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CHRISTIANITY, KIRIBATI, AND CLIMATE CHANGE INDUCED MIGRATION
[FETALAI GAGAEOLO, SARAH HEMSTOCK, CONNOR PRICE]

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ABSTRACT:

This chapter examines the perceived socio-cultural impacts of relocation to Fiji through the lens of target communities in Kiribati. Findings based on the perceptions of Kiribati communities reveal that relocation is the last 'adaptation resort' to escape and offset individual losses caused by climate change. It is viewed as an option that will compromise their socio-cultural practices and values in the long term. This study indicates that attention should not be focused only on factors that drive human relocation but should also prioritize justifications of those who choose not to relocate. This approach will better serve community expectations for in-country climate change adaptation and help shape future strategies and/or policies on climate change driven relocation. Finally, policies and adaptation initiatives should be holistically framed; integrating values that are important to grassroots level such as socio-cultural values; and spiritual and mobility concerns for informed decision making at all levels.

KEYWORDS:

(Please supply up to 6 keywords for your Chapter)

1. Climate change
2. Migration
3. Kiribati
4. Fiji
5. Spirituality
6. Climate refugee

Main Body:

Introduction

The impacts of climate change on societies and cultures within the Pacific are extensive, far reaching, and rapid (Hausia Havea et al., 2018; IPCC, 2018). There are a range of factors that contribute to increasing vulnerability of small island developing states in the Pacific islands region to climate change, including geographic isolation, ecological uniqueness and fragility, human population pressures and associated waste disposal problems. It is important to note the centrality of Christianity to Pacific culture, and the likely implications this holds for understanding and addressing climate change (Capstick et al., 2018; Hausia Havea et al., 2017).

A survey of 1,226 students at the University of the South Pacific found that over 80% of them attended church at least on a weekly basis; this is a sample of the region's educated urban elite, and therefore its future climate leaders (Nunn, 2017). This factor coupled with the climate crisis the region faces makes the relationship of religion and climate change an essential facet to research. The argument for a closer consideration of the role of religion in tackling climate change in the Pacific islands has begun to be taken up by researchers, who have suggested that religion has an essential role to play in how people make sense of climate change in the region (McLeod, 2010; Capstick et al., 2018; Hausia Havea et al., 2019). Therefore, this chapter looks to explore this relationship with a focus on the spiritual dimension of climate change induced migration (from Kiribati to Fiji) and its associated cultural impacts.

Background

It is inevitable that "migration" would be viewed as an adaptation strategy and Kiribati was the first nation to prepare for climate induced migration. In 2014, the Church of England sold their 20km² land holding in Fiji to the Government of Kiribati, who bought it in a flurry of press attention and political gesture with the intention of using it firstly to improve Kiribati's food security, and secondly as a place to relocate to.

In July 2017, in his opening address as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, COP23 President, the Prime Minister of Fiji Frank Bainimarama, in an awesome speech, stated:

"...No one living in the Pacific can be left in any doubt about what is at stake. ... As Pacific Islanders, we are fighting for our very survival.

Of all the vulnerable nations of the world, you [Kiribati and Tuvalu] are the most vulnerable....

And even if the battle to keep your islands above the water is lost, we will continue to stand shoulder- to-shoulder with you. Fiji has offered to give permanent refuge to the people of Kiribati and Tuvalu, our closest neighbours under threat.

In a worst-case scenario, we know that there will be climate refugees throughout the world. But the people of Kiribati and Tuvalu will not be refugees. We Fijians will embrace you and take you into our homes and our hearts. That is our solemn promise to you as Pacific neighbours and friends. ..." (Bainimarama, 2017).

Following on from this momentous commitment from Fiji, in 2018, New Zealand legally recognised the status of "climate refugees" and offered 100 visas a year to Pacific Islanders on that basis (Office

of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2019). It is a token gesture since it would take more than a thousand years to evacuate Kiribati's current population of approximately 116,000 people, but the recognition of "climate refugee" status is important. Oakes et al., (2016) found that in Kiribati, 94% of households had been impacted by natural hazards between 2005 and 2015, with 81% being affected by sea-level rise. Relocation seems a sensible option in the face of those impacts.

However, this study finds that Kiribati communities (I-Kiribati) are not willing to leave. It is apparent that many Pacific Islanders are ready to accept the impacts of climate change on their islands and are opposed to forced relocation which they recognise as compromising their solid foundation and faith in God.

