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CLIMATE CHANGE SONGS AND EMOTIONS

ARTICULATING AGENCY IN THE CENTRAL PACIFIC

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Elfriede Hermann & Wolfgang Kempf

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ARTICULATING AGENCY IN THE CENTRAL PACIFIC

ABSTRACT

Articulations of vulnerability, of the will to address the challenges posed by climate change, and of criticism of the international community's inadequate efforts to limit global warming have taken many forms. In the Central Pacific atoll nation of Kiribati, songs associated with emotions are one of the artistic forms used to convey these articulations. In this paper, we turn our attention to a song about climate change that was written in English to reach the global community. We argue that this song, with its highly articulated and evoked emotions, represents a political practice in which the agency of atoll inhabitants is expressed. This song allows the protest against international climate policies to be heard and felt on the global stage. Although Kiribati is considered particularly vulnerable, the composer resists portraying the nation as a victim of climate change. Instead, he emphasizes the people's agency and calls on the global community to take appropriate action.

1. Introduction

In the past few decades, scientific projections of physical effects of anthropogenic climate change on small islands have been circulating in the Pacific region, or Oceania. Projections for this region have been compiled by scientists (e.g., L. Kumar 2020) and summarized by successive assessment reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the latest being AR6 (IPCC 2021). From these assessments it becomes clear that during the 21st century there will very likely be a continuation of global warming, heat extremes, ocean acidification, and sea-level rise, which along with storm surges will lead to a higher incidence of coastal erosion and the intrusion of saltwater into aquifers. The extent of these and other consequences of climate change, such as the intensity of tropical cyclones, will depend on the extent of greenhouse gas emissions (IPCC 2021). Atoll countries, among them the Marshall Islands, Kiribati, Tuvalu and Tokelau in the central Pacific region, have long been considered to be most vulnerable as their atolls stand only a few metres above the surrounding ocean (e.g., Barnett and Adger 2003; Nunn and R. Kumar 2006; Nunn 2009: 212; Connell 2015; Barnett 2017). Although suggestions for managing climate change impacts have long been addressed not only to political decision makers in the respective Pacific countries but also to the global community (see e.g., Nunn 2009; Barnett and Campbell 2010), international support for adaptation to climate change was not sufficient (Barnett 2017: 3). One of the reasons for the hesitant support on the part of the global community was, according to Barnett (2017: 3), "a collective disassociation from the grave risks climate change poses to atoll countries."

The central Pacific state of Kiribati, with its 32 low-lying atolls or reef islands, and Banaba, a raised limestone island, counts among the most vulnerable atoll countries. In Kiribati the threats posed by effects of climate change have been known and dealt with since the 1990s (Neemia and Thaman 1993: 288, 295; Uan and Anderson 2014: 243).

Successive governments of Kiribati have demanded that the international community employ measures to limit greenhouse gas emissions. They have spoken on behalf of their country at regional and international conferences on climate change and joined associations like the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) and the Coalition of Atoll Nations on Climate Change (CANCC) in order to press for emissions reduction (Hermann and Kempf 2019: 299–301). In a political atmosphere of intensified climate change discourses causing deep concern in many I-Kiribati, the citizens of Kiribati, some of the Islanders have drawn on the performing arts, including songs, to cope. Thus a few old songs have been reinterpreted, one of them has been used in innovative ways combined with film and dance (Hermann and Kempf 2018), and new ones have been composed. All these songs are designed to evoke emotional responses in their listeners. While several of the earlier lyrics are set in Kiribati language to raise the awareness within the population, a few of the more recent climate change songs are composed in English, with an outside audience in mind.

In this paper, we focus our attention on a climate change song composed in 2010 by Betarim Rimon. The composer intentionally used English so as to address the global community in an effort to facilitate a collective international association with I-Kiribati and inhabitants of other small islands. This song, which subsequently has become widely known in Kiribati and beyond, can fairly be called a protest song, since in it the composer articulates his critique of international climate policy with his own political concerns. On the one hand, the song gives expression to the emotions the I-Kiribati feel. On the other hand, it addresses the emotions of the audience and makes an urgent appeal to the global community. In this connection, we argue that this climate change song, with the emotions it expresses and evokes, represents a political practice that articulates the agency of the atoll inhabitants.

