



“I stand in the Middle of the Ocean”: The Emerging Coconut Theology of Climate Change in Kiribati

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Abstract

The challenge of climate change for the South Pacific Island of Kiribati demands a twenty-first-century missional vision to help respond effectively to the hopes and fears of islanders. This article employs a “coconut theology” embedded within an Indigenous knowledge thought-system and the daily cultural experiences of the Kiribati people. Using coconut theology as a qualitative method, this study views climate songs as a source of primary data. The songs are collected and analyzed through a thematic approach. The findings demonstrate that songs play a critical role in the Kiribati people’s culture, keeping their voice alive and helping them make sense of their experiences of climate change. Based on the findings, the article argues that climate change songs embody critical theologies that could help the church embrace Indigenous imagination in its search for contextual relevance and effective response to climate change.

Keywords: Kiribati Islands, coconut theology, climate change songs, resistance, faith.

Introduction

This study examines how the phenomenon of climate change is affecting the people, Indigenous culture, and environment of the Micronesian island nation of Kiribati in the South Pacific. It focuses on the mission of the Kiribati islanders in the context of global warming and rising sea levels. More specifically, it utilizes the emerging Indigenous missional concept of coconut theology to analyze how Kiribati people understand and interpret climate change through songs. As an Indigenous theory, coconut theology captures how Kiribati people define, construct, and make meaning of their experiences of God in part through their daily interactions with the coconut tree. The coconut tree is the most important plant in Kiribati because it produces all of the key elements of life, and thus the life of the people is constructed around it (Timon, 2013). In the Kiribati context, the coconut tree is conceived of as a divine source of all being. Existence on the island would not be possible without it.

As a result, the coconut tree is entrenched within the Pacific islanders’ worldview as a source of life and foundation of existential knowledge. It is a symbol for them of both life and God, as it embodies the culture and cycle of life that shape the environment of the people (Palu, 2012, Timon, 2013). The coconut tree is not just a physical tree, but a spiritual statement symbolizing God’s earthly presence. In the presence of the tree, the people are always reminded that they are living in full connection with the ultimate source of life – God (Havea, 1986; Palu, 2012, Timon, 2013). At the last supper, Jesus, as an I-Kiribati, a person from Kiribati, could be referring to the coconut as his flesh and its juice as his blood. Pacific scholars have argued that this coconut tree theology not only sums up their life culture but discloses knowledge of



who God is and what God has done in and for the land and people of the Pacific (Havea, 1986). Agreeing with Havea, Forman (2005: 116) stresses that “in many ways the coconut could symbolize Christ, since it gives life to human beings, and when it is broken new life springs forth.” In the context of the environment, then, the coconut tree is a sign of the God who sustains life in Kiribati. It provides food, shelter, and medicine and reminds the islanders of the life-giving God always available to them; and by growing along the coast, it protects the land from erosion. The coconut tree is embedded within an ecological and relational understanding of God as the ultimate source of life.

Following from this, songs function as critical tool to articulate coconut tree knowledge within Kiribati cosmology. Songs play an important role in keeping the people’s oral tradition alive and fostering historical awareness of their origin and ethnicity. Kiribati composer Ten Nenem affirms that “songs cannot die” when they are sung generation after generation (cited in Kempf, 2003: 48). Coconut theology is articulated through the songs, which become powerful devices for communicating and advocating for climate change on the islands (Kempf, 2003: 33). The songs are written histories in the people’s hearts and minds, and they are remembered through the generations not only by those who are able to read and write, but by everyone who can speak and sing. Songs are critical in the Kiribati worldview because music articulates their cosmology as well as their ecological and relational understanding of reality. They are used as weapons of resistance against oppression and exploitation, as political critique, and as tools in the struggle against climate injustice (COP15 2009). This study thus analyzes Kiribati songs related to climate change not only to understand how people are engaging with climate change, but also to investigate the coconut theology that is emerging through them.