"I was born as a Kiribati, so I will die as a Kiribati. I don't care if I would die poor here on my own land. Just wait, if it's God's will to wash Kiribati away, so be it. We do not know the hour and the day for the end of time to arrive. We can relate this to Noah's time. We have to blame ourselves because of the rumours of climate change that have been ongoing; it is a sign that we have changed a lot. Climate is changing because humans are changing; we are modifying the natural resources from God and living rebelliously" (#15 Male, Abaiang, Kiribai).

It would be a mistake to overlook these views given their prevalence among the communities in Kiribati, where more than 90% of the population identify as Christian, and the Pacific as a whole (Nunn, 2017). These views on climate change are complex and to some extent can be demonstrated through multiple formulations of the Noah story with corresponding ethical and political imaginaries (Fair, 2018). However, these accounts provide locally meaningful and morally compelling counter-narratives of Pacific regional climate change issues.

Study Design

The design of this study was non-experimental. Most of the participants involved in this research were randomly selected with a few selected key informants irrespective of age, sex and status. A total of 56 interviews were conducted. Primary data was qualitative and records personal experiences and perceptions of climate and environmental changes. Relocation was explored in relation to how it would influence socio-cultural issues with specific reference to Fiji as the host country. The study was conducted in Kiribati where core information and data were collected from two islands; South Tarawa and Abaiang.

Emerging Themes

The study set out to discuss the spiritual dimension of relocation experienced by I-Kiribati moving from Kiribati to Fiji.

From interviews it emerged that spirituality enabled people to cope with climate change impacts in Kiribati and could potentially provide successful adaptation strategies. Most studies on climate change induced mobility (Australian Government, 2014; Donner, 2015; Remling, 2020) focus on migration patterns or the political, environmental, socio-economic and scientific aspects. Previous studies have little emphasis on the concerns and justifications of those who refuse to migrate and specifically, no studies were found which examine those who refuse to migrate on a spiritual basis. It is important to note that the refusal, based on spiritual beliefs, of many I-Kiribati to relocate to Fiji does not mean that are in denial or climate sceptic. Their refusal is rooted in their awareness of dangerous climate change impacts worldwide, so efforts to escape it are viewed as pointless. In response to this acceptance, study participants were actively adapting to climate change "spiritually"; hence building up their spiritual persona by "realigning their ways to God's decrees"

which they believe to be their best adaptation option. Peoples' justifications are based on their own Christian biblical interpretations which they used to explain their real-life experiences.

Responses indicated three themes to explain how people are coping with climate change spiritually. First, people have strong 'faith in God' to defend them in this climate crisis; second is their strong belief that as long as their 'inner being' is secure and in tune with God then the direct threats of climate change on their physical being are not a worry; and third, was the biblical belief that climate change was one of the apocalyptic signs of the world's end times. Since the majority of the responses were from people with Christian backgrounds, they formulated conclusions based on the Bible to justify their views. Based on their faith, the Bible provides the normative and definitive basis for interpretation of all events. For those that adhere to such interpretations, it reveals the secrets to the unseen fixed and predetermined future that awaits the world, including climate change.

Theme 1 – A strong connection to and 'faith in God' as the source of refuge.

The participants who refused to relocate were very optimistic about their decisions despite their awareness of their vulnerability to climate change. One of the responses was, 'Wait, because at the moment there is still not yet a clear sign that Kiribati would submerge. Relocation can be the answer right now, but we still have to wait on what the Lord has for Kiribati' (#12 Male, South Tarawa).

'For us, we believe that Jesus is coming soon. If we're faithful to Him, then the problem won't matter, because we also have another "home in heaven". We have a lot of plans like building a ship but if we have faith then I'm sure God will see us through, we have to be prepared' (#21 Male, South Tarawa).

Given their interpretation of God as the creator of nature, it is understandable why the grassroots are claiming God to be more trustworthy in delivering them from climate change impacts than human scientific knowledge and physical solutions. One respondent mentioned; 'We run here and there to our neighbours but they are also affected. So that was the chance for us to look up to God for a heavenly solution. Maybe God has allowed climate to change to draw people closer to Him' (#10 Female, South Tarawa).