Our theoretical approach draws inspiration from practice theory, assemblage theory, discourse analysis, political ecology, and biographical research. Practice theory as represented by Sherry Ortner (1999, 2006) offered the concept of agency, defined as the ability to bring influence to bear on others and on processes, even as one is subjected to structures, the effects of events and processes, and the actions of others. Here the analytic gaze is trained on the power relationships and cultural meanings, but also on the subjectivity of humans and the projects they follow in their practices. Broadening our perspective to include the agency of non-human actants, we draw on assemblage theory as developed by Jane Bennett (2010). Informed by her concept of distributive agency, we are attentive to how songs (Kempf 2017) and emotions (Hermann 2004, 2017) can be efficacious in various networks. Studies of the reception of climate change discourses in Oceania (e.g., Barnett und Campbell 2010; Rudiak-Gould 2011, 2013; Lazarus 2012; contributions to Crook and Rudiak-Gould 2018) have noted that social scientific research should pay more attention to the Islanders' awareness of problems, their knowledge and value systems, and the solutions they propose. Indeed, the I-Kiribati – and other Pacific Islanders living in vulnerable regions – challenge us implicitly and explicitly to do just this and recognize their agency. Heightened attention to agency, discourses, and power relationships is also part of the approach of today's political ecology (Biersack 2006), which additionally provides us with theoretical perspectives on reciprocal human–nature relations, local–global articulations, and inequalities on various scales. In looking at political practice, we draw on Swartz, Turner and Tuden (2002: 107), who defined 'political' as characterizing "everything that is at once public, goal-oriented, and that involves a differential of power (in the sense of control) among the individuals of the group in question." Concerning the definitional component of power, however, we use Foucault's (1983: 221) understanding of the "exercise of power as a mode of action upon the actions of others." We combine these theoretical lenses with research on emotion, which understands emotions and emotional discourses as a culturally constituted social practice and attends to how emotion "serves as an operator in a contentious field of social activity, how it affects a social field, and how it can serve as an idiom for communicating" (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990: 11). Biographical research, with its sensitivity to both the historical life course and its shaping during narration and dialogue (Peacock and Holland 1993), trained our attention on the

composers' biographies (cf. Kempf 2003). In attending to Kiribati songs as a form of social practice in which emotional discourses crystallize, we also draw inspiration from Mary Lawson's work (1989, 1998), which emphasized the interaction of cognitive and emotional aspects as well as the affective power of Kiribati music and dance.

The data we present in this paper were co-produced with our interlocutors in Kiribati between 2009 and 2017, during which we did fieldwork for about one month each year on various atolls. During our interviews, I-Kiribati and Banabans told us of their attitudes towards climate change, their emotions, and the role of songs in coping with projections of the effects of climate change. After Betarim Rimon presented his climate change song to us in 2012, we met and interviewed him every year on various issues, including his song. In methodological terms, we conducted narrative as well as semi-structured interviews (supplemented by more structured interviewing via questionnaires), engaged in "observing partial participation in discourses" (Hermann 2017: 53), and participant observation. Betarim Rimon discussed an earlier version of this paper with us, which allowed us to correct details and include his additional explanations. During our stays in Kiribati, we were also invited to learn about environmental changes during field walks. All of this was complemented by digital communication (primarily via email) and information gathered from private, public, governmental, and non-governmental archives as well as Internet sources.

In the following, we will first set the scene by briefly summarizing the development of policies on climate change, the reception of discourses on the issue, and emotional responses in Kiribati. We continue to give some context by turning to a spectrum of climate change songs and to the culture of composing in this country. Based on this, the songwriter Betarim Rimon and his climate change song are presented along with his interpretation. Subsequently, we analyze discursive connections the song has with policies and religion. After looking at the dissemination of the song, we attend to the political practice that the song represents, the agency expressed in the song, and the accompanying emotions.

2. Climate Change in Kiribati: Policies, Discourses and Emotions

Since the 1990s, under the impact of scientific projections and globally circulating discourses on the potential negative consequences of climate change, the various governments of Kiribati have sought to protect the land, inhabitants, and nation through both national policies and engagement in regional and international forums. Teburoro Tito, during his tenure (1994–2003) as president of the atoll nation, laid important foundations for the country's future climate policy with the ratification of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the presentation of the Initial Communication under the UNFCCC (Kiribati Government 1999). This also included the Kiribati Adaptation Program (KAP), a pilot project on adaptation to climate change, which was continued and expanded by the subsequent government under Anote Tong.

For his part, President Anote Tong made climate change a major policy focus of his terms in office (2003–2016). In his speeches at international political forums, Tong highlighted the existential threat the effects of climate change posed to atoll states and the necessity of mitigating greenhouse gases. Regarding the projections of the climate sciences that predicted that atolls, as the 21st century progressed, would no longer be able to accommodate the same population as today, President Tong devised the concept of "migration with dignity." He always stressed that the answer to the problem of climate change won't be migration alone, and that relocation is the last resort; yet he saw his government as bearing responsibility for building a pathway to the future and, at the same time, offering the I-Kiribati a variety of options.

