

GILBERT AND ELLICE ISLANDS COLONY.

S. G.

No. 11.

Ocean Island,

19th November, 1937.

Sir,

As directed by His Honour the Resident Commissioner, I have the honour to submit the following report on the causes and extent of over-population and "land hunger" in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony, with special reference to the proposed scheme for the relief of increasing population congestion by emigration to the Phoenix Islands. An exact statistical survey of the amount of over-population would necessitate a visit of several weeks to each of the islands concerned and the investigation of thousands of individual cases. I do not consider, however, that a detailed enquiry of this nature is necessary at this early stage of the scheme as there can be little doubt that a considerable measure of over-population and land-hunger does exist in the colony and my enquiries have convinced me that there are more deserving cases in the Southern Gilbert Islands alone than can be found immediate room for in the Phoenix Group.

2. In order to avoid any misconception, however, it can be definitely stated that no one in the Colony is living in a state of destitution - the claims of kinship and clan are too strong for anyone to be left to starve. At the same time the

Gilbertese

The Acting Secretary to Government,  
Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony,  
Ocean Island.

Gilbertese as a race are so prolific that they would soon exhaust the slender resources of their islands if they did not limit the size of their families by artificial means.

The population capacity of these barren atolls is strictly limited by nature and the islanders, who thus unwittingly exemplify the doctrines of Malthus, have from time immemorial realised that only by carefully limiting the number of their offspring by artificial methods could they hope to prevent the operation of the less pleasant natural checks of starvation and incessant warfare.

3. Many authorities could be cited in support of the above statements but, in view of the fact that the matter is probably beyond argument, I will confine myself to quoting only two careful observers.

The Rev. L.H. Gulick, M.D., a recognised early authority on Micronesia, writes of the Gilbertese in 1860, -

"So prolific are they as yet on the greater number of the islands, so uncontaminated with foreign disease, that their population is deliberately limited by practising abortion to prevent too great a number of mouths. Their numbers are also shown by the sanguinary nature of their battles."

Sir Basil Thomson, an observer writing long after the establishment of the Protectorate, states as follows, -

"As the Gilbert islanders are credited with being excessively prolific, and are said to be the only race in the South Seas that would increase if artificial means were not used to prevent the population exceeding the capacity of the islands, it will be well to compare their methods of midwifery as described by Teerabungu, a professional midwife. On her island - Tamana - ..... She said that four or five children are considered enough, and any above that number are not allowed to come to maturity. All the women practise

practise abortion because they are so prolific. If they did not they would have from ten to twenty children apiece. But neither medicine nor instruments are used. The common method is to pound the abdomen with a billet of wood, and this is not fatal to the mother. Now, however, the practice is being abandoned, because the missionaries have persuaded the people that it is dangerous."

Again, on a later page, he speaks of, "Various methods of inducing miscarriage by violence, such as are practised by the Gilbert Islanders, who pound the abdomen of a pregnant woman with stones, or force the foetus downwards by winding a cord tightly about her body."

Similar conditions prevailed on at any rate Niutao Island in the Ellice Group. The Rev. W. Gill states that on that island, "it was their custom, in seasons of scarcity, to make war on certain families. The conquered men, women, and children were either slain or cruelly driven to sea in canoes, without food or water."

4. The present inhabitants of the various islands make no secret of the existence of artificial checks to population increase in the past. The natives state that it is precisely because such artificial controls are frowned upon by the missions and prohibited by the government that a population problem exists today and will necessarily grow more acute year by year. It should be remembered, furthermore, that the successful efforts of the Colony Medical Department in reducing the Death, and in particular the infant mortality, rate will inevitably add further to the embarrassment of the Gilbertese when endeavouring to adjust his natural prolificity to his limited food resources. Contrary to an opinion generally held by European residents

residents, there are no contraceptive methods known to the Islanders and the only artificial population check now employed is that of abortion, a practice which, though still common, is less prevalent than in former times.