Theme 2 'As long as my inner nature is saved and in tune with God's will'

The second justification was the belief that 'as long as the inner nature or spiritual person is saved and in tune with God's will, then the means of relocating for the security and safety of the physical nature is not obligatory'. One of the detailed responses was, 'No (I won't move), it is better I stay and die here in Kiribati rather than dying in a foreign country that we have no knowledge about. Fiji cannot save me from dying; we will all die no matter where we run so it's better I die here. I will not move as long as my inside person is safe and secure no matter what would happen with my physical being' (#5 Female, South Tarawa). Another respondent mentioned, 'Wait, I will not go as long as I am saved in the inside. Kiribati will not be submerged because God says in His bible that there would be no more flooding' (#35 Male, South Tarawa). These responses created more questions than they answered, namely; 'What does it mean, 'as long as the spiritual person is saved', and what is the 'spiritual person' and what are they being saved from? Their understanding appeared to be that no physical life would be spared in the wrath of climate change, and that running away from it cannot reverse its consequences. This study revealed that the security of their spiritual nature has given insights into a legitimate aspect of human security in the face of climate change.

'We believe that Jesus is preparing the best home for us in heaven, so I think it's best to prepare the person inside or the spiritual person so that when the end times arrive or you die, your inside person goes straight to heaven where there is joy, peace and love, no more crying, sorrow or even death'

(#5 Female, South Tarawa). Another respondent also mentioned, [...] 'If we're faithful to Him (God), then the problem won't be that much because we have another home in heaven' (#33 Male, South Tarawa).

Possibilities were also expressed with regards to biblical references to a destructive future based on the participant's spiritual views. 'Physical is physical, saving our lives physically such as relocating to other places would not save us from the end of the world that is at hand. Now is the time to be prepared because the kingdom of heaven is near' (#5 Female, South Tarawa). Such compelling views reveal that local communities of Kiribati are already looking at climate change beyond science and politics, and furthermore, view human security from an eternal point of view. There were many biblical sources referred to as evidence for these perceptions - Amos 5: 19; Zephaniah 1:2-3; Zephaniah 1: 14-16.

Theme 3: Anthropogenic climate change: An apocalyptic sign of the end times and an appointed time for all to 'return to God'.

There seemed to be a linkage between climate change and the end times according to the responses. Although climate change is anthropogenic, through the lens of Kiribati people, it is allowed by God as a warning for all humanity to repent and return to Him and that the end times and the establishment of His Kingdom is at hand. Hence in Kiribati, climate change is not just an indication of a physical crisis but primarily a spiritual crisis. One respondent mentioned, 'I don't want to move, God placed me here, I will not lose thinking about my own land but whenever I move I would always think as a Kiribati until the very last day; these are the signs of the end times that Jesus is coming soon, and we have to get ready and repent' (#10 Female, South Tarawa). Another respondent also mentioned, quoting from the bible, 'Yes, in the book of Matthew 24, it mentions all the signs of the end times and of Jesus' coming, for example pestilences and so forth. Climate change is also a sign of the end times' (#21 Male, South Tarawa). Another also responded, 'Climate change is very much related also to the signs of the end times we are in. At times we talk about this problem, it is one of the signs that the end of times is coming' (#12 Male, South Tarawa).

People's reasoning based on biblical interpretation stresses that the world is in a new era of changes. 'We have to blame ourselves because of the rumours of climate change been ongoing; it is a sign that we have changed a lot. Climate is changing because humans are changing; we are modifying the natural resources from God and living rebelliously' (#15 Male, Abaiang). Another interview was based on Matthew 24, 'the people during Jesus time asked, What is the sign of the end of the world, then Jesus replied, the stones that you see, there will be no stone on top of another, in other words, the stones will be washed off similarly to what we see now with our sea walls because of sea level rise. So this is one of the signs that the world should be aware of, that the end of time is drawing near' (#21 Male, South Tarawa).

Conclusions

In exploring relocation it was brought to light that climate change, through the lens of Kiribati communities, is not just a matter of physical, environmental, political or economic crisis but a spiritual crisis. Kiribati people are looking beyond the physical challenges and interpreting climate change from a spiritual dimension in order to understand and take action accordingly. Through their strong spiritual connections and beliefs, I-Kiribati have confidence and faith to remain on their islands rather than relocate. Paradoxically, spirituality could hold the key to successful relocation. It is, therefore, essential to include considerations of religion and spirituality and the role of churches in the settlement of Pacific migrants, as also argued by McLeod (2010). Religion and spirituality are

the foundation of Kiribati communities and the spiritual side of the 'self' is a significant feature of climate change adaptation.

With international dialogues around climate change branching into many diverse issues, Kiribati people have considered human security from an eternal viewpoint, which does not prevent practical interventions for successful adaptation if relocation becomes necessary. Rather it defines the essential values that will make an adaptation strategy successful. Therefore, the views and justifications of those who refuse to migrate or relocate from a spiritual angle should not be ignored in climate change induced mobility or anthropology studies.

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