (K. Hakaraia, personal communication, 23 August 2012). Each year, approximately 1000 registrations are submitted to the New Zealand High Commission in Kiribati, corresponding to 2500 individual applications (K. Hakaraia, personal communication, 29 November 2012).

The **‘Recognised Seasonal Employer’ Work Policy** is a temporary work scheme that enables I-Kiribati to work in the horticulture and viticulture industries in New Zealand, coordinated by the Ministry of Labour and Human Resource Development (MLHRD) (ILO 2009). In 2009, of the 800 I-Kiribati having passed pre-selection and screening and having registered on the seasonal worker database, only 100 had in effect been recruited (ILO 2009). Similarly, Australia launched the Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme in 2009, allowing a maximum of 250 I-Kiribati to work in horti- or viticulture each year. The pilot scheme ended in 2012 and its future is currently under revision (Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2012).

**Higher education** is another gateway to reach overseas. While a satellite campus of the University of the South Pacific (USP) is located in Teauraereke on Tarawa, no complete degrees are offered. This means that those who want to earn a Bachelor’s, Master’s or PhD degree from USP will have to go to Fiji to do so. The government grants scholarships to facilitate the move to Fiji; these scholarships are highly competitive. Currently, 50 I-Kiribati are sponsored to study in Suva (The Kiribati Independent 2013). Similarly, the New Zealand High Commission, Australian High Commission, the Taiwanese and the Cuban Embassies as well as the Japanese Embassy based in Fiji offer scholarships to study abroad. While many students apply for these scholarships, only a fraction can leave to study abroad. Nonetheless the students abroad are important agents in fuelling the imaginaries of overseas of those left

at home, through stories told after their return or by communicating virtually during their stay.

Furthermore, **religious institutions** are also important players in facilitating the move abroad. The various churches active in Kiribati frequently offer opportunities for travel to the leaders and representatives of various groups (for example youth groups). These institutions also offer scholarships (for example Latter-Day Saint scholarships to Brigham Young University in Hawai'i) to their best students. Apart from this, engagement in other organisations such as climate change advocacy, family planning, women's organisations that are usually supported by an overseas Aid agency, provide the opportunity for some staff or volunteers to go overseas for regional or international meetings and workshops.

It is important to consider the fact that the majority of popular frameworks allowing for overseas migration (temporary or permanent) or trips are organised in order to provide labour or education opportunities. By nature of the institutional setting then, the "Western experience" (Salazar 2010c: 57) is very often linked to ideas of further education or labour opportunity. This does not mean that these experiences are always positive or successful ones. For example, the Kiribati Australia Nursing Initiative launched in 2006 was an AusAID funded initiative that intended 30 I-Kiribati per year to be trained in nursing at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. This scheme has since been suspended, as only a very small number of the students graduated (MLHRD 2012). Clearly, the goal of one's migration is not always achieved. Nonetheless, when one looks at the institutional arrangement for overseas migration, it becomes clear why imaginaries of overseas generally imply education and work opportunities.

### 3.5. **Brokers**

From the examples above, it can be seen that migration in Kiribati is negotiated by a large amount of brokers. Brokers are understood to be formal as well as informal agents and agencies that arrange legal migration for work, marriage, education, etc.

(Lindquist et al. 2012)<sup>25</sup>. Imaginaries of overseas equally hinge on brokers. Most of the time, these are I-Kiribati who previously spent time abroad, or alternatively, are currently abroad, and relay stories to those in Kiribati about their overseas experiences. Furthermore, brokers also fuel people's imaginaries of overseas, not only through their explicitly shared stories but also through their behaviour, looks and possessions that are consciously or unconsciously interpreted by those remaining in Kiribati.

### 3.5.1. **Migrants fuelling the imagination**

Seafarers, while not exactly to be categorised as 'migrants' as they do not leave to live on shores abroad (Borovnik 2004), are, as mentioned above, important brokers of the imagination of overseas. The nature of their time overseas is very different from that of most others. Many of them have travelled to a majority of the big ports in the world. Due to the nature of working on container ships, they usually cannot spend a long time on shore; especially in technologically advanced ports such as Hamburg and Rotterdam, the unloading of cargo only takes a few hours while in South America it can take up to a week. What seafarers tell about overseas is thus an amalgam of snapshots taken over many years in many different places (Borovnik 2005, 2012).

Students, as well as seasonal workers, missionaries and those who have permanently emigrated, on the other hand, usually spend more time in one specific place, be it only a few months or years in a row. These people, just as seafarers, rely on technology to communicate during their stay abroad with their close ones in Kiribati (Urry 2007, Borovnik 2012). Moorings such as telecommunication networks and technological artefacts allow these people as well as their stories to be 'on the move' (Pellegrino 2011). The most popular way of communicating with peers abroad is by chatting on the Internet. However, Internet on Tarawa is slow and many do not have regular access to computers; there is little to no Internet access on the outer islands. Similarly, mail service takes

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<sup>25</sup> Brokers are also involved in arranging illegal migration; however, this phenomenon is not prevalent in Kiribati due to its location.

time and most people do not have a postal address; and thus, communication between home and away is not frequent.

### **3.5.2.I-Matang fuelling the imagination**

Kiribati being a nation heavily depending on development aid, a considerable number of volunteers (working at schools, hospitals, NGOs and government departments), development experts and embassy staff, especially from the major donors New Zealand, Australia and Taiwan, live on the island<sup>26</sup>. People involved in development cooperation of some kind or alternatively, business, constitute the majority of foreigners on the island<sup>27</sup>. This does not imply that all I-Kiribati are in contact with I-Matang, far from it. Many I-Kiribati are too shy to approach let alone talk to I-Matang; yet, I-Matang presence is visible to most. Thus, the behaviour, possible display of possessions, activities and responsibilities of I-Matang in Kiribati is also influential on how I-Kiribati conceive of people from overseas.

### **3.5.3.Media fuelling the imagination**

There is currently no functioning television station in Kiribati; equally, the Tarawa cinema shut down a few years ago. Nonetheless, movies as well as television programmes from abroad play a large role in the formation of Kiribati imaginaries of overseas. Pirated copies of blockbusters from all over the world (most prominently Hollywood and Bollywood), television series, international sports events as well as other TV shows are for sale in small one-room

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<sup>26</sup> In 2003, \$A41 million of the government's total consolidated revenue of \$A143 million came from foreign aid (KNSO 2012). This aid dependency is one of the characteristics of MIRAB economies (**MI**gration, **Re**mittances, **Aid** and **B**ureaucracy), which are widely addressed in academia (e.g. Bertram 1999, Connell and Conway 2000).

<sup>27</sup> The tourism sector of Kiribati is very small, only few tourists find their way to Tarawa, which is characterised as somewhat filthy, dangerous and boring in tourist guide books. Kiritimati island as well as Fanning island have a more developed tourism sector, but are far away from Tarawa.

video stores that exist in virtually every village in Tarawa. These businesses are thriving; watching movies is a very popular pastime on the island and frequently, when walking into a house that has a television screen, the screen is surrounded by DVDs. According to the 2010 census, 2214 of a total of 4728 Tarawa households own at least one television screen and 1050 households own a computer (KNSO 2012). While far from every household is in possession of a TV screen or computer, it can be argued that most in Tarawa have access to a screen, via neighbours or family.

Thus, movies and shows inform the understanding of I-Kiribati about the kinds of lives that are being led overseas. Appadurai is correct in suggesting that the mass media have influenced people's imagination, in that they have vastly increased the expanse of the "set of possible lives" that people can imagine (1996: 53). Movies were often times invoked in my presence. In combination with stories from those who have travelled overseas, information from books, the Internet and white people who have travelled to Kiribati, I-Kiribati construct and image of what overseas is like. However, while a set of infinite possibilities opens up before the spectators, these are not immediately taken to be a reflection of reality.

How exactly these imagined mobilities are brokered is hard to determine. Those who live in Kiribati do not uncritically believe everything that they are told by those who have been abroad. In fact, many of those interviewed stated that they wished to go overseas to check if the stories about overseas are true. For instance, an aspiring seafarer was keen on discovering whether it was really the case that electronics bought in China break easily, a fact that he had been told repeatedly by his seafaring uncle. Another young man was doubting whether the life of his aunt in New Zealand is truly as good as she portrays it to be; "maybe they don't want to tell us the bad stuff because they want us to come". Those who receive information are not merely passive recipients, but are "actively engaged in producing meaning out of the information with which they are provided" (Römhild 2003: 3). This fact has been commented on most in respect to the production and consumption of media, where the production and distribution of imagination happens on different

levels (Herzfeld 2001). Next to these sources of imaginaries, there are others that work on an unconscious level. Here, one speaks of “popular images, stereotypes and prejudices, or collective impressions that are socio-culturally transmitted” (Salazar 2010b: 14). Again it comes to show how social imaginaries are linked to personal imagination, feeding on rumour and truth, spread and adapted in selective, sometimes unconscious and hard-to-track ways.