The current government under President Taneti Maamau, which has been in office since March 2016, is primarily striving for improvements in the areas of prosperity, infrastructure, security, and governance. The vulnerability of the atoll state to the effects of

climate change is considered a serious limitation on the path to realizing these goals. Therefore, the Maamau government emphasizes the need to incorporate adaptation and mitigation measures to minimize the risks and achieve the intended development goals. The focus is on a policy that de-emphasizes migration and diaspora as a means of adaptation to climate change, and instead reclaims land, belonging, and future in Kiribati.

As Kiribati's governments have developed climate change policies over the years, various discourses on the projected consequences of the changing climate have gradually been building up in the country. Representatives of national and foreign governments, international organizations and NGOs, sciences, churches, media, and individual citizens have all played their part in importing and circulating information about anthropogenic climate change. I-Kiribati, understanding that climate change discourses purport to contain an important message about their future, have received, processed, interpreted, reworked, and responded to these discursive formations in their own ways. Some have adopted the essential findings of scientific modelling along with the projection of existential threats to atolls, while others have accepted the basic truth of climate change without believing that the changes would severely endanger their home islands. Yet others have rejected the truth of claims that climatic change would have grave local effects, drawing on religious beliefs, environmental knowledge, and political or cultural arguments (cf. Teuatabo 2002; Kuruppu and Liverman 2011). Those who subscribe to discourses about dangerous effects of climate change frequently emphasize their concern about sea-level rise (Neemia-Mackenzie 2004: 40; Hermann and Kempf 2018: 22; Kempf 2019). In any case, the intensity with which climate change was being debated as well as the foci of discourses highlighting either *in-situ* adaptation and/or migration as adaptation varied depending on the political context framed by the respective government policies.

Interacting with the diverse discourses on climate change, I-Kiribati have responded not only with thoughts, planning, and implementation of adaptation measures but also with emotions (Hermann 2017). Among the emotions that are frequently articulated in connection with the projected effects of climate change are what we gloss as love, worry, fear, sadness, and pity. These emotions refer not only to people, but often also to the land on which the people live. The land in the cultural logic of the I-Kiribati is construed as no less addressed by emotions than are humans, since land and the people on it are ideally conceptualized as belonging together and are united into a single concept: *te aba* (land/people). One emotion that stands out in climate change discourses is love, *te tangira* – felt for land and people. This love is juxtaposed by emotions of uncertainty that go along with unsettling thoughts about threats to the future existence of Kiribati (Hermann 2020: 279–280). Statements of worry (*raraoma*) and fear (*maku*) express that both land and people are seen as facing a looming menace. When the I-Kiribati react to worst-case scenarios of inundation by voicing sadness (*nanokawaki*) and pity or empathy (*nanoanga*) for the land and for those on it, they do so because they feel attached to both. The I-Kiribati, however, do not want to be the only ones to feel pity; rather, they demand empathy from citizens of other nations. Being frustrated by the hesitant moves of industrial states towards mitigation of climate change, a few well-informed observers in Kiribati also express anger (*un*). This emotion together with sadness was made explicit, for instance, by members of the Kiribati delegation that took part in the Conference of the Parties (COP15) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Copenhagen in 2009 when they realized that no binding agreement on the reduction of greenhouse emissions could be reached (Uan and Anderson 2014: 245).

All the emotions are much more than descriptions of inner states: they are meaningful articulations of the relationships between the inhabitants of Kiribati's islands as well as between them and their land, but also between Islanders and people from other countries. Thus, expressions of emotions are to be understood as practices that are often articulated with a will to act and/or demand action from others. In this capacity, emotions can unfold agency (Hermann 2004). In the encounter with external discourses on the consequences of climate change and sea level rise, emotions have the potential to propel the Islanders to

act and to strengthen their social resilience (Hermann 2018). Likewise, emotions evoked in outside observers and listeners might also unfold efficacy and lead to actions.

3. Climate Change Songs and the Culture of Composition in Kiribati

For the I-Kiribati, music and dance are elementary components of social, cultural, and political life (see Lawson 1989; Teaero and Tebano 2008; Whincup and Whincup 2001). Important events, be they private festivals, church celebrations, state receptions, or national ceremonies, as well as representations of Kiribati culture to the outside world, are hardly conceivable without musical performances. Discourses on climate change have not left this field of performative art untouched. For example, the side-events organized by Kiribati during the 2009 (COP 15) and 2017 (COP 23) international climate change conferences to raise global awareness of the threats of climate change's effects on the atoll nation included the performance of songs and dances. However, the number of songs and dances on climate change penned by I-Kiribati remains quite modest.