5. The Gilbertese hold that, left to themselves, they can deal effectively with their population problems, but as this is not presumably feasible their surplus numbers should be permitted and assisted to emigrate. I must confess that their argument appears convincing to me and I would submit that the government is under a definite moral obligation to facilitate the emigration of the Gilbertese. After all, in virtually all small islands of the Pacific it has been the practice from time immemorial, whenever the population threatened to overstep the resources of the island, for the surplus inhabitants to set sail in search of new lands. Should the government permit the native to migrate, therefore, it would be merely assisting him to carry out a custom sanctioned by his forbears. Failing such assistance it is difficult to see how the government will be able to insist on a rigid enforcement of the law against abortion, which is based on purely western ideas of ethics and has never received the sanction of native opinion.

6. A table is annexed to this letter showing the changes in the population of each island in the Southern Gilberts from 1876 to the present day. From this it will be seen that the population of the District has remained virtually stationary throughout the present century whereas all the other islands of the Colony have shown increases, in some cases of a substantial nature. This confirms Mr. G.M. Murdoch's statement, made in his letter to the Resident Commissioner, No. 51 of the 5th May, 1911, that the islands of Beru, Nikunau, Onofu, Tanana, and Arorae, "would not comfortably carry any more population than they have at present".

Enclosure 1.

The table

The table unfortunately conveys a somewhat false impression, not only owing to the unreliability of the early estimates, but because it does not show that a large percentage of the population than ever before consists of young people. At every island it was explained that, given the room, the next generation will witness a great expansion of the population but that at present there was no space for any great numbers of children. In other words, even were it admitted that the Southern Gilbert Islands can support, with difficulty, their present population, there is absolutely no room for expansion and unless the practice of abortion is to be resorted to more extensively in future there is going to be a really acute land shortage within the next few years. The potential fertility of the race is greater than ever and we have broken down the old controls.

7. It should be emphasized, furthermore, that even allowing for the fact that a portion of the population is able to obtain employment on Ocean, Fanning, or Washington Islands, it is difficult for the Southern Gilbert Islands to maintain the same population as in former years, since a certain amount of money, or its equivalent in copra, is now an absolute necessity for each family. Due to the advent of the government and the missions a native and his family can no longer consume the entire produce of their lands. He must have a surplus to pay his government tax, the various levies of the mission, the fines of the Native Court, the clothing of himself and his family in accordance with what are considered to be the wishes of the government and mission, and for numberless other things which it is now obligatory for him to provide. It is estimated that approximately one-third of the coconut crop, which would formerly have been consumed by the native owners, is now required for taxation or other indirect purposes.

8. The natives of the Ellice Islands have a higher standard of living than the Gilbertese and even a poor Ellice islander would be considered a comparatively rich man by the Gilbertese. A striking illustration of this difference in wealth is shown by the number of young coconuts used for drinking purposes - on an average an Ellice island family requires two carrying loads of 20 nuts each daily for drinking, whereas on the poorer islands in the Gilbert Group a native would be severely censured by public opinion if he used a single nut for this purpose. Niutao is by far the poorest of the Ellice Islands and there the natives stated that they could not afford to drink more than five nuts daily per family. I discussed the question of relative poverty with the Administrative Officer, Ellice Islands, Mr. D. G. Kennedy, and we agreed that whereas a Gilbertese family could be considered as being below the poverty line if the members did not possess enough coconuts for food purposes plus a surplus sufficient to bring in an annual sum of 30/- for necessities, the corresponding line in the Ellice Group should be drawn at enough coconuts for food and drink plus a surplus sufficient to bring in at least 65 per annum.

9. Owing to the inevitable inequality in the distribution of land in the Gilbert Islands, where individual ownership prevails, I consider that several families could be found on nearly every island who are sufficiently poor to desire to emigrate. At the same time my investigations have convinced me that the greatest measure of over-population and "land-hunger" exists on the islands of Beru, Arorae, Onotoa, and Nikunau, in that order. I have never had an opportunity of studying the land question on Nonouti but I have been informed by several natives that there are many families there who have insufficient land and are anxious to emigrate. By far the most over-populated island is Beru, where over

where over 2,000 natives inhabit a remarkably unfertile island some eleven miles long. In the Ellice Group the most over-crowded island is Niutao, while a few families might be willing to emigrate from Nanumea. Were it not for the comparative fertility of the soil, a small island like Niutao would not be able to support more than four or five hundred even on a Gilbertese standard.