Nonetheless, gateways and brokers are directly involved in the formation of an idea of what life beyond the shores of Kiribati is like. In this process, ‘overseas’ is not only given specific attributes, but also a location. For instance, the imagination of overseas can be concentrated in specific locations and this is very often relational to the gateways and brokers that individuals have been confronted with previously.

### **3.6. Gateways to where?**

Mobility is clearly channelled along certain routes through certain gateways (Cresswell 2010). Where do these routes lead? After an investigation into what people meant by ‘overseas’ when arguing that they ‘want to move to overseas’, it became clear that often, ‘overseas’ refers to a very specific set of places, these clearly being linked to the different gateways available for migration.

New Zealand and Australia are by far the most popular places invoked when speaking of overseas. Due to the involvement of the aid agencies of Australia and New Zealand in Kiribati, these countries are quite visible in Kiribati everyday life. Trucks carry AusAID logos, schools are co-sponsored by the Australian government. Furthermore, New Zealand especially, but also Australia’s provision of temporary or permanent work migration schemes have raised the profile of these nations considerably. In 1978, neither New Zealand nor Australia counted a very large I-Kiribati population (Bedford and Bedford 2009). However, since the introduction of the different schemes, the numbers have steadily risen; in 2006, 1116 people of I-Kiribati ancestry lived in New Zealand (the country with the biggest I-Kiribati population outside



of Kiribati) and 482 in Australia (Bedford and Bedford 2009: 108). Thus, next to the fact that these two states are plainly visible in Kiribati, they also have the reputation of being potentially accessible. In addition, due to the fact that there are well-established routes leading to New Zealand and Australia, there are also well-established I-Kiribati communities there, a factor that is very important, even when considering imagined mobilities. Thus, when invoking overseas, I-Kiribati often have a specific place in mind, referring back to experiences of friends, family or rumours that have been rotating in the community.

Physical mobilities are important in the genesis of imaginaries of overseas. On Tarawa, these mobilities happen in the context of environmental, social and economic challenges and are, to very large extents, of a very organised nature. Migration is usually organised in the context of education or work opportunities, this clearly colouring the way overseas is imagined by I-Kiribati. Furthermore, the stories, behaviour and looks of those who have been overseas and have returned, who are overseas but are communicating with those remaining at home, or people originally from overseas all have an impact on how overseas is characterised and where overseas is. Overseas often means New Zealand or Australia, as these are the most accessible countries for I-Kiribati. Yet, overseas is also used as a general category. Here then, the importance of media is especially big, as the life worlds of mostly fictional characters are laid out and invite to be compared to what is known from home. 'Overseas' here tends to turn into a homogenous entity that is in many aspects considered to be the opposite of Kiribati, some of these aspects being better, some being worse. Laying out the different gateways for migration and brokers of imaginaries of overseas prevalent in Kiribati also offers a critique to the idea that islanders are bounded and sedentary, instead arguing that both routes and roots are important in the life world of I-Kiribati.

Having pinpointed some of the most important actors in fuelling the imaginaries of overseas of I-Kiribati, and in the case of migrants, the most prominent gateways through which they migrate, the next

chapter will look at what kind of imaginaries of overseas the information gathered through gateways, brokers and media result in.

## 4. IMAGINING OVERSEAS

Social imaginaries surrounding Kiribati are inherently paradoxical. Often, Kiribati is imagined as a land of plenty, in which food is readily (and easily) available, and life, if one wants it so, is easy. At the same time, sometimes in the same breath, Kiribati can be portrayed as a place where life is hard and lacking in opportunity as well as in availability of goods and foods. When I-Kiribati imagine their home as lacking, it is done so in comparison with overseas, which is portrayed as having everything that Kiribati does not.

This chapter will look at how overseas is imagined to be the land of educational as well as vocational opportunity and the land of plenty, where a diversity of goods is readily and cheaply available. These imaginaries, it is argued, are always put in contrast with a Kiribati that is lacking in opportunity due to overpopulation, and goods due to isolation. This then offers a critique to the idea that nowadays, the planet is marked by unfettered mobility; in Kiribati, the mobility of people, as well as of goods, is heavily restricted. What is more, longing for goods is about more than wishing to consume; it is about wishing to overcome the felt marginalization and peripherality of Kiribati and to be a part of a wider global community. Overseas is thus imagined to be ‘better’ than Kiribati due to its full participation in the global flow of goods.

### 4.1. Overseas – the land of opportunity

Vast overpopulation is perceived to be the root cause for the lack of opportunity prevalent in Tarawa. “Form 7s, they didn’t get a job after [graduating] because there are a lot of people and it continues like that. So the more people finish, the more people then can’t get a job. Because when there’s a job, if there’s only one job, around 3000 people apply [...]. That’s why most of the people here don’t have a job. Because it’s overpopulated.” A young man echoes the general sentiment on Tarawa; even for those with a high level of education, opportunities for social mobility are thought to be heavily restricted.

I-Kiribati, paradoxically, conceive of both home and overseas as paradise. These paradoxical feelings are born from, on the one hand, the idea that hoping for a prosperous future on Tarawa is perhaps in vain due to overpopulation and climate change, and on the other hand, the fundamental attachment to home. Here, Carling and Åkesson's (2009: 135) description of Cape Verdeans' feelings towards their home resonates; the feeling is one of "close belonging to a land that is your own, but that unfortunately lacks the resources needed to take care of all of its children". When Carling and Åkesson (2009) speak of a lack of resources, they refer to the perception that the Cape Verdean homeland is 'barren'. In the context of Kiribati, it is perhaps more appropriate to speak of a felt lack of opportunity at home, whereas overseas is perceived as rife with opportunity<sup>28</sup>. Seasonal work schemes, scholarship opportunities and international conferences give the impression that overseas, both education and jobs are easily accessible.

This impression is further reinforced by international movies focusing on college life and the business world. Shortly after having explained his vision on the job market in Kiribati (two paragraphs above), the interviewee remarked: "So at your country, it's easy to get a job, no? [...] I saw it in the movie. Children finish with their education and then they get a job." Perhaps due to the limited extent of actual migration, or to the fact that a large proportion of emigration is temporary, I-Kiribati generally have confidence in the fact that migration is a good strategy for economic improvement<sup>29</sup>. In reference to those who have migrated permanently, for instance through the PAC, stories of regretted migration are rare.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> I-Kiribati are very outspoken about their luck of having been born in Kiribati, where food (especially fish) abounds and life is easy.

<sup>29</sup> This contrasts with findings in the African context, where youngsters are feeling increasingly disillusioned about the advantages of migration (e.g. Salazar 2010b, Weiss 2004).

<sup>30</sup> No in-depth academic research has been carried out on the situation of I-Kiribati who have emigrated permanently and so the reality of their lives is

Thus, overseas is overwhelmingly perceived as a place offering good educational and occupational prospects and thus seemingly facilitating social mobility and economic prosperity. A young woman, who has a friends studying abroad on scholarships, noted: “Lots of them are in school [abroad]. That’s why we communicate in chat, Internet. They send their pictures, with their friends. And the place they live in. The big houses. And their... the rivers. [...] It looks like a very exciting place. And here... [laughs]. I want to go there too. But it’s hard.” She expresses her awareness that for those who desire to move overseas, the move is difficult to achieve due to structural restrictions.

#### 4.2. Connections and disconnections

The imaginaries of Kiribati as lacking in opportunity thus offer a critique on the notion that today’s world is marked by unfettered mobility and access. Mobility, in this way, is not neutral; it is embedded in in power relations that play on micro- as well as macro-levels<sup>31</sup>. Mobilities are the product of social relations, and at the same time produce them; this fact is what Cresswell (2010: 21) calls the “politics of mobility”. The “fetishism of movement” (Urry 2007: 186), celebration of new technologies that facilitate mobility and the conception of the entire world as ‘in constant movement’, marked by fluidity, tends to mask the fact that, to put it simply, most of the time, the majority of the world is not on the move (Salazar 2010, Cresswell 2006, Sheller and Urry 2006, Urry 2007). Merely three percent of the globe’s population actually makes the move to settle elsewhere (Salazar 2010a). Despite increased connectivity, migration remains the exception. This is also clear in Kiribati, where physical mobility is heavily regulated and, in most cases, is merely temporal. Thus, the portrayal of the world as a “global village” (McLuhan 1962: 21) that is intrinsically open and accessible to all

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hard to determine. For a rather superficial overview of I-Kiribati migrant experiences in New Zealand, check Gillard & Dyson (n.d.).