An older song that gained some degree of fame in Kiribati and beyond due to its new association with climate change was the *Song of the Frigate* or *Koburake*, composed by Tom Toakai (see Hermann and Kempf 2018). The piece was prominently featured in the documentary film about the Kiribati government delegation's side-event at COP 15 in Copenhagen (see Nei Tabera Ni Kai 2010);¹ it was used in the parallel documentary film *The Hungry Tide* (Zubrycki 2011); and the dance group Te Waa Mai Kiribati presented the song as part of a project² about music, dance, and climate change on a tour of the United States. *Koburake* had already emerged in the late 1970s, had a firm place in the atoll nation's musical heritage, and, since its recent linkage to the field of climate change, was felt to possess a certain prophetic character (see Teaero and Tebano 2008: 6; Hermann and Kempf 2018).

In addition to *Koburake* and its interpretation in terms of the climate crisis, several pieces created by local composers respond to the discourse on climate change and its possible implications for Kiribati. These include *Taekan Rabakau*, composed around the turn of the millennium by Tibwere Bobo and his composition teacher, both members of the Kiribati Protestant Church (KPC), on the urban part of Kiribati's Tarawa atoll. The song was intended to counteract the uncertainty and protest mood that government announcements about sea-level rise and its threatening consequences for Kiribati had triggered within the population. *Taekan Rabakau* sought to reassure people that the power and care of the Christian God ultimately stood above science as well as its representatives and future scenarios (Kempf 2017: 35–38). Conversely, many years later the composer Nenem Kourabi used the song *Ai kamira kanoan te bong* to call on people to understand scientific forecasts about dangerous consequences of climate change as a warning, and to take them as an opportunity to assess risks and take precautions (Kempf 2017: 38–41).

An important reference point for contemporary I-Kiribati ideas about the efficacy of songs and dances is the historically and culturally specific practice of ritual composition. This practice is reserved for selected men, rarely women, who are referred to as *te tia kainikamaen* or *te tia kario*. They possess secret knowledge of power and represent different, often competing, schools. These experts have in common that they must undergo specific inductions, training, and examinations. The thus-acquired ability to ritually interact with spirits (*anti*), as well as some real and imagined zones between land, sea, and horizon, enables them to compose songs, arrange dances, and heal diseases (see Hughes 1957; Bataua 1985: 126; Kirion 1985: 48–51; Lawson 1989: 184–246; Kempf 2003, 2019).

¹ See the film clip posted by Linda Uaan and John Anderson on YouTube "Kiribati – The Song of the Frigate" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOcMLWVNIm>).

² See University of California Television (UCTV): "Water is Rising: Music and Dance Amid Climate Change" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8091psfnNMU>).

In order to protect themselves, relatives, assistants (*rurubene*) or their own song or dance group, composers must observe a special set of rules. Above all, this concerns the arrangement of the words and phrases in the song texts. The words themselves are the actual powerful components of the songs (cf. Lawson 1989: 267–268, 289). Violations of certain principles of arrangement, balance, and ritual safeguards can have negative consequences for the composer or his/her immediate social environment (Lawson 1989: 304–308). The actual effective power of ritually composed songs, i.e., the order of words they encompass, is based on the cultural concept of setting binding goals to be achieved in the future. When composers are commissioned to write songs – whether love songs, pieces for birthdays, weddings, and deaths, or compositions for meeting houses, villages, islands, journeys, competitions, or social groups – this is accompanied by the expectation that the wishes and goals anticipated in the songs will come true.

However, *kainikamaen* knowledge, the associated ritual practices, and the selection and training of experts are subject to ongoing change that has produced highly variable degrees of specialization, procedures, beliefs, and representations over time (see Lawson 1989: 185, 264–289). Due to pervasive secrecy, the heterogeneous field of these varying degrees of knowledge, practices, and attitudes is difficult to capture. But there are clues. For example, some composers who certainly have *kainikamaen* knowledge create some of their songs based on their own inspiration. Others build on their long-standing routines in communicating with the spirits, and therefore get by with a minimum of ritual practices. Some composers have access only to limited sections of *kainikamaen* knowledge.