10. It is impossible to give any exact figures of the number of families on each island anxious to populate new lands. I understand, however, that nearly 1,000 natives on Beru have signified their desire to emigrate. From native informants I gather that Arorae and Onotoa would furnish another 500 candidates each and that at least a further 1,500 could be obtained from the remaining islands in the Gilbert Group. With regard to the Ellice islands probably 100 would be anxious to emigrate from Niutao and about 30 from Nanumea. In my opinion it can be safely held that few, if any, natives would be willing to give up their ancestral lands on their own islands and emigrate unless they were genuine cases deserving of government assistance.

11. To summarize my conclusions, I consider that:-
- (a) Over-population and "land-hunger" exists to a varying degree on several of the Gilbert islands and on the island of Niutao in the Ellice Group;
  - (b) To a certain extent it is not so much a question of actual shortage of land for the present adult generation as a lack of room for expansion for the youth of the race. Its full effects will, therefore, not be seen until the present disproportionate number of children and young people reach a marriageable age;
  - (c) The over-population is caused through the abandonment of the old population checks of infanticide, emigration, and warfare,

and warfare, and a decrease in abortion, due to the establishment of British rule, coupled with the fact that the native is no longer able to consume all his food resources but must convert a portion into cash or its equivalent, which results in the islands not being able to support as many inhabitants as before;

(d) The government is therefore under a certain obligation to assist the poorer families to emigrate, provided there are suitable untenanted lands in existence.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your obedient servant,

(Signed). H. E. Maude,

Commissioner for Native Lands,

Gilbert Islands.



Population change in the Southern Gilbert Islands.

<u>Island.</u>	<u>1876</u> <sup>1</sup>	<u>1883-6</u> <sup>2</sup>	<u>1895</u>	<u>1901-2</u>	<u>1911</u>	<u>1914</u>	<u>1921</u>	<u>1931</u>
Nonouti	- 4,500	-	-	2,924	2,601	2,622	2,273	2,255
Tabiteuea	- 7,000 <sup>4</sup>	7,500 <sup>3</sup>	-	4,343	3,858	4,268	3,590	3,702
Beru	- 2,500	2,000 <sup>2</sup>	-	2,309	2,305	2,219	2,170	2,241
Nikunau	- 2,000	1,850 <sup>2</sup>	1,684	1,681	1,715	1,708	1,647	1,674
Onofoa	- 950 <sup>5</sup>	1,052 <sup>2</sup>	967	1,398	1,585	1,542	1,425	1,639
Tamana	- 1,700 <sup>6</sup>	570 <sup>25</sup>	-	769	870	-	814	989
Arorae	- 600 <sup>5</sup>	1,200 <sup>37</sup>	960	1,050	1,282	-	1,225	1,451

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- <sup>1</sup> from Turner, G. - "Samoa, a hundred years ago and long before". London, 1884.
  - <sup>2</sup> from Woodford, C. M. - "The Gilbert Islands". Journ. of the R.G.S., October, 1895.
  - <sup>3</sup> from Brigham, W. T. - "An Index to the Islands of the Pacific Ocean". Memoirs of the Bernice P. Bishop Mus., 1900.
  - <sup>4</sup> based on an estimate made by Capt. Randall in 1860.
  - <sup>5</sup> figures artificially depressed owing to raids made by blackbirders, 1870-75.
  - <sup>6</sup> probably an over-estimate, but made before the blackbirders had visited Tamana.
  - <sup>7</sup> includes natives re-patriated by blackbirders.

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All other figures are from Government Censuses.

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Enclosure II.

Works Cited.

1. Collett, Rev. L. H., M.A. - "Lectures on Micronesia. Lecture V, The Gilbert Islands". The Polynesian, 1860-61. Vol. XVII, No. 36.
  2. Thomson, Sir Basil. - "The Fijians. A Study of the Decay of Custom". London, 1908.
  3. Best, Elsdon. - "Polynesian Voyagers - The Maori as a Deep-sea Navigator, Explorer, and Colonizer". Wellington, N.Z., 1923.
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