<sup>31</sup> Centres of power can also play a big role in the attribution of meaning to different types of mobility.

masks the fact that just as much as globalization has generated an exponential increase in connectivity and accessibility, it has also generated new restrictions on access; globalization is as much about openness as it is about closure (Geschiere and Meyer 1998, Salazar 2010a). Nomadic metaphysics sometimes seem to suggest that borders have become irrelevant; however, little could be further from the truth. While Western Europeans can cross a large number of the world's borders (at least temporarily) without too much administrative work, others, such as I-Kiribati, have to invest considerably in order to (maybe) obtain the visas allowing them to cross borders. This is also a drawback of Hau'ofa's vision of 'a sea of islands'. While there certainly are merits in his empowering message, he neglects to consider that "Pacific island societies are, in fact, small, dependent, and in the grip of relentless forces" (Clifford 2009: 5)<sup>32</sup> and that there are limitations to the extent to which I-Kiribati can, do and want to cross the sea. Even within Kiribati, access to other islands can be hard due to the cost of transportation.

Thus, not all people have the same access to "mobility-systems" (Urry 2007: 51), not the same potential of mobility (what is referred to as 'motility'). "At transnational borders, one group's mobility seems to be facilitated at the expense of the other" (Salazar and Smart 2011: 4). Globalization is not merely about unfettered connectivity, mobility and empowerment; it also fosters disconnection, social exclusion and immobility (Sheller and Urry 2006, Salazar and Smart 2011). The challenge then lies in theorizing mobility "as basic to human social life in ways that normalise neither mobility nor stasis" (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2012: 2). Here then, Glick Schiller and Salazar (2012) propose the 'regimes of mobility' approach in order to account for the importance of territory and nations in structuring (im)mobilities, while not being restricted to them. Mobility and immobility are relational as well as contextual, and are embedded within unequal power relationships that create varying obstacles to individuals' movement. 'Regime' draws attention to the role state governments and other regulatory

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<sup>32</sup> For instance, considering foreign aid dependency and marginalization in international negotiations.

bodies play in the construction of hurdles or channels for mobility. These unequal power relations are not only relevant when looking at physical mobility of I-Kiribati. Barriers and gateways for physical mobility have a part to play in how other places are imagined, and equally, how Kiribati itself is imagined.

Disconnection and social exclusion are clearly perceived by I-Kiribati who, comparing to overseas, feel that their home is lacking. The sense of peripherality also comes to the fore when I-Kiribati imagine overseas as the land of plenty where everything is available that is not available at home.

#### **4.3. Overseas – the land of plenty**

Next to the role that the actual gateways play in the creation of imaginaries of overseas as a place of opportunity, commodities also play an important role. The feeling that overseas has many things that Kiribati does not is of course, to a certain extent, rooted in reality. Due to its location in the Pacific, the “tyranny of the sheer distances involved” (Becker 2012: 22) is at times hard to ignore. Kiribati is heavily dependent on imported products, the arrival of these being tied to the arrival of container ships or planes. In Vannini’s (2011: 266) words: “[T]he negative aspects of isolation are obvious when we think of the mundane complications distance originates”, such as the regular lack of products. For example, the frustration attached to the regular shortages could be felt when one of my neighbours ran out of cooking gas. She had been told the ship with the next gas delivery would be arriving in two weeks’ time. ‘They’ve been saying that for weeks already’, she added sneeringly. No matter whether it is gas tanks or mobile phone SIM cards that are meant to ‘arrive any week now’; these regular lacks (even if only temporary) tend to emphasise Kiribati’s “consumption isolation” (Vannini 2011: 266) to its citizens. Store shelves are marked by rhythmic lacks, the arrival of a containership potentially marking the end of a wait. In this context, Kiribati’s islandness is experienced as isolation, isolation from the global flow of goods.

Isolation is one aspect of Vannini's remove (2011: 252), which refers to "the temporal and spatial performance of distance in which people engage in order to separate places from one another, or to bring them closer together". This aspect is especially important when considering imagined mobilities; imagining other places always goes hand in hand with creating connection, or alternatively disconnection, in order to make the other place seem closer or further away. Islanders can emphasise different facets of islandness in order to mobilise distance between themselves and outlanders. I-Kiribati can practice remove, the active putting-into-action of distance, to try and distance themselves from places overseas and at the same time, to create a closeness to places overseas. Here also the relational aspect comes to the fore; mobilities are about how people establish relations with others in other places and how these relations are understood (Adey 2006). Vannini (2011: 267) believes that islandness is marked by both isolation and insulation.

"Insulation and isolation are the opposite sides of the same coin, as it were the coin of islandness. Insulation refers to the more positive (as perceived by locals) dynamics occasioned by dwelling in communities that are one step removed from some of the hegemonic spatial mobilities practiced in large cities. Isolation refers instead to the more negative (again, as perceived by locals) dynamics which originate as a result of their peripherality and marginalization".

Considering insulation and isolation is important when looking at imaginaries of home and away. At the same time, one should not restrict islandness to insulation and isolation. As suggested by Hau'ofa (2008), the ocean is not an insurmountable boundary; people, images and goods cross it every day<sup>33</sup>. The notion of remove implies that the ocean can be actively emphasised to imply distance, or, alternatively, be seen as a connector, negating distance.

These diverse experiences of islandness can then also lead to different imagined (im)mobilities, isolation linked to peripherality and marginalization, encouraging fantasies of a better life across the

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<sup>33</sup> The idea that boundaries are crossed should equally not diminish the fact that structural restrictions can heavily limit people's potential to move.



horizon and equally, perhaps simultaneously, insulation motivating an unwillingness to move and/or an idealization of home. It is thus important to emphasise that isolation does not necessarily imply the boundedness or smallness purported in a lot of island discourse that is criticised by Hau'ofa (2008), but that it can equally lead to the establishment of connections across the ocean.

Salazar (2010b), in a Chilean context, demonstrates how notions of insulation, as well as isolation, can be used to justify a tendency towards immobility. Here, I will argue that perceived isolation can also be a factor that plays a role in the creation of imagined mobilities, in imagining a better world that lies beyond the shores of Kiribati and vice versa. Thus, the perception that Kiribati is cut off from the world can, on the one hand be seen as a positive thing but often leads to the vision of Kiribati as lacking.

It is not only the regular scarcity of imported goods that tends to be perceived as frustrating to I-Kiribati. I-Kiribati have an understanding that the cost of products is much higher in Kiribati than elsewhere, due, for one, to the long journey that these goods have to make to get to the shops. One young man remarked: “Things out there are very cheap. Right? Very cheap. Like laptops, like whatever you want nowadays, comparing with Tarawa. Things out here in Tarawa... Things are too expensive. And comparing with the other countries, things are very cheap. Because they are the ones that manufacture the laptop and it's very cheap. I think that's.... Is it true, or not?”

In this quote, the separation between Tarawa and overseas is especially emphasised, a stark contrast being drawn between prices ‘out there’ and ‘out here’. The interviewee was visibly frustrated by the lack of goods available and their price. These statements were frequent and the frustration almost always concentrated on, as stated in the above quote, the lack and price of “whatever you want nowadays”. The problem is thus not so much that all products are expensive or unavailable. Rather, it is the modern products, ever-present in movies, brought back by return migrants or sent by those abroad, that are felt to be intrinsically unavailable, and in contrast,

accessible overseas. ‘Overseas’ is characterised as a land of plenty, where one can get everything (especially everything *modern*) one might possibly wish for.

Here again, the role of brokers such as return migrants have in fuelling these imaginaries is not to be underestimated. It is not only through explicitly shared stories that people construct an imaginary of abroad. People interpret the behaviour and looks of those who return, as well as the possessions they come back with, or alternatively, the lifestyle that an extended family has now that a migrant relation is remitting to them. Stories circulate about how people who have returned from overseas dress differently, speak differently, and behave differently. “The perceived new authority and cosmopolitan identity acquired through the Western experience has a huge effect on the migration imaginary” (Salazar 2010c: 57-58)<sup>34</sup>. An older man explained during an interview: “That’s why people are tending to move out of our country, to find jobs, to get money. Then they come back, like millionaires. Build houses, have a very nice, brand-new car, saloon or motorcycle. When you see them, you instantly know – he’s a seaman, he’s working on a ship. Because we rely now on money, we now want to go outside, to get money. That’s one of the elements of why we want to move out, to find jobs outside”.

Thereby, “[t]he gifts brought home by generations of migrants and the stories they have told function as unambiguous sign of the

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<sup>34</sup> In Kiribati, the different behaviour or looks of return migrants is not unequivocally regarded positively. During a conversation I had with two young, female I-Kiribati, they mocked the women who return from overseas no longer looking like ‘real I-Kiribati’, wearing tight jeans and high heeled shoes which are considered too Western. Similarly, Borovnik (2005: 144) argues that “it is embarrassing if they [I-Kiribati seafarers] did not adapt to the traditional mores once they returned home and continued behaving like *I-Matang*s [...] – like wearing long trousers, long hair, being too forward, or having different eating habits”. This shows how mobility is perceived in a highly contextual and subjective way; it is far from neutral (Salazar and Smart 2011, Cresswell 2010, Adey 2006).

wealth and magic in foreign countries” (Carling and Åkesson 2009: 137), spreading the idea that overseas is where superior lives are being led.

#### **4.4. You know, what we don’t have here, they have it.**

Hence, objects are not neutral in the construction of I-Kiribati imagination of ‘overseas’. They are loaded with meaning that is not restricted to their material functionality but “embody the primacy of the social” (Pajo 2010: 59). Thus, overseas is not merely imagined as a good place because there are goods available that are not available in Kiribati. The consideration of overseas as ‘better’ is made in reference to “geographies of power” (Gardner 1993) and thus products, but also landscapes, become symbolic of unequal global relations.

Especially during initial conversations with I-Kiribati whom I had just met (and particularly I-Kiribati youngsters), the conversation soon would turn into an interrogation – it seemed that people were eager to learn about the place I was from. In the beginning, I assumed this exercise, which after a while was carried out with routine, was a mere conversation starter. Questions that were asked most frequently included the inquiry whether there were trains, horses or cows where I come from, big busses, high buildings, street lights.

Against my expectations, these questions did not abate over time; I found myself continuously affirming the expected; yes, we do. I came to understand that these interrogations were about more than satisfying people’s curiosity about my country of origin. Rather, they sought to confirm and reconfirm general I-Kiribati knowledge about overseas; overseas has, what Kiribati does not. The following extract is exemplary of this general sentiment. Here, the three people in their late twenties previously discussing the reasons for moving overseas (in the beginning of chapter 3) are talking about Samoa, a Pacific island nation that one of their friends had recently returned from after living there for two years for her studies.

Man: 'She says that Samoans are really good at everything. It is a really good country.'

Woman 1: 'Better than Kiribati' [giggling]

Man: 'She says Kiribati is not a good country. She could see the difference when she went to Samoa. And she says that Samoa...'

Woman 2: 'Buildings...'

Man: 'Yes the whole buildings there' [gestures a tall building]

Woman 1: 'Do they have a mountain there?'

Man: [nods] 'Yeah, mountains'.

Woman 1: 'Mountains too'.

Man: 'You know, what we don't have here, they have it.' [all three laugh].

Towards then end of my stay on Tarawa, a friend told me that, while she enjoys wearing traditional clothes at home (*te tibuta*, a stitched, loose, traditional blouse, and a *lavalava*, a piece of cloth used as skirt, to cover the shorts or underskirt worn underneath), when she goes out, she prefers wearing Western style clothes as traditional clothes make her look 'poor'<sup>35</sup>. Increasingly, young women replace the *tibuta* with a shirt and wear knee-length shorts instead of a *lavalava*.

One could argue that the change in fashion preferences has to do with the convergence of cultures towards a Western model due to its hegemony, by many feared to happen because of increased global interconnectedness (Pieterse 2009). This explanation is however an

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<sup>35</sup> I frequently wore a *tibuta* and a *lavalava*. My friend specified that for me, as I-Matang, it is good to wear traditional clothes, as it shows my appreciation of the culture. My wearing of traditional clothes was most of the time met with great enthusiasm by I-Kiribati and was one feature through which they would identify me as a 'good I-Matang' (in opposition to 'bad I-Matang'). Here then, the same clothes are loaded with different meaning; by wearing them, I moved myself closer to Kiribati culture and values, which are perceived as preferable to Western ones (see also chapter 5).

oversimplification. Firstly, this model implies that ‘peripheral’ nations such as Kiribati merely receive culture from the powerful cultural centre that is the West, thereby negating I-Kiribati agency in accepting, amending or rejecting cultural influences. Furthermore, it overlooks the symbolic meanings that objects or landscapes (Western or otherwise) carry in people’s imagination (Pajo 2010, Carling and Åkesson 2009, Ferguson 2006, Gardner 1993).

According to the informant, traditional clothing is linked to poverty, while Western clothing invokes wealth. *Tibutas* and *lavalavas* carry more meaning than simply being clothes; they link Kiribati to a very specific economic and social status. Investigating the link between *te tibuta* and poverty provides a glimpse of the woman’s imagination of the world, in which countries have a specific rank within an imagined world order.

Similarly, the preceding conversation amongst three friends defining Samoa as a ‘good’ country, in opposition to Kiribati, as ‘not a good country’, establishes an imagined moral order between nations based on landscape and architecture, which in turn are linked to economic status and development. In fact, little evidence is given to support this ranking, but the existence of high buildings and mountains seems sufficient for all parties involved to draw the conclusion that Samoa is indeed a much ‘better’ country than Kiribati. Here, landscapes “work as a key symbols of unequal relationships” (Carling and Åkesson 2009: 138) and an international hierarchy (Pajo 2010). The argument that ‘Kiribati is not a good country’ is not to be taken literally; rather, it is considered ‘not good’ in a relational comparison between material features in which ‘modern’ ones rank above ‘traditional’ ones. I-Kiribati are very proud of their nation and in many ways rank home over overseas, which will be discussed further in chapter five of this thesis.

There thus seems to be a social imaginary reigning in Kiribati that ranks Kiribati within an imagined world order that is measured in perceived degrees of modernity, ranking below Western countries, and ranking below more developed Pacific island nations such as Samoa or Fiji. The term modernity here is used in the way I-

Kiribati use it. Always referring to things that are ‘Western’, it is used in opposition to terms such as traditional or cultural, denoting activities, goods and ideas perceived as originally stemming from Kiribati<sup>36</sup>. Ferguson (2006) recounts in his work on Africa in the Neoliberal World Order an encounter with a man in the mountains of Lesotho who proudly showed him his European-style house, rectangular, made from brick. His experience and reaction parallels mine in almost every way, having been confronted with a very similar situation in Kiribati. Ferguson (2006: 19) reflects: “The Sesotho round houses seemed to me, in the language of the times, an ‘appropriate technology’. The ‘European’ rectangular houses, in contrast, were (thanks to their metal roofs), hot in the summer and cold in the winter. They were also unnecessarily expensive, requiring imported materials, and conspicuously ugly”. Ferguson’s initial defence of the Sesotho house is one many relativizing anthropologists would resort to as well; trying to differentiate themselves from anthropology’s evolutionary legacy, they try “to treat different cultural traditions as ‘equal’” (Ferguson 2006: 19).

The construction of a Western-style house or the wearing of Western clothes would often be explained invoking the concept of mimicry, or alternatively (and more recently) by indicating resistance to the neo-colonial project (Ferguson 2006, Jonsson 2007, Wilk 1990). This is directly linked to the idea of ‘alternative modernities’ – the idea that modernity is not based on a Western model of progress, but rather, that every place has its own form of modernity<sup>37</sup>. Hence anthropology’s more recent celebration of notions such as creolization, bricolage, hybridization; the coming together of different cultures, in which Western goods and ideas are transformed and adapted, which is, according to many, the proof of

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<sup>36</sup> What is traditionally I-Kiribati is of course far from static. Yet ‘tradition’ often inferred stasis in Kiribati. Itonga, who in general had a static view of Kiribati tradition, equally commented on its constructed nature (see footnote 43).

<sup>37</sup> See Englund and Leach (2000) and Thomassen (2012) for an elaboration and critical review of the multiple (alternative) modernities paradigm.

people's resistance, as inputs are creatively changed to fit the local context.

Ferguson (2006: 19) rightly diagnoses that much of this celebration happens out of a "well-intentioned but misplaced sense of 'respect'" and condemns this tendency for ignoring that "real cultural differences always take on meaning within contexts of sharp social and economic inequality. Inequality is thus not only a matter of 'political economy'; cultural differences (e.g. in dress, language, or, indeed, styles of house construction) may in practice be just as 'stratified' (i.e., ranked from 'high' to 'low') as income or wealth."

Just as culture is not apolitical, political inequality manifests itself and is imagined through cultural objects and cultural differences. Thus, when my friend invoked poverty in relation to traditional clothes and wealth in relation to modern clothes, she referred to the existence of a perceived world order, in which the West is ranked higher than Kiribati. Objects, but also ideas and even landscapes are loaded with social, political, economic and moral presumptions about this order (Pajo 2010). The more 'modern' consumer goods are considered 'better', while what is thought of as traditional is devalued. Similarly, the mere presence of high buildings, representative of the 'non-traditional', suffice to lead to the conclusion that Samoa is a country that is 'better' than Kiribati. The desire for one object can be symptomatic of the desire to be part of the more privileged part of the world order, or of a global citizenship that the less privileged are otherwise not granted access to (Ferguson 2006). When I-Kiribati imagine overseas, they invoke a more privileged part of the world that has better access to the global market and flow of goods, situating Kiribati at the margins, drawing on an understanding of global, structural inequalities. The wearing of Western-style clothes, rather than being perceived as mimicry or resistance, can be interpreted as people's attempt to change their position within an unequal world order, or at least, to give a directionality to their aspired mobility (Ferguson 2006, Jonsson 2007, Gardner 1993).

To summarise, this chapter has outlined how I-Kiribati imagine overseas to be the land of opportunity as well as the land of plenty, where a diversity of goods is readily and cheaply available. These imaginaries, are always relational, put in contrast with a Kiribati that is lacking in opportunity due to overpopulation, and goods due to isolation. What is more, longing for goods is about more than wishing to consume; it is about wishing to overcome the felt marginalization and peripherality of Kiribati and to be a part of a wider global community. These imaginaries of Kiribati as lacking and peripheral also offer a critique to the notion that today's world is marked by unlimited mobility and access. The simultaneous openness and closure of the globalised world is felt harshly in Kiribati, where opportunities and goods are perceived, but remain inaccessible to most. Overseas is thus imagined to be 'better' than Kiribati due to its full participation and centrality in the global market.

This does however not mean that home is looked at as inherently 'worse' than overseas, to the contrary. I-Kiribati's imaginaries of home and away are paradoxical. The next chapter will look into how overseas is viewed to be dangerous and its influence detrimental to the Kiribati way, *te katei ni Kiribati*, and how Kiribati (especially its outer islands) is imagined as paradise where food is plenty and life is easy.



## 5. IMAGINING HOME

The previous chapter aimed to show that I-Kiribati imaginaries of home are often times framed in terms of lack, in relation to the plenitude that is perceived to exist overseas. At the same time, when speaking to I-Kiribati about overseas, an undertone of ambivalence is ever-present. While overseas is by many conceptualised as ‘a good place’, it is simultaneously thought of as dangerous and threatening. Kiribati, in contrast, is then referred to as ‘safe’, insulated from the negative influence and harsh realities of overseas. Furthermore, Kiribati is imagined as paradise steeped in tradition where limitless amounts of food are available and where the upholding of good relations with others is of utmost importance. Imaginaries of home envisage Kiribati as a culturally continuous society. Societal change is however threatening this continuity, leading to the fact that home, the real Kiribati, is increasingly imagined to be on the outer islands.

### 5.1. Kiribati - paradise

Westerners are likely to think of Pacific islands as paradise<sup>38</sup>. I-Kiribati, equally, are not “jaded to the beauty of their islands” (Gilkes 2009: 62). ‘Paradise imagery’ such as shells, sunsets and palm trees can be found on the walls of small shops, these generally not being frequented by I-Matang and thus not intended for them (Gilkes 2009). Most often, Kiribati is thought of as paradise in reference to the large amounts of food available on the island.

As seen in the previous chapter, Kiribati is, in some respects, certainly thought of as a place of lack. While home is lacking in opportunities and consumer goods, overseas is portrayed as a ‘better

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<sup>38</sup> It is likely that Western representations of Pacific Islands, which are rooted in the colonial endeavour, influence how I-Kiribati conceive of their home. The spreading of such imagery is likely to happen through the interaction with I-Matang who perhaps unconsciously purport such imagery, and the popular representation of islands in literature and film. Unfortunately, this issue is much too vast to be treated in this thesis, but for further reading, check for instance Gilkes (2009) or Kahn (2000).

place'. However, sometimes in the same breath, home is described as paradise, where food is plenty and survival is easy. One young man, who was dreaming of moving overseas forever so to provide better opportunities for his children, exclaimed: "I am so thankful to the Lord that I was born in Kiribati, because life is so easy. Life is very, very good in Kiribati". This judgment was yet again of a relational nature. He consequently referred to Africa where "people are so thirsty", "have scarce resources" and "are so poor", and wondered "how will they look for their food when there are no trees, no water? It's really hard for them. [...] Comparing [this] with Kiribati life, it's really easy because we go out in the sea, catch the fish, come back, there's a *moimoto* [young coconut] on the tree, you can just climb up and take it. From there you can fill the stomach"<sup>39</sup>.

Food is of great importance for I-Kiribati; feasts call for the preparation of large quantities of food, important occasions are marked by the slaughter of a pig and the preparation of the large swamp taro. Guests are offered copious meals, eating a lot is a sign of gratitude and respect. The unavailability of food seems preposterous to I-Kiribati, who, it is argued, never have to go hungry<sup>40</sup>. The free availability of food through cultivation of land and fishing is thus perceived as a great source of wealth. Broadly grinning, my neighbour would tell me that I was very lucky to have 'such a rich lady' as a neighbour, before offering me papaya or

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<sup>39</sup> When I enquired how he had heard about Africa, the young man stated that his knowledge stemmed from videos and posters he had seen and stories he had heard from American missionaries during his schooling at a Seventh-Day-Adventist school. He then also invoked Michael Jackson's song 'We are the world', explaining that "it's referring to the people who are so thirsty and need help from big countries because they can't rely on themselves". This demonstrates yet again that imaginaries have very diverse sources, as well as how these sources influence how other places are imagined and positioned within a world order.

<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, droughts pose a threat to subsistence, especially of the communities in the more Southern Islands.

bananas<sup>41</sup>. Paradise is where food is available and you do not have to pay for it. This is in stark contrast with imaginaries of overseas, where one has to pay for *everything*. A well-travelled seafarer stated: “Overseas, only money. That is what I understand. I was in Korea. If in Korea you don’t have money, you cannot do anything, you have to stay at home. You have to drink from the tap.”

Next to the imaginary of home as a paradise with copious availability of free food (in contrast with an overseas that is ruled by money), Kiribati is also thought of as an inherently safe place.

## 5.2. Kiribati – a safe place

As many times before, I was at the bus stop outside the MTC in Betio, waiting for a bus that most likely would not come for another two hours. ‘No buses around this time. They’re changing shifts’ – a woman around my age strikes up a conversation. Over an hour later, still no bus in sight, she tells me that she used to work on the big Norwegian cruise liners before they stopped recruiting I-Kiribati women in 2011. She has been to many places, ‘America!’ she exclaims. When I ask her how her time in the United States was, she retorts: ‘Horrible...’. Her stay in the United States had been short but marking. Within the first few hours on American soil, her luggage was stolen. ‘It is a dangerous place, I will never go back’.

She was not the first one to portray overseas as dangerous; places such as the United States, New Zealand or Australia are often characterised as threatening. A middle-aged woman explained: “We had a friend visiting from PNG [Papua New Guinea]. He was very surprised to hear about how we live, because in PNG, every night around 6 you have to lock your house, you never see any girls walking around late in the night. Also they were surprised to see teenagers during the night”. Kiribati, in comparison to other places, is argued to be inherently safe.

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<sup>41</sup> Grinning for being fully aware that calling herself rich in comparison to me was inverting the generally accepted global geographies of wealth and power.

However, this perceived insulation has negative effects for those I-Kiribati who move overseas. In Fiji, so popular discourse goes, gangs are on the lookout for I-Kiribati. These gangsters ask them for help, claiming they lost their luggage, money and take advantage of I-Kiribati kindness. Along the same lines, a popular local video production tells the fictional (yet based on true occurrences) cautionary tale of a seafarer who, at an overseas port, is tricked into transporting drugs back to Kiribati and ends up doing jail time. These tales, fictional as well as real, set in different locations falling under the category of ‘overseas’, all have the same baseline. In these stories, I-Kiribati are victims to the dangers that lurk abroad, the islanders portrayed as gullible and easily duped. These characteristics then, it is argued, routinely lead to negative experiences for I-Kiribati, as thugs are likely to single them out.

Furthermore, Kiribati is not only imagined as inherently safe, but also as very peaceful. The seafarer who commented on how “there’s only money” overseas also debated the pros and cons of moving overseas, coming to the conclusion that “Staying here, that’s better. Here, no police, no army, no navy, no guns, only peace in Kiribati. You cannot see war, civil war, missiles.” Asking him whether he had seen any of this on his journeys abroad, he answered “no, only in the movies”. Notes from my field diary recounting a conversation I had at the Taiwanese Technical Mission with three I-Kiribati men about Europe tell a similar story: “Europe remains elusive to them. They ask in all seriousness – is it dangerous there? I ask what they mean exactly – they explain – are there wars there, anything like that, terrorism, bombs? The government shooting at people? No, it’s quite safe in Belgium, I explain, nothing like that is happening there. They read in the newspaper about war in Europe, the translator says – he thinks they are probably talking about the Middle East. But Europe is safe too? Yes.” Images from movies and news reports mix to form an understanding that conflict is ‘out there’, although its exact location remains abstract. Perhaps, the only thing one knows for sure is that home guarantees a peaceful coexistence.

The underlying understanding in these stories is that in Kiribati, people live such an insulated life, that when stepping out of this sheltered existence, they might not be prepared for ‘the reality out there’. Kiribati imaginaries characterise home as a safe place, where one can walk around freely without having to be afraid of violence or crime. Similarly, while overseas is portrayed as complex and confusing – a funny anecdote of a woman not knowing how to operate an elevator in a hotel in Tokyo comes to mind – Kiribati is imagined as simple and straightforward. After I arrived at the airport in Bonriki, my contact was not there to meet me. Later, she told me that she was not worried when the airport was deserted by the time she arrived; “In Kiribati, you cannot get lost”. She was indirectly referring to the assumption that it is impossible to not find your way in Kiribati, due to the (seemingly) simplistic set-up of the island (one major road running from the airport to the other end in Betio), in combination with its naturally helpful and friendly population<sup>42</sup>.

Vannini (2011: 257) notes that for islanders, insulation involves “feelings of protection, safety, distinction, and disconnection”. One can see that distance is actively put into motion, stretched, so to speak, in order to make overseas seem more removed. By drawing on imaginaries of home, as well as away, immobility is justified. The imagined safety of Kiribati is used to explain why I-Kiribati “should better stay at home” and not move overseas (while this move will remain a dream for most anyway). Overseas is imagined as abject, its portrayal implicitly connoting an array of negative features (Vannini 2011: 267), and Kiribati, in contrast, carrying all the related positive features. To reiterate, circulating are social imaginaries of Kiribati as an exceptionally safe place in contrast to the dangerous outside world. This relation is analogous to the way in which, for self-definition, the self constantly refers back to an abject ‘other’ (Kristeva 1980). It is through this constructed insulation, the

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<sup>42</sup> The simplicity of ‘getting around’ in South Tarawa restricts itself to there only being one tarmac road. Other things, such as how to catch a bus, which bus to catch, where to get off and how to navigate in the ‘back alleys’ away from the main road are far from evident for an I-Matang newcomer such as myself.

“dwelling in communities that are one step removed” (Vannini 2011: 267), that the I-Kiribati discursively uphold and justify values, traditions and a pace of life that is considered different from and preferable to those of overseas.

What is more, Kiribati is not only considered a peaceful place due to a lack of violence. “We talk to people in the same language, the same sense of humour, that’s peace for us. [...] We feel secure when we have someone who can understand us, share our own sense of humour.” This shared understanding is one factor in the *katei ni Kiribati* treated below.

### 5.3. ‘We I-Kiribati people are very friendly’ - *Te katei ni Kiribati*

*Te katei ni Kiribati*, the Kiribati way of life, is the basis of Kiribati culture (Borovnik 2003, 2005, Itaia 1984). It is this Kiribati way that I-Kiribati proudly refer to when delineating what makes them true I-Kiribati. According to Itaia (1984: 122), in order to be ‘a real person’ (*te aomata*), one has to believe in and live “according to the six codes of *te katei ni Kiribati*. These codes are known as *te bunna*, *te kareka*, *te betia*, *te boia*, *te reita*, *te baema* – they correspond respectively to protection, keeping the advices, keeping away from danger, to be loved, keeping good relationships, and keeping oneself with one’s group”. The Kiribati way is, by and large, analogous to the ‘Pacific Way’.

“The ‘Pacific way’ is a term used in a general sense to refer to a way of behaving that is considered to be appropriate for Pacific islanders. It has developed out of the various notions of culture, *kastom*, tradition and especially traditional sanctions and laws that are individually referred to as ‘the Samoan way’, ‘the Melanesian way’ and so on. It suggests a way of communicating comfortably and effectively with others, requiring a form of consensus in manners and attitudes, emphasizing shared cultural values such as courtesy, respect for parents and elders, generosity towards others,

and generally ‘Christian’ ethics. Beyond this loosely agreed set of values, it also tends to be used to include reference to enjoying life in the form of feasting, dancing, games and sports.” (Lal and Fortune 2000: 486).<sup>43</sup>

During my time on Tarawa, the ‘Kiribati way’ was mentioned frequently. It was usually invoked to denominate the positive features of I-Kiribati (and other Pacific islanders) such as friendliness, openness, talkativeness, easily establishing friendships and being fun-loving. “You are lucky you came to Kiribati. What do you think of people in Kiribati? For me, they are very friendly. They can easily accommodate you, they can always welcome you”. In another interviewee’s words: “the I-Kiribati are never strangers to each other”. This friendliness was deployed by people to draw up a contrast between the Pacific and the West, emphasizing the ‘good’ features of the Pacific and implying the ‘bad’ features of ‘overseas’, portraying people from ‘overseas’ as more distant, individualistic and cold.

While Pacific and I-Kiribati friendliness are often used in the same breath, I-Kiribati are characterised as ‘even friendlier’ than other Pacific people. I-Kiribati consider themselves as people who establish friendships instantly and thereby put a claim on the nation’s exceptionalism and uniqueness. A young woman who had spent the first half of her life in Fiji remarked: “[E]ven when you have known each other for a day, and then you can talk as if you’ve known each other for long. That’s only with your own race, like I-Kiribati – I-

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<sup>43</sup> The extent to which the ‘Pacific way’, (and by extension the *katei ni Kiribati*) is an invention of tradition has been heavily discussed since the early 1980s. While the discussion of this issue surpasses the scope of this thesis, it should be noted that tradition is continuously evolving. Natan Itonga (personal communication, 18 September 2012) commented on the constructed and evolving nature of Kiribati traditions when mentioning “Christianity has become part of our tradition” and arguing that his job was to safeguard this tradition, implying the agency involved in its construction and maintenance or evolution. For more discussion on this issue in a Pacific context, check for instance Otto (2007).

Kiribati. But I have this feeling that when I talk to Fijians, I only know them for a day, and not for afterwards if we meet again [...].”

The extended family system is also a considered a very important part of this Kiribati way. Caring for your elders and siblings is intrinsic to the Kiribati way of life. The care for others and communal living is pitted against an understanding of overseas where people are individualistic and where “they only live with their [nuclear] family and they sleep by themselves” and leave their parents’ house the moment they turn 18. A middle-aged woman who was preparing to move overseas in a few months time suggested: “I-Matang, I think they just want to live by themselves, *kee* [right]? They enjoy living like that. They don’t want people living with them. But for us, especially old men and women, it’s sort of very boring if there’s no people in the house, they like a lot of people. Like my mom, she would be very bored in New Zealand. There, the entertainment is not the same. Here, she can chat, play bingo, go visit friends, then if there’s this *botaki* [feast], she can sleep there one day, come back. In New Zealand, you just stay on your own.” In this way, social imaginaries of home as community-centred and loving functions as one of the “technologies of (im)mobility” (Salazar 2012: 237), a way of removing overseas even further from home than it is.

Living in close interaction with others is considered very important; the *katei ni Kiribati* is what makes Kiribati special. The I-Matang, on the other hand, are believed to be inherently individualistic, their lifestyle not being compatible with the Kiribati way. On several occasions, I-Kiribati mentioned homelessness in the West as an illustration of I-Matang individualism, lack of care for each other, as well as the fact that without money, one cannot survive overseas. A young Mormon, who had had been overseas on a mission, explained: “You hear it’s a rich place with high buildings and stuff like that. But when I was there [...] I saw a lot of homeless people too. [...] I didn’t expect to see homeless people wandering around, begging for food and money [...] Here, it’s hard to see homeless people.” Thus, while overseas is positioned ‘above’ Kiribati in terms of material wealth, simultaneously, Kiribati is considered much ‘better’ than overseas in terms of culture and values.



‘Keeping away from danger’, ‘keeping good relationships’, and ‘keeping oneself with one’s group’ are thus considered to be especially important values, values that exist and are maintained in Kiribati and that are less present overseas. It is also in relation to these characteristics that the islandness of Kiribati is perceived as positive; insulation fosters the strengthening of the values that makes I-Kiribati feel protected from negative outside influence as well as distinct from others. Here then, they refer to an imagined moral world order, in which Kiribati is positioned higher than other places.

I-Kiribati consider themselves shy around foreigners and continuously state that if they were to move, they would move to a location that has an established I-Kiribati community. Ravuvu (1992: 330) explains that “confidence and security among Pacific Islanders are acquired through membership of a kin group”. This is another reason why New Zealand is considered an attractive place for I-Kiribati to move to. Here, due to the PAC, a considerable I-Kiribati community has formed, organizing community gatherings and celebrating national holidays. These celebrations are well known on Tarawa; DVDs of the Kiribati Independence Day celebration in Auckland are sold in stores and are widely distributed. Opinions on these celebrations are split. Some laude the upholding of the traditions, especially song and dance. Others deplore the lack of use of traditional materials in these performances, claiming that overseas, one can never be a real I-Kiribati. To these people, being a real I-Kiribati has to do with the upholding of customs, as well as maintaining a link to the land to which one is unequivocally rooted.

Thus, the existence of a social imaginary such as *te katei ni Kiribati* is part of an identification process, helping groups to delineate a self that is in opposition to an ‘other’ external to the group. The ‘Kiribati way’ discourse is orientalism pointing the ‘other way’, the modern West pitted against the traditional Kiribati in an attempt to differentiate it from the dominating West, to discursively distance them, while in practice, they are incredibly intertwined (Bossen 2000, Besnier 2011). Just as the imaginaries of home are used to explain why one would want to move, simultaneously,

imaginaries of home as safe and ‘traditional’ are used to explain why one would perhaps not want to leave Kiribati, justifying immobility or sedentarism.

However, simultaneously as home and away are discursively being distanced, discourse is collapsing or blurring the boundary between home and away.

#### 5.4. The erosion of paradise

Narratives of Tarawa very often focus on change, influx of cash economy, rising importance of money and the negative sides that modernity has brought. Imaginaries of home are often times conflicting. Thus, conversations about Kiribati would often centre on its “elsewhere-ness” (Vasantkumar 2012: 222), inferring nostalgia and a longing for something that is unavailable, removed either in space (located on the outer islands), or in time (in Tarawa seemingly being lost for good).

Tarawa, according to many, is changing for the worse. While overpopulation is certainly taking its toll on the environment in Tarawa, environmental degradation was never mentioned as a problem by the I-Kiribati I spoke to. It was more the lack of space and unemployment that were thematised by many. A young man who had just finished his secondary education argued: “I mean, there’s a lot of... more cars than before, more buildings than before. Just everything has changed. Before, we used to go over to the other side, the lagoon-side, there was a lot of trees. Now, there’s just buildings, there’s just nothing. So it’s not so fun anymore.” Similarly, Itonga (personal communication, 18 September 2012) suggested that “Tarawa is becoming worse. A lot of incidents happened that are not Kiribati normal life. Robbings, rapings, killings. I mean, not a lot, but it’s happening. There are few cases... Once in a year, or two times a year, just accidents happening. Mainly in the main town, at Betio, cause there are a lot of people. In our *own culture*, we stay in one village, we know everyone almost, from one end of the island to the other end. But here in Tarawa, you can’t even

know whose house is three houses further. It changes a lot. This [rural-urban] migration thing, it also changes our sense of security.”

Centre for education, government and commerce, Tarawa is the target of much of the rural-urban migration. Increasing population growth is changing the environment of Tarawa; where there were trees or agricultural land, there are now buildings. Equally, it is argued, the overpopulation is leading people to move away from their culture; as people no longer know each other, there is less respect for each other. In the words of Itaia (1984: 123), “there is an apparent change in people’s attitude towards life as a whole. They are becoming more money-minded and individualistic. The concepts of extended family and social obligations have tended to shrink, being replaced by small, nuclear family sizes and restricted commitments”. The arrival of the I-Matang and the introduction of a cash economy are frequently pinpointed as the source of this change. It is thus argued that the influence of the outside world is increasingly eroding the good features of authentic Kiribati culture. Thus, the things that in some I-Kiribati imaginaries define home, are perceived to be increasingly washed away from Tarawa. Here, overseas and Kiribati are deeply intertwined, the former, it is understood, tainting the good features of the latter. As ideas of cultural continuity are being threatened by outside influence, the discourse of the good, safe Kiribati life shifts location, from Tarawa to the outer islands.

Very often, when people were speaking of their dream of moving overseas, it was followed by the statement that if this move was not to work out, they would move back to an outer island instead. The promise of living on one’s own land in combination with the ‘easy life’ of the outer islands was said to be more appealing than staying in Tarawa, where possibilities of social mobility are restricted.

### **5.5. The Outer Islands - ‘It’s like the blue lagoon island’**

To illustrate, the rationale for moving back to an outer island I was given by a seafarer is useful: “Cause the outer island, it’s like the blue lagoon island. No need to pay. You have fish, breadfruit, you see

the tree there [points to tree], breadfruit, and this... looks like a potato but in the swamp, *babai*. There's no need to pay, you only just need to plant. And you can get water from the well. There's firewood, so no need to pay for electricity.”

The outer islands, more so than Tarawa, are very frequently portrayed as a land of abundance. Besnier (2011: 70) comments on a similar phenomenon in the discourse of the Tongan diaspora's portrayal of the homeland as well as a case in point when comparing Tonga and the rest of the world. “In Tonga, one can eat, sleep, and relax when one wishes; if one is hungry, one just goes to the bush and helps oneself from the papaya trees”. On the outer islands, the importance and exchange of money, so it is said, is kept to a minimum; in these discourses, barter is idealised. The outer islands are where the *katei ni Kiribati* is still properly practiced and thus, where one can, most easily, be a real I-Kiribati.

In the imaginaries of home, the real Kiribati is considered a ‘traditional’ society, where food is abundant and available for free and where the good values of *te katei ni Kiribati* remain of importance. In this imaginary, the outer islands are imagined as static and authentic, hence representative of the purest form of Kiribati culture, defined as ‘traditional’. While life on the outer islands is certainly more ‘traditionally’ I-Kiribati than life in Tarawa, its portrayal is a nostalgic construction. The outer islands are by no means isolated from the rapid changes happening on Tarawa. Technological advancements and monetary exchange are of increasing importance on even the remotest islands. Here as well, villages have televisions hooked up to generators on which the newest pirated DVDs brought on the weekly flight from Tarawa are watched.

One can trace the location of these imaginaries of home moving from Tarawa to the outer islands, depending on context and on what they are being compared to. Here, one can observe a continuous effort by I-Kiribati to keep (what is perceived as) two opposites apart, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that “these two opposites are so deeply enmeshed with one another” (Besnier 2011: 70). Thus,

imaginaries of Kiribati emphasise its paradisaical qualities; the abundance of food, its safety, and “the basic comfort” (Besnier 2011: 70) present in *te katei ni Kiribati*.

However, the outer islands also lack the things that are perceived as lacking in Tarawa. Possibilities for education as well as business opportunities are more limited than on Tarawa. A USP student’s interpretation of the outer islands stressed the lack of opportunity present: “There’s no busses, just cultural things happening there. Lots of people cultivating, planting [...] They get the copra from the coconut. They open it and dry it. And then they get money. That’s how they earn money, from the government. It’s a hard life”. This then also explains why rural-urban migration from the outer islands to Tarawa remains significant; it is on Tarawa where the promise of finding a job or getting educated is biggest. Likely, this is why the government’s attempts to encourage people to move back to the outer islands have not been successful so far (Moaniba Ikam, Senior Policy Officer, personal communication, 25 September 2012).

In opposition to home, overseas is portrayed as individualistic, money-minded and dangerous. Simultaneously, it is also the locus of opportunity in education and jobs, and the place where all goods are that one wishes for. Within the context of felt social and environmental changes occurring on the atoll that create an air of uncertainty about the viability of a future for I-Kiribati on Tarawa, imaginaries of overseas are offering the vision of a better life elsewhere. At the same time, I-Kiribati are very aware of the structural difficulties that makes the move overseas improbable for most. Thus the nostalgic, paradisaical imaginary of Kiribati creates a sense of comfort in this environment of instability and change. The peripherality of Kiribati that is felt when imagining overseas at the same time contributes to its perceived exceptionalism; what is isolating and thus often times encouraging mobility on the one hand, is insulating (safe and in line with the Kiribati way) and justifying immobility on the other. Imaginaries of the idealised home on the outer islands offer the vision of a better life, not in terms of monetary wealth, but in terms of food that is freely available and loving relations.

Tarawa is at the nexus of a multitude of imaginaries, perhaps, the place in Kiribati where the longing for the modern and the nostalgia for the traditional are the strongest. The oppositional portrayal of Kiribati and overseas attempts to mask and simultaneously bears witness to the fact that Kiribati and overseas, as well as their imaginaries, are deeply and fundamentally intertwined. It is here where it becomes obvious that on Tarawa, the boundary between home and away is at times hard to trace and depends completely on context. The location of the real Kiribati proves to be mobile (just as the location of overseas can, at times, be specific, or alternatively, abstract). Sometimes, Kiribati is to be found on Tarawa, while other times, it is felt to be lost there and is located on the outer islands.

I-Kiribati imaginaries of Kiribati are thus, on the one hand, marked by stability, albeit mostly constructed and discursive, and on the other hand, mobility, as their locus shifts depending on context and in relation to what it is being imagined. It becomes apparent that these imaginaries of home are not “neatly mappable onto either the mobile or the stable” but are “complex *mixtures* of movement and stability”(Vansantkumar 2013: 232). Rootedness and mobility, the above examples shows, are equally present and very much interdependent on Tarawa. In opposition to what both ‘sedentarist’ and ‘nomadic’ scholars would argue, neither mobility nor stasis are the norm in the life experience of I-Kiribati (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2012).

This chapter has aimed to show that imaginaries of home in Kiribati are multiple, and a lot of the time conflicting. Kiribati is imagined as a land of plenty, in which local produce is readily available. Equally, Kiribati is portrayed as a peaceful, safe place, where one can walk around freely without need for fear of violence and where the ‘Kiribati way’ is practiced. Simultaneously, the fast societal and environmental change in Tarawa is threatening this sense of safety and leads people to discursively locate ‘the real Kiribati’ on the outer islands, where food is plenty and the *katei ni Kiribati* is still properly practiced. The relationships I-Kiribati have with each other is considered an especially important feature of home, these also

adding to the I-Kiribati's peaceful character. Overseas, on the other hand, is portrayed as dangerous, money-minded, individualistic and confusing, and thus, if one is to go overseas, one should go somewhere where there are other I-Kiribati. The social imaginaries are constructed in a relational fashion to other places, portraying Kiribati as 'better' than overseas in terms of culture and values (caring for elders, having good relations with others). These imaginaries are equally used as justifications for immobility, portraying the outside world as individualistic and dangerous. What is more, the 'real' Kiribati, depending on context, changes location, at times, being in Tarawa, at other times on the outer islands. This is evidence for the fact that the line between home and away is in fact blurry, and their imaginaries are not "neatly mappable onto either the mobile or the stable" but are "complex *mixtures* of movement and stability" (Vansantkumar 2013: 232).

## 6. CONCLUSION

I chose the title of this thesis consciously. ‘What we don’t have here, they have it’ – this sentence, uttered by a man in his late twenties in conversation with two of his friends and myself, is emblematic of the content of a lot of the conversations I had during my stay on Tarawa. It tells a story about the way in which overseas and Kiribati are often imagined to be absolute opposites, the features of one excluding those of the other. Yet, as Baldacchino (2007:4) suggests, “in separating two objects, we underline their connectedness”. It is this connectedness that forms the baseline for my investigation into I-Kiribati imaginaries of home and away. Perhaps most simplistically, it was the connectedness that allowed me to travel to Kiribati. Related to this, but more to the point, it is the connection formed between Kiribati and overseas by means of people, stories, movies, news, images, calls, ideas and goods travelling between shores, which fuels I-Kiribati’s imaginaries of overseas.

What forms do these imaginaries of overseas take? Overseas is imagined to be both a ‘good’ and a ‘bad’ place, ‘better’ and ‘worse’ than Kiribati itself. Overseas can be located in a specific country, often New Zealand or Australia, as these states are both very visible in Kiribati as well as potentially accessible. Overseas is however also often referred to as an abstract place that is, generally, everywhere where Kiribati is not. These imaginaries are directly linked to the physical mobility of I-Kiribati, as well as the flow of goods and images. Due to the nature of existing gateways leading overseas, such as the Pacific Access Category, seafaring, the ‘Recognised Seasonal Employer’ Work Policy, university scholarships or international meetings and colloquia, overseas is often imagined to be a place where educational and vocational opportunities are abundant. This impression is reinforced by movies in which people seem to get a job right after graduation, as well as the role and responsibilities that I-Matang working on Tarawa have. The idea that overseas is rife with opportunity is reinforced by the perceived lack of opportunity present on Tarawa. Overpopulation and a small economy are leading to fierce competition for jobs,



scholarships and internships, leaving for many but the dream of a better future across the shores. Here, dreaming of a better life abroad can function as a way of coping with the reality of unemployment and general lack of opportunity at home (Salazar 2010c). Next to being abundant in opportunity, overseas is also imagined to be abundant in goods that are lacking or too expensive in Kiribati. Due to the logistics of transport between Tarawa and overseas, goods regularly run out before the next shipment comes in. The complete or intermittent lack of electronica, imported foods and other products fosters a feeling of “consumption isolation” (Vannini 2011: 266) amongst I-Kiribati.

This isolation is one facet of remove, the active-putting-into-motion of distance, and stresses the distance between Tarawa and elsewhere, rather than diminishing it. This felt isolation is also symptomatic of the fact that the mobility of goods, as well as people and images is not as unconstrained as a nomadic metaphysics (Malkki 1992) would have it. It is important to take into account the importance of territory and nations in structuring (im)mobilities, yet not being confined to them (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2012). Today’s age is as much about mobility as it is about stasis, the mobility of some fostering the immobility of others, openness being accompanied by closure (Geschiere and Meyer 1998, Salazar 2010a). This closure is deeply felt by I-Kiribati. Western clothes, skyscrapers as well as rivers and mountains are infused with meaning, being linked to a more ‘modern’ West that has what Kiribati does not have, and, while highly visible, is extremely hard to access. These things then become emblematic of the position overseas takes in a global world order in which countries are ranked according to their full participation in the market. In this imagined ranking, countries such as Australia and New Zealand, but also more developed Pacific nations such as Samoa are ranked higher than Kiribati, which is felt to be marginal and peripheral at best.

Yet, this does not mean that Kiribati is perceived to be inherently worse than overseas. To the contrary, I-Kiribati are proud citizens of their nation. Although many dream of moving overseas, it is debatable whether they, if given the opportunity to do so,

actually would. While Kiribati is often perceived to be lacking in comparison to overseas, it is also perceived to be very wealthy in other respects. Imaginaries of home conceive of Kiribati as a place where food is abundant and freely available. Here, a contrast is drawn up with overseas, where, it is understood, one has to pay for everything. Furthermore, Kiribati is imagined as safe from wars, conflicts and criminal activity, which, it is argued, exist to very large extents overseas. The security that is felt to exist in Kiribati extends onto the relationships prevalent between I-Kiribati. The *katei ni Kiribati*, the Kiribati way of life, is often stressed by I-Kiribati when speaking of home. Its most prominent features are caring for elders and living in close interaction with other I-Kiribati, both of which are much harder to achieve when overseas. Often, a contrast is drawn up between home and overseas, where, it is understood, people are more individualistic and less caring for each other. Nuclear family living as well as homelessness were mentioned regularly to illustrate how the culture of the I-Matang is less community-minded than the culture of the I-Kiribati. Thus, just as I-Kiribati view their home as peripheral in a world order that is based on material power and participation in the flow of goods, they imagine home as ‘better’ in terms of values and culture. Home is thus imagined as a place where food is available for free, where one is safe from the conflicts existing elsewhere as well as where great emphasis is put in respect for and community-living with others, as enshrined in the *katei ni Kiribati*.

‘What we don’t have – they have it’ stresses, as suggested by the imaginaries of home and away presented above, the way in which Kiribati (‘we’) and overseas (‘they’) are viewed to be in complete opposition. Overseas is imagined as having opportunity, goods and participating the flow of these, while Kiribati is imagined as not having these. At the same time overseas is imagined as dangerous, money-minded and individualistic, which Kiribati is not. It is striking how home and away are discursively distanced while they are in fact, increasingly intertwining, especially on Tarawa.

This intertwining, accelerated by the mobility of people, goods and images, is argued to taint the good, ‘traditional’ I-Kiribati

features on Tarawa, leading people increasingly to locate the real, 'traditional' Kiribati elsewhere, that is, on the outer islands. The outer islands, which often do not have electricity or Internet, are idealised and imagined to be culturally continuous, being the place where one can still be a real I-Kiribati. On the outer islands, it is argued, the *katei ni Kiribati* is still properly practiced and one can still truly live off the land and the sea. At the same time, the things that are perceived as lacking on Tarawa are also lacking on the outer islands; it is likely that the longing for the move back to the outer islands is not to be taken literally. Rather, faced by the insecurities brought on by the overpopulation of Tarawa, and the knowledge that the move overseas is unlikely for most, imaginaries of the idealised home on the outer islands offer the vision of a better life, not in terms of monetary wealth, but in terms of food that is freely available and in terms of good relations with others.

On Tarawa, imaginaries of home and away are thus simultaneous, multiple and often conflicting. They are constructed relationally yet within an understanding of global, structural inequalities. The oppositional portrayal of Kiribati and overseas attempts to mask and simultaneously bears witness to the fact that Kiribati and overseas, as well as their imaginaries, are deeply and fundamentally intertwined. In these imaginaries, the boundary between home and away, while continuously being reified, remains blurred and hard to define, as home and away, considered stable and culturally continuous, shift location depending on context. Thus, in a time marked by environmental, social and economic insecurities, a sense of continuity and security is fostered through the upholding of oppositional imaginaries of Kiribati and overseas, while these are born from a reality in which home and away are deeply and fundamentally entangled.

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