Not all songs and dances in contemporary Kiribati spring from the ritual knowledge and procedures of *kainikamaen* experts. Many I-Kiribati now exclusively follow their own inspiration when writing songs for church, festive occasions, youth work, entertainment, competitions, media, and the like. The influence of Christianity plays a weighty role. The composer of *Koburake*, for example, as pastor of the Kiribati Protestant Church (KPC), relied exclusively on European-Western musical influences (notation, harmony teaching, etc.), as is customary within the country's Protestant church. Only later, when the song was linked with climate change and sea level rise, as well as the prophetic aura the song acquired, did it evoke the presence of ritual power-knowledge. Thus, one effect of this culture of composing is that songs are perceived as effective even when it is unknown whether, or to what extent, they were composed on the basis of *kainikamaen* knowledge and ritual expertise (see Hermann and Kempf 2018). This reference point of power-knowledge of ritual practice also appears occasionally in Betarim Rimon's remarks about his own activity and passion as a songwriter, and about his song about climate change.

4. The Composer Betarim Rimon

Betarim Rimon is extremely knowledgeable about the climate change policies of the state of Kiribati, the discourses circulating there, the attitudes of his compatriots towards the topic, their emotions and initiatives. Being of part I-Kiribati descent on his father's side and part Fiji-Banaban descent on his mother's side, he has lived in Fiji as well as in Kiribati. He attended the Theological College and then the University of the South Pacific in Fiji before working as a pastor with the Kiribati Protestant Church in Kiribati. There, he later became project manager at the Ministry of Environment, Lands and Agriculture Development (MELAD). Subsequently, he moved on to the Office of the President, where he worked under President Anote Tong. In this role, he oversaw the National Strategic and Climate Change Unit, founded in 2009. This unit was tasked with coordinating all national efforts of different ministries related to climate change and economic issues. Stakeholders included the meteorological office, the disaster unit, and an economic advisor. Later in 2009, he was part of a delegation sent by the government to the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Copenhagen (COP15). Here he was placed in charge of a side-event organized by the Kiribati delegation, whose



Betarim Rimon 2009 at COP15.
Still from Nei Tabera Ni Kai (2010).

mission was to inform the global public about the extreme vulnerability of the atoll state to the threats posed by climate change and its consequences. Some time after his return to Kiribati, he became chief executive officer at the Broadcasting and Publications Authority. Later he came back to the Ministry of Environment, Lands and Agriculture Development to work in the project on Kiribati's Phoenix Islands Protected Area (PIPA), one of the largest marine protected areas worldwide. Here, he held the post of the PIPA Education, Information, Media, and Outreach Officer.

Betarim Rimon characterized songwriting as his "hobby," one which he devoted himself to with great interest and enthusiasm. He had learned the basics of composing from his parents. His father, a pastor, had written songs, as had his older brother Maroti, also a pastor who wrote some award-winning ones composed in English, which Betarim admired. He had also repeatedly helped his older brother write songs by acting as his "recorder" – a role he likened to the *rurubene*, the assistant to a *kainikamaen* composer (Interview Oct. 5, 2013). Another important influence was the musical culture of Jamaica. In 1989, early in his career as a pastor, he had spent seven months in Jamaica and, in his own words, had been "absorbed in the music" (Interview Oct. 5, 2013). Betarim Rimon played the lead guitar, and during his time in Jamaica often performed with church youth groups there. His hobby included listening to songs with friends and interpreting their lyrics. Regarding the musical culture of Kiribati, he expressed the greatest respect for *kainikamaen* composers. He himself had not gone through this training and seemed to share his older brother's view that *kainikamaen* art was "a matter of the mind" and of "focus." Betarim described his own style of songwriting as "modern composition" (Interview Oct. 5, 2013). Thereby, he attached great importance to a careful choice of both the words and the melody, which had to fit the subject matter.

Among the repertoire of songs he had written were religious and social songs as well as topical songs drawing attention to human–environment relations. Thus, for instance, he had composed a song about a period of food shortage in Kiribati, one about the problem of foreign countries fishing in Kiribati waters without permission, and another about the Phoenix Islands Protected Area as Kiribati's "Gift to Humanity."³ He had composed his early songs in the Kiribati language before he turned to English. The *Climate Change Song* he had deliberately composed in English – the better to reach a global public. On his motivation to compose, he said, "It's the pressure that you are in that inspires you. When you are directly affected." Then, regarding his climate change song, he added, "And climate change because I was deeply involved with the President" (Interview Oct. 5, 2013).

³ See Phoenix Islands Blog: "The PIPA song" on July 29, 2012 (<http://pipa.neaq.org/2012/07/>).