On Song Elicitation

Songs are an essential part of the Kiribati culture. They speak of past times, of the time of traditional gods and humanity’s place in the universe, and of the coming of the missionaries and the new world. They also speak of the future: a future that seems to offer only migration, loss of land, and questions about God’s role in all this. The fact of belonging to land, a village, an island is one of the deepest and most entrenched parts of every I-Kiribati’s culture. To cry out their fear, confusion, and need for assurance, they turn to song. Song is a place to gain peace and comfort, a place of refuge that embraces them in their critical situation.

The songs are also collections of data. They indicate the facts of what people want to say and provide a way to advocate and spread information about these circumstances to a wider community and the world. Coconut theology as a theory rooted within ecology and rationality uses song to connect the past with the present and the poor with the rich in order to improve the future. This article uses qualitative methodology based on a contextual model of the coconut tree to elicit songs. Nicola Allett (2010:2) suggests songs are effective research tools that can serve to produce data links to places, issues, and feelings that characteristically “remain unspoken or that are difficult to uncover in a conventional qualitative interview.” I use song elicitation, therefore, as method to collect data on climate change and find that history, culture, and theology are intertwined with climate change and its effects on Kiribati. The songs were based on their popularity (people listen to these songs in their homes, cars, bars, etc.), their message (they are about climate change), and their influence on Kiribati society. The data in the songs was analysed to identify and examine emergent theological themes. The intention is to provide a rich thematic description of the data emerging from songs.

The Challenge of Climate Change

Kiribati is in the front line of countries that are vulnerable to climate change, experiencing higher temperatures, shifting rainfall patterns, destructive erosion to land, and contamination of freshwater. The people, as a result, suffer extreme hopelessness, fearing they will lose their land sometime in the future. In an attempt to protect their homes from the sea, most people



have erected seawalls for safety. In the past, this was sufficient, but it is no longer, as the attacking waves are becoming stronger. The entire village of Tebunginako¹ on one of the main islands has already been relocated to other parts of the island because of the loss of land to the encroaching sea (Holden, 1992; Worlan, 2015). Most of Kiribati's people depend on small groundwater supplies through wells as their main source of fresh water. But these wells are gradually becoming contaminated with saltwater, and on many islands the water is undrinkable or nearly so. This also affects the vegetation, including the fruit trees that the people depend on for food and income. These changes have dramatically shifted traditional cultural patterns of the community. Where once everyone helped everyone else, now fruit trees and freshwater wells are carefully guarded – for who will share with strangers if there may not be sufficient food for their own family? Climate change is the greatest current threat to the people because it affects not only their livelihood but their cultural values, and it is also eating up their island (Timon, 2013).

In the capital island of South Tarawa, huge waves swamp paths, flooding the hospital in Betio, destroying homes and food crops, and fouling the already severely limited freshwater supply. About one hundred homes have been destroyed on the island of Tamana, and the rest of the islands face similar damages (Uekera, 2015). In January 2016, four young Kiribati men were reported dead after being crushed in a car on Kiritimati Island by a strong wave.² The Pacific Island nation of Kiribati is living the reality of the dangers of climate change. Despite this suffering, many people refuse to leave their ancestral lands. Some have been relocated internally to safer places and others have migrated to other countries. People turn to their churches in such times of crisis, seeking help. But even though these incidents have gradually come to affect the lives of the people, the church does not address this issue as a threat to life.

“Song Cannot Die”: Emerging Coconut Theology in Kiribati Climate Songs *Theology of resistance: “I stand in the middle of the ocean”*

The song “*I teitei I nukan Marawa,*” or “I Stand in the Middle of the Ocean,” has been widely used in media and international conferences to evoke the negative impacts of injustices done by powerful countries to the poor. This song expresses the past events of the people as a British colony, and also speaks to the contemporary situation. How people were treated in the past is connected to how they are treated now by developed nations that have caused the brutal impact of climate change.