Betarim Rimon,
September 30, 2012.
Photo: Elfriede Hermann.

Betarim Rimon wrote the *Climate Change Song* in June 2010. He had been working at the Broadcasting and Publications Authority at the time but had fallen ill. When Elfriede asked him how he had gotten the idea of writing this song, he said: "Well, I'm swimming in the idea. We are swimming in the misery, in the problem" (Interview Sept. 30, 2012). He remembered getting into an argument with an international consultant, criticizing the way such institutions had failed to come up with any solutions. Then he stressed: "We want some kind of tangible assistance and response from the international community" (Interview Sept. 30, 2012).

He had played with the idea of writing a song on climate change for some time. As he related, a conversation with President Anote Tong had stimulated him: "We went to the Maldives on a climate change meeting. During the reception, he asked me to perform one item. I hadn't done the song then. But I sang other songs, 'Country Music.' Later on Anote said: 'I didn't realise you can sing and you can play guitar like that. Why don't you make one song on climate change? That's your responsibility now. Do something about it!' It was more like a joke. But in fact, to me as a lover of music, it sank in" (Interview Sept. 1, 2017). Betarim Rimon had not taken Anote Tong's joking remark as a commission to compose this song. Rather, it resonated with his commitment to fighting the impacts of climate change and his passion for songs.

5. Betarim Rimon's *Climate Change Song* and his Interpretation

The *Climate Change Song* begins with a spoken prologue which goes as follows: "This is the story of Kiribati and her people who are now living under the threats of climate change." Then we hear the words set to a reggae rhythm:⁴

[Click here to listen to the song online]

⁴ In the following, the original text from June 2010 that Betarim Rimon gave us for publication on September 30, 2012 is quoted. Betarim Rimon also kindly gave us permission to reproduce the song sung by Brian Taki whom he had commissioned to perform in 2010. Brian Taki chose to replace the original prologue by his own words. To access the sound file of the Climate Change Song please click on the following link: <https://publications.goettingen-research-online.de/handle/2/94197>.

(1)

Searching for myself
Searching for my refuge
As the world is getting worse day and night
Why there is so much pain
Why there is so much struggle
I cry to my Lord to help me through

[Chorus]

My people oh my children
My country oh my home
Stand firm and stay strong
Until the end of time
Climate change is blowing strong
The rising waves will hurt us all
And I cry oh yeah I cry to my Lord to help me through

(2)

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 all the hopes, all the laughter, a strong future

[Ending]

Climate Change is spreading out
The rising storms will hit us all
And I cry oh yeah I cry to my Lord to help me through

Climate Change is upon us all
The rising tides will drown us all
And I cry oh yeah I cry to my Lord to help me through
Climate Change is affecting us all
The rising sea will kill us all
And we cry oh yeah we cry to our Lord, please help us through.⁵

In his interpretation of the song, Betarim Rimon pointed very clearly to the vulnerability of Kiribati to climate change and to his message to the world. In our first interview he got straight to the point: the government of Kiribati had very little in the way of resources to counter climate change and the projected impact on the national territory. In this connection he came to talk about the appeal “I cry to my Lord to help me through” that is included as the last line of the first verse, the chorus, and the last verse:

It's more like a plea to the world rather than to God because otherwise God won't do anything. You know? And the chorus is like a reaffirmation to the generation of the day, that though there are plans to move out from the country, they should be known as last resorts. They should stay firm. It's sad to lose home, you know! We know that when things come to the worst we have no

⁵ The lyrics were later sung with slight alterations, as Betarim Rimon told us on September 1, 2017. A musical group that Betarim Rimon was working with at the time added an “and” at the beginning of the last line of the first verse to read: “And I cry to my Lord to help me through.” In addition, the group replaced the original “oh” in the first two lines of the chorus with an “and” to read: “My people and my children / My country and my home”

choice. But at this time we should stand firm, hold on strongly to our roots, you know? (Interview Sept. 30, 2012)

Later he explained to us what considerations had led him to integrate this urgent request to the Lord into his poetry:

When people come to the Lord it means there is nothing else within their means to address a problem. And that's when they jump to the unknown to help them. In that song it reflects the severity of the problem and our limited capacity to counter it, to cope with it. When you know you run out of resources, you run out of everything else, you jump to someone else. ... That's the kind of comfort you're seeking. (Interview Oct. 5, 2013)

When he explained the meaning of the song in our first meeting, he had this to say about the chorus:

"Climate change is blowing strong, The rising waves will hurt us all" and we cry, nothing else. ... That reflects the vulnerability of the people. We can't do much, we just cry. You know? The kind of defense that is readily available is just to cry. This is what our government is doing in the international meetings, just to voice our concern. That's in poetic terms: "we cry, we cry, we cry." (Interview Sept. 30, 2012)

This "cry," he emphasized, was by no means a reflection of a passive attitude but should be understood as an ability of the I-Kiribati to actively articulate themselves in the face of threats from climate change impacts:

"We just cry" [he drew out the word "cry"] That's our nature and that's our opposition. We don't have a hand on trade in which we can make a difference. And we don't have any other physical forms of might that we can impose change or influence things. But otherwise we can just keep on asking for help. And that's all we have. It's better than doing nothing. (Interview Sept. 1, 2017)

He went on: The "Second verse is more like an anger." When Elfriede reacted with some surprise, he repeated the same words: "An anger. Because our future is bleak, is uncertain." He quoted the first line of the second verse:

"Tomorrow I'm not sure," we are not sure what Kiribati will be like. Scientists say: in fifty years' time we'll be in trouble somewhere. In 50 years' time, the IPCC report, you know? So for that "Tomorrow we are not sure when I try to see the future" and then there is an anger there: "My brothers and sisters," those on the negotiation table, from the US, from England, from Europe [he laughed a little and said to Elfriede "sorry," at which point she signaled to him that she understood and agreed], they are sitting on the other side, "with all the hopes, all the laughter and a strong future" but we are losing out. (Interview Sept. 30, 2012)

Turning now to the final part of the song, Betarim Rimon explained:

Then I keep on changing the emphasis here: "Climate change is spreading out," the first one it's "blowing," now it's "spreading." ... The rising storms will hit us all." Then: "Climate change is upon us all." [sudden laugh], is upon us all. "The rising tides will drown us all." [sudden silence.] And then: "Climate change is affecting us all." [Brief pause before continuing:] The angry sea will kill us all. And you know this is a kind of irony. Because we always treat the Ocean as the mother. But this time the mother will get angry with us. You know, because somebody is instigating that. So instead of nurturing us, one day the sea will kill us. (Interview Sept. 30, 2012)

Regarding the tune of the song, Betarim Rimon explained: "I've been thinking of stressing something" (Interview Oct. 5, 2013). He set his words to a reggae rhythm he had grown to like during his stay in Jamaica. He elaborated that reggae is a "political rhythm" for him:

It's more like a political beat in Jamaica. If you listen to Bob Marley's collection, it's about freedom. It's like a fight for the right. [Wolfgang quoted from one of the most famous songs of Bob Marley: "Get up! Stand up!" and Betarim Rimon enthusiastically continued:] "Yeah: Stand up! Stand up for your rights!" (Interview Oct. 5, 2013)

In interpreting his lyrics, Betarim Rimon repeatedly mentioned emotions vis-à-vis the threatening consequences of climate change. From the first to the last line of the lyrics, sadness regarding projected threats sets the tone. He explicitly referred to this emotion when he explained that it is sad to lose one's home. Likewise, he clearly spoke about worries when he detailed that the repetition of the line "I cry to my Lord to help me through" is an expression of "our concern" (Interview Sept. 30, 2012). However, he stressed that when voicing his individual and his nation's collective concern, it was not his intention to evoke fear in his compatriots:

With my vision it's different. Because I don't want to instill fear. My focus is more on developing their ability to observe the changes and to develop their vision to see what will come in the future and how would they greet and encounter the future. (Interview Sept. 30, 2012)

He felt it important to make clear that his intention was to raise awareness – awareness of projections, of consequences, but no less of causes and the parties responsible for climate change. Pointing at the latter, who are "sitting on the other side, with all the hopes, all the laughter, a strong future," as the last two lines of the second verse reveal, he made explicit his anger. Responding to our observation that anger is rarely voiced by I-Kiribati in connection with climate change discourses, he gave the following explanation:

I think the anger only comes to the informed mind. In terms of knowing what the situation is like. What are the reactions of those who are responsible for that? You know?! And not everybody knows that. But once you are fully aware that climate change is caused by these countries and then they don't care much about you, whether you remain on the map or not, then you become angry, you know?! (Interview Sept. 30, 2012)



Betarim Rimon and his family, September 30, 2012.
Photo: Elfriede Hermann.

This articulation of anger is also linked to awareness-raising on the part of those responsible in industrial countries. Poetically phrased as the lyrics are in English, they are meant to tell the global community in no uncertain terms that low-lying islands and their inhabitants are severely threatened. By actively addressing the citizens of the world, the song seeks to evoke their empathy. This intention, which is deeply ingrained in the song, became explicit in a comment Betarim Rimon's wife Ruru made while listening to the song with us. When the first two lines of the chorus rang out with the verses "My people oh my children! My country and my home!" she exclaimed: "Pity!" (Interview Sept. 30, 2012). In Kiribati this is a shorthand for an appeal to have pity, or empathy, with the speaker and her/his collectivity.

Betarim Rimon's interpretation of the song also included an association of the vulnerability of I-Kiribati and his own existential crisis at the time he composed the song. He began composing his *Climate Change Song* when he was housebound on Tarawa due to a serious illness, and he finished it in the hospital. He explained:

I asked my nephew to record it on the mobile – in case I don't make it. So that song can carry a dual meaning. On my own personal fight with life and then with this issue of [climate change.] And it's in that stage when you don't have to call for words. They just come in. Just like in the traditional *kainikamaen*. People wake up early in the morning and go to the oceanside and listen to the sound of the waves and the sound of the wind and then they figure out words and.... But in that stage of being on the verge of dying, you find some comfort in putting together some kind of poetry. It provides you with some sense of what you are going to leave behind. So during that time I saw the song when it was completed. And I said: Oh, it is good. It provided me with some peace of mind. (Interview Sept. 1, 2017)

Betarim Rimon reflected here that he was able to so effectively express the vulnerability of I-Kiribati to the threats of climate change impacts because he was personally in a state of extreme vulnerability at the time. He projected his personal struggle for survival onto the collectivity of the island's inhabitants, encouraging them to remain strong in the face of whatever should befall them. It is revealing that he likened the liminal phase he was experiencing to the threshold in space and consciousness that culturally trained *kainikamaen* composers go to in order to approach their work. When *kainikamaen* go to this threshold, they expose themselves to encounters with powers that are very dangerous for them, but which also account for the powerful effect of their songs (Lawson 1989: 232–234; Kempf 2019). By linking his threshold phase to that of the cultural experts, Betarim Rimon hinted at the powerful nature of his song.

6. Discursive Connections with Policies and Religion

The song refers clearly to political discourses that were omnipresent in Kiribati at the time of composition. In general, the lyrics adopt elements of climate change discourses that were intensified by the government under Anote Tong towards the end of the first decade of the 21st century (Hermann and Kempf 2019: 299–301). Thus, statements about rapidly advancing climate change and projections of threats to land and people from rising sea levels, storms, and flooding are echoed here. The song's lyrics condense references to these projections in statements that Betarim Rimon helped represent at the side event of the Conference of the Parties (COP15) in Copenhagen. His composition was completed just a few months after this conference participation. In the song, the threat is both diagnosed in the present and implied for the future of subsequent generations when "My people oh my children" are mentioned in the chorus along with "My country oh my home" as those affected.

The song's lyrics also refer to the option of migration as an adaptation to climate change – an option formulated by then President Anote Tong. Thus, the first two lines of the song already transport the singers to a future in which they will have to look for a place to migrate when it says "Searching for myself, Searching for my refuge." As Betarim Rimon indicated in his interpretation, moving out of the country was only addressed "as a last resort" by the government, but migration as adaptation to the effects of climate change was part of their political discourse. The poetic words about the search for a safe place convey the uncertainty that I-Kiribati associate with migration.

The composer was very familiar with all these discourses on climate change and migration due to his work in the National Strategic and Climate Change Unit. However, the song not only articulates references to the climate change policies of the government of the time but also speaks of Betarim Rimon's own political intentions. On the one hand, in keeping with the climate change policy under Anote Tong, the song seeks to raise the awareness within the population about the approaching threat of climate change. On the other hand, it is mimetically aligned with that component of climate change policy that focuses on articulating one's vulnerability to the global community and calling on the latter to act for climate protection. Like political action by the government, the song also includes a 'politics of hope' (Appadurai 2013: 293) with the message that a path to a livable future is possible for the country and its people. Thus, the lines "Stand firm and stay strong – Until the end of time" are also meant to encourage I-Kiribati to face future challenges with hope.

The song also draws on a widespread religious discourse in Kiribati, and in Oceania more broadly. The recurring line, "I cry to my Lord to help me through," addresses the religious understanding of the I-Kiribati that only God can help them. This local discourse is in turn related to the skepticism towards science that prevails among parts of the Christian population. In these religious communities, there is not only skepticism vis-à-vis news about climate change impacts, but also a widespread belief that only – or ultimately – God can protect the land and its people. The composer himself does not share