As Vaii argues, the dominant attitude of European nations and their treatment of islanders as second-class citizens has been extremely destructive to the connection of the Indigenous people and their culture, land, ocean, and homes (Vaai, 2006: 20). Even though people have not written books about their feelings in their homelands, their songs are more than books – like the following one, composed in 1979 but still fresh in the mouths of the people (Teaero, 2004).

¹ Tebunginako in the far north of Abaiang Island is a village located with about 1000 inhabitants who lived on its lagoon coastline. In the past, they had no worries about storms or erosion. A surprise came with the rainy season, accompanied by the cruel impacts of the rising sea level. Their beaches began to erode, and the seawall was not sufficient to protect the land and soon fell apart. The villagers determined to protect their village, building an even stronger seawall with the help of concrete. Very soon, the village turned to seawater and the village is now divided into sections. The once joyful village has now become a barren land of dead trees and the cruel sea.

² This is the first tragic event in the history of Kiribati, where four men killed by a strong wave while sitting in their car.



*I teitei i nukani marawa
Akea raou ae e na
buokai A katukai boong
ririki I a ukoukora
mwengau
Man tiriwetea arana
Kiribati, Ko mena iara?
Ongo banan au anene
Koburake koburake
ngkoe Ae tunarin
aonaba, Routiko Rake
Routikorake mai
Marawa, Ba ana noriko
akea a mena lke raroa
Mwemwe mwerake Akea
raou ae e na buokai A
katukai boong ririki*

In the middle of the ocean, I stand without anyone to help. Days and years have left me behind. I search for my home, I call you by name – Kiribati, where are you? Hear the voice of my song. Arise you the centre of the world. Arise from the depth of the ocean so you may be seen from afar, be lifted higher. For no one is to help me. Days and years have left me behind (COP15, 2009).

As songs speak of the past times, they are used in this study as a way of knowing and learning within the Kiribati context. The song is about the history of the 87-year rule of the Kiribati by the British empire, from 1892 to 1979 (Tabai, 1987: 42). The first line of this song states, “*I teitei i nukani marawa,*” which means, “In the middle of the ocean, I stand.” This song is a critic against colonial account. It serves to inform the Kiribati people of how the British Protectorate left their country after mining their phosphate, without helping the country in its economic development. The song reveals how the colonizers in the Pacific hid the knowledge and skills of development but continued controlling the islands and the lives of the people dependent on them.

The song is thus a lamentation that maintains the history of how powerful countries take control and reduce poor nations into dependency. The history will be sung to all generations to defend the lives of the poor and to fight against the roots of discrimination, that is, greed and injustice. This song serves as a theology of resistance. It challenges the church, which is focussed on the theology of the salvation of the soul, with a clear picture of the people’s condition in their everyday experience, enduring suffering and oppression through human injustice and the greed of the rich (Uriam, 1999). This song serves to guide the church to see that on the island and in the context of the people, God is there with them as part of their culture and situation. “The Church may not be of this world, but certainly as a pilgrim living in this world, it, too, must play its role in the life of this world” (Uriam, 1999: 92).

The composer uses the word *marawa*, which literally means the deep sea or deep void where feet cannot stand. Standing in the middle of the deep-sea means living without a ground or strong foundation to stand on. The tone of this song goes back to the 1960s, when Kiribati has been part of the British empire 87 years and the British government controlled the economic development of the people. Having limited resources, the Kiribati relied on the phosphate island of Banaba as the only resource for economic development. But the British mined the phosphate; and when the phosphate was exhausted, Kiribati was given independence and left behind with only a small share. As Tabai (1987: 42) stated, “They left us with a very little for our economic development, very poor infrastructure.”

The second line “*Akea raou ae e na buokai; A katukai boong ririki*” – meaning “No one to help; days and years have left me behind” – is the people of Kiribati’s complaint after being used and then left to stand on their own without a single viable industry. Tabai (1987: 4) further states that the island “has always been dominated by developed countries, and with their political systems and ideologies our Pacific world has been influenced and under-controlled,



because they provide most of the necessary finance.” The song points to the fact that even though climate change was recognized and discussed as early as the 1980s, the people of Kiribati are still living without any answer to the question of what their future will be.

In their current situation, people are starting to leave their islands, knowing that they are under threat. This migration raises many concerns for people about their identity and culture, because these are tied to the land. This song gives a strong voice to every generation in Kiribati, allowing them to embrace the value of their culture, lands, and ocean – their place of origin that connects with their ancestors and their gods. This song calls the Kiribati people to learn from their experiences in order to understand the impact of colonization, globalization, and climate change: so as “to cherish our identities and rediscover ourselves as guardians of the best for the next generations” (PCC, 2007: 17). This song also seeks to caution the church against the corruption of the world, to urge it to stand against injustice in the lives of the poor and voiceless. The song critiques the injustice of the rich imposed on the lives of the poor, reaching its climax with the global phenomenon of climate change that affects now affecting the whole world.

The word *marawa* (standing in the middle of the ocean) also speaks metaphorically, referring to the current situation of people being relocated, both within their islands and to other countries, because of fear and uncertainty about the future. Leaving the ancestral land is like standing in the middle of the ocean, without any ground. This is why the Israelite lamented: How can we sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land? (Ps. 137). The Israelites expressed the feeling of having no ground to sing their song in the foreign land. However, this song speaks to people in the diaspora and those who remain on their islands. It calls them to stand strong within their songs of Indigenous knowledge, cultural value, and identity, as these are strong grounds for security and identity. This is a ground that connects them strongly with their God as their future security and hope.

Thus, the knowledge of the coconut tree encourages the people never to abandon and forget their culture, identity, and origin. Divinity is present in land and ocean because they are interconnected and sacred grounds – as Havea (2010: 346) notes, “the resting place of ancestors and the sites where islanders learn the customs; thus requiring them to observe certain rituals, even in connection with activities that non-islanders might consider mundane.” Havea (2010: 6) further states that “the recognition of *tapu* (means taboo) in land and ocean obliges islanders to certain responsibilities that, when observed, result in the hallowing of the islanders themselves.” *Tapu* is an essential part of island culture – a more spiritual connotation of the connectedness of the community with its environment. However, this song criticizes the politics of climate change that has shifted the notion of the ocean from a home and place of refuge to a threat and an enemy of the people.

Koburake koburake is a call to rise from the depth of the ocean. People have been undermined by the colonizers; thus, this song informs them to rise with what they have. The knowledge of the coconut reminds the people that they are the resources, rich with their cultural values and Indigenous knowledge. Despite being undermined and treated poorly, they have their land and ocean, which are full of abundant resources for life and have provided for them since the beginning of creation. The song reminds the people to rely not on other nations but to on their own strength, skills, and knowledge, which will provide for them abundantly. According to Vaai, people at the grassroots level have a whole world in which they live and operate, and they should stand up for themselves and not allow themselves to be “belittled” again (Vaai, 2006: 20). Even though the Kiribati are poor and constantly oppressed and victimized through the impacts of climate change, (Zakaria, 2014) the song encourages the people to rise up to fight for their land, rights, and freedom.

The song is also a critique of theological education in Kiribati, which remains Euro-centric. As argued elsewhere, pastors have no contextual tools to help the people address the issue of



climate change, nor do they provide answers in face of people's questions and confusion (Timon, 2013). According to Talia (2009: 2), the legacy has focused on theologies that make no sense in the situation in which people are living. It has disconnected the people from the realities of their context. Thus, coconut theology, as embodied theology in climate change songs, challenges the church to become an institution of liberation in the context of climate change. The message of liberation in the climate change songs comes not only from the preacher but is sung where all I-Kiribati live and work – their canoes when they fish, at the top of the coconut trees when they cut *toddy*, in the *babai* (a root crop, is the staple diet of the people of Kiribati) pit when they cultivate their crops, on the beach when children play. They sing aloud about their history and feelings of joy and pain, and against the injustice and oppression of the system controlling them.

This song is the song of the oppressed, and it reflects the song of David in Psalm 58: "Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods? Do you judge people fairly? No, in your hearts you devise wrongs; your hands deal out violence on earth" (Ps. 58:1-2). This psalm speaks about the earth's powerful nations – they are corrupt and lack justice, whereas the small and poor nations suffer and have no hope or future. Therefore, the church must not be silent, but must stand for the truth. The church in its preaching must engage in eco-justice against the ill-treatment and injustice of powerful nations suppressing the poor and small island nations. The theological education that develops a vision of justice and human equality will allow pastors to address climate justice within wider environmental concerns (Conradie, 2009).

Theology of lamentation: "What will be our future?"

Out of the context of hopelessness and fear, the question of the future raised and becomes part of the songs that could be sung and heard every day. In his song, Taki focuses on a question of what our future might be, as the sea level gradually creeps up and our islands are washed away. What theology will the church provide to sustain the hope and faith of the people in their context of confusion and despair?

What will be our future, what will be the future of our children? Searching for myself, seeking a refuge as the world, is getting worse day and night. My day is so much pain. My day is much struggle; I cry to my Lord to help me through. My people and children, my own country, stand firm and stay strong until the end of time. Climate change is so strong. What will be our future? What will be the future of our children? Searching for myself, seeking a refuge, and as the world is getting worse day and night. My day is so much pain,

My day is much struggle; I cry to my Lord to help me through. My people and children my country of my own stand firm and stay strong until the end of time, climate change is so strong. The angry sea will kill us all. So here I cry and there I cry till my Lord helps me through. Tomorrow I am not sure as I try to see the future. As the world is getting worse day and night. My brothers and my sisters sitting on the other side with the open hopes, open laughter and strong future. Reality in the context of climate change (Taki, 2013).

The concept of "searching for myself" is a metaphor of being lost. In this song, the composer is comparing his disappearing islands to the disappearing of his own body. The strong waves eroding the land are like whips beating the body and bringing pain. Once the land disappears,



it also disappears with his whole body.³ Bird (2008: 197) indicates that land is “the living link between the past and the present and the future, and remembering vitalises this living bridge.” But what is the meaning of this theology of lamentation in the Pacific context, where the land is gradually being destroyed and washed away? And how can the Pacific people of Kiribati be good guardians for the next generation when they themselves are losing hope for the future?

The coconut theology of lamentation expresses that which is affecting the lives of the people, and it is a call for an effective response to the changed and changing context in society. The composer also notes that the Kiribati are not alone, as climate change is a global issue: “We live in one world, [and] we are brothers and sisters.” Negative effects of climate change in one place will affect life in other parts of this one planet. In his definition of the earth, Tofaeono (2000: 234) suggests that the earth begins with the household of relationship, where all “members are connected through the web of intimate relationship as brothers and sisters, parents and children, humanity and creation, God and all creation.”

Home is a place where everyone feels warmth, care, and relationship; no one is excluded in the family or regarded as a stranger. When the younger brother subdues the elder sister as a slave and exploits her labour, the integrity of the home is violated. Each has to support each other as part of one family. The theology of lamentation ironically uses this song to reflect on the expression, “Take a walk together with us.” Within the Pacific context, this refers to an invitation to the stranger who caused the problem of the people without knowing or caring about the consequence. This song indicates that life can be relational if humans acknowledge their failure, repent, and fix what they have destroyed.

According to Palu, the breakdown in relationship between the two – the rich and the poor – has helped to give rise to gender inequality, economic injustices, and climate change. As he points out, “All of us are meant to exist in an ‘eco-relational household’ where harmony of life is upheld, and resources are meant to be shared. In such a household, despite being different in race, gender, and identity we are all diversely connected through an ‘ecological reference’” (Palu, 2012). In this regard, this song argues for the perpetrator of global warming to enter and live in the situation of climate victims to see how the inhabitants live and feel – with the storms and waves approaching and destroying their homes and lands. This has the potential to help reimagine the relationship between the poor and the rich and to result in mutual understanding.

The coconut theology of lamentation challenges the powerful nations living in open hope and laughter to see how islanders are struggling for life day and night. It raises a critical question as to how neighbours can enjoy their days when others are suffering because of them. In his interview with the President of Kiribati, Helvarg (2010) stressed that the public is talking, but not all political leaders seem to be listening. Many politicians claim that they need fossil fuels because it provides many jobs and keeps people out of poverty. President Tong asked whether they thought it was fair to allow people in another part of the world to lose their country in order to keep their people in work. If we all work toward a low carbon economy, we may be able to save the planet (Helvarg, 2010). Conradie (2009) is right in saying that we need political will, moral imagination, moral will, moral leadership, and moral vision to address the challenges of climate change. Only this way can we shift destructive consumerist aspirations and attitudes that embrace increasing prosperity at any cost at the expense of sustainable alternatives.

³ In the Kiribati, land is translated *te aba*, which means “people” – not one person but a community of people. Land is more valuable than one person. It is as valuable as a nation or society. In addition, land is also highly significant because it is the home of the people’s ancestral spirits. So, once your land is destroyed, it affects the whole body and spirit of one who owns it. Once the land has disappeared, one’s self has also disappeared.



The Fijian Band (2017) sing a song against Donald Trump, who denies climate change, inviting the president to recognize the impacts of climate change in the Pacific. The phrase “Take a walk with us”⁴ arises from the Pacific context of community life, where people live, walk, and support each other in all circumstances (Band, 2017). To walk together means to live together as part of a family, sharing the same home, context, concerns, and feelings of joy and suffering. It is embedded in the concept of empathy; as Seferosa (2010) says, “The task of weaving in the Pacific is a communal activity – one does not weave alone or for oneself. One weaves together with others and for the community.”

The coconut theology of lamentation also criticizes the church as an agent of globalization, just as scholars argue that the first missionaries who came to the region to spread the Christian message were not only motivated by altruism but also influenced to serve as “agents of the colonial powers that took the leading role in bringing western culture to the Pacific Islands” (Ernst, 2012: 33). This is a critique of powerful nations, urging them to consider eco-justice in their economic development. But it is also a critique of the church, urging it to teach relevant messages about the eco-presence of God among the people – the Christ who has lived in the context and culture of oppression and injustice.

The coconut theology of lamentation reminds the church of the impact of a legacy that the governments and churches need to reconsider in their role as leaders. In this way, they can avoid corruption and discrimination and be more responsive to the needs of the people based on their current situations of suffering. In order to commit ourselves to God’s life-giving mission, we have to listen to what the voices from the margins conceive as life-affirming and life-destroying (Kaunda, 2010). Kaunda (2017: 10) harkens back to his original argument that missiological research (life-giving research) is conversation, “face-to-face encounters between people.” This, Kaunda (2017: 10) argues, allows the people from the margins to have a relevant say in their own futures. He points out that this concept echoes not only the conversation on the road to Emmaus, but also Jesus’ criticizing of dominant ideologies in the New Testament and his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well.

The coconut theology of lamentation is also a challenge to Christians to proclaim the word of God at a time when it is most needed and where it hurts the most (Conradie, 2009: 40). The Council for World Mission general secretary, Collin Cowan, says that part of the legacy is the theology of personal salvation, which promotes heaven, with all its gold, as a future phenomenon reserved for the sufferers of this world and is convenient for free-market consumer ideology. This theology suggests that it is okay for the poor to remain in their misery now since their reward (for suffering?) is in heaven. While we are busy promoting this theology, the unregulated free-market economy wreaks havoc on the worlds’ resources, excessive greed increases, and the few continue to prey on the many (CWM, 2017). The Kiribati churches also preach the comforting message of Noah’s covenant when people encounter the impacts. Even though sea level is rising, cruelly destroying the lives of the people, the church guarantees in its preaching that Noah’s covenant will protect their islands. The misinterpretation of the Bible is a problem that can undermine the relevant message that God works through people’s own cultural skills and talents, helping them to face their own situations.

The coconut theology of lamentation provides the notion of the eco-presence of God among the people – the Christ who has lived in the context and culture of oppression and injustice. This song professes that if people live with faith in Christ who sacrificed himself – who was whipped and beaten to save the life of others – the world will be saved. Those who have been neglected will be embraced and accommodated in the perfect love that only those who live with the notion and faith of God can share.

⁴ The saying “Take a walk with us” was directed at the US President so he would put himself as one who lives among the family of Pacific people to see how the impacts of climate change are affecting their livelihood.



Theology of faith: “Only God knows . . .”

A popular song sung in the Kiribati church about climate change reads as follows:

<i>Ai kamimira taekan rabakau ake a tataekinaki ba e na iekaki aonabara ni korakoran te iabuti.</i>	<i>How astonishing predictions are to say that our islands are to be flooded by the sea level rising.</i>
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<i>Bon te Atua e karika aonnaba ma kanoana ni bane ao e tautaeka iaon bwai nako ake a riki n te aonnaba.</i>	<i>It is only God the Creator who knows what is happening in our world.</i>
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<i>Ngkana tao nanon te Atua ba e na toki te ieka ao antai te tia rabakau ae kona n atai baikai</i>	<i>If it is God’s will to end flooding, who is a scientist who to know these things (Kiito 2010).</i>
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The song literally expresses the strong faith of the Kiribati people in relying on God as their home, refuge, and future. The tone of this song strongly opposes what the scientists say about their islands being submerged in the future. It is a missiological understanding of God the creator versus the scientists and anthropocentric people who spread the news that the islands are drowning. In Kiribati, the new government strongly criticizes the former government’s use of the “Anote Ark” as a tool to advocate in international conferences that Kiribati would be submerged in the next 30 to 50 years (AKAT, 2018). The people do not accept this message because they believe that God is the creator who rules the earth and all therein, even though their low islands will one day be underwater. This song carries the people’s notion of God the creator as the only one who has the power to speak the last word about the islands.

The coconut theology of faith uses songs about climate change to point out that islanders’ faith in God is a strong refuge and nothing can destroy that. The issues of climate change and the rising sea level are addressed with questions that arise out of people’s faith: How can this be happening? Most people do not know anything about climate change. What they know is life in their home country with strong faith in their God, who was and is always there with them and for them. The coconut theology of faith formed the islanders’ belief that God is their protector, provider, and sustainer, who has existed among them at all times. This song echoes the strong belief of the people on the ground: If this (climate change) is happening, can it destroy our strong faith in our God, whom we trust will be with us until the end of time?

This raises a serious theological question, as narrated in Noah’s account, of the great flood. What about the promise God’s made to Noah that he would never again destroy life? Did this promise stop at Noah? Can it not be extended to the people of low-lying Pacific islands? The song is like an “article of faith” in God the creator and ruler, even though the sea level is rising. How does faith in God affect perspectives about climate change? Does singing this article of faith open the eyes of people so that they act in a preventative way to offset the challenges of climate change? Or does it make the people fatalistic, accepting reality without questioning it? Could there be something behind this song that the Kiribati people have overlooked?

The coconut theology of faith argues that when the church fails to provide clear biblical guidelines or to work alongside the people’s faith in God in the context of environmental issues, then the fullness of life embedded within its missio-ecclesial identity and the vocation bequeathed by Jesus (John 10:10) will not be realized. In the context of climate change, which compromises people’s future on this planet, the theology of Christian faith, especially within



the vast Pacific Region,⁵ responds to contemporary environmental threats to life. It addresses wider environmental concerns and develops a vision of justice and human equality that is embedded in the faith of the people.

The coconut theology of faith critiques the colonial framework of reading the Bible that leads people to listen and follow without any say – a non-liberative approach that hinders people from inculturating the gospel in a way that is life-giving to their situation. This traditional reading of the Bible allows people to deny the rising sea level related to global warming by arguing that the Bible clearly indicates there will be no more floods sent by God to destroy humanity. This is expressed in the wording of their song, “*E bon ngae ngkana tao e na iekaki abara ma ti onimaki ba te Atua are te Tia Karikibai e bon teimatoa n raoniira ni karokoa tokin kawaira*” (Even though our low-lying islands will one day be underwater, we still have hope in God the creator that he will be with us until the end of time) (Kiito, 2010). This song is an expression of people’s trust that God will provide for, save, and protect God’s people, and this becomes the motivation for radical acts of resistance against climate change. The song is not an expression of passivity around social actions in defence of their environment, but rather a demonstration that their actions are anchored in their faith in a faithful God. As the sea level is rising, they still hold onto their belief in Noah’s covenant – that God will not forget this promise that he will never destroy the earth again (Talia. 2009: 71).

The coconut theology of faith links issues of climate change and environmental degradation to the mission and preaching of the church. One can argue that we must explore challenges of climate change not only through the resurrection and the cross but through people’s faith in God (Conradie. 2009: 48). This implies that the people’s faith in the transformation of the islands is anchored in their understanding of the coconut tree, in which they perceive the presence of God within their environment as a caring and loving God. The coconut trees in the lives of the people speak of the eco-presence of God – experienced in love and care through the interconnectedness of humans and creation. Thus, the coconut theology challenges the church to be more eco-missional in its efforts to transform societies that have been ignorant of the effects of climate change on their land and environment.

Conclusion

The article argues that climate change is the result of humanity’s pollution of the earth. Humans are supposed to be stewards of the universe, but instead are exploitive and destructive, regarding themselves as rulers of all creation. The cry of the Pacific nations has always been that they are the victims; that the larger nations seek wealth, comfort, and an easy life at the expense of the smaller nations. The silence of the church in the face of these issues has raised much criticism of the Western-style Christianity the missionaries brought to Kiribati. Moves have been made in recent years to overcome Christianity in favour of a Pacific-style of theology that incorporates elements of tradition and culture from the various islands. The coconut tree theology that is now widespread through the Pacific islands is conceived of as a divine source of all being in the Kiribati context. The people cannot continue to exist on the island without the coconut. Hence, it is entrenched within their worldview as a source of life. It is a symbol of both life and God to the islanders of the Pacific, as it embodies the culture and cycle of life that shapes the environment of the people (Palu, 2012).

This inculcation of traditional elements into Pacific Christianity includes song. Songs are a vital part of Kiribati culture and tradition; songs play an important role in keeping alive the people’s oral tradition and their historical awareness of their origin and ethnicity. Songs are critical in

⁵ “Pacific” is a foreign prescribed name and not one given by the local people. According to the National Oceanic Service, the term Pacific was coined by Portuguese navigator Ferdinand Magellan, who in 1519 on a journey across the Atlantic Ocean seeking a western route to the Spice Island via South America came across the ocean. Its calm and peaceful nature led him to designate the name (National Ocean Service 2017).



the Kiribati worldview. In their context of unjust victimization, they turned to song as a means of expressing their hopes and fears in the face of rising sea levels. Through songs, they grieve the loss of their islands and the vanished future of their children. Songs are the article of faith of the people, who rely on God as their home, refuge, and future. Therefore, songs function as a critical tool to articulate coconut tree knowledge within Kiribati cosmology. Based on these findings, the article argues that climate change songs embody critical theologies that can help the church – in its search for contextual relevance and effective response to climate change – embrace Indigenous imagination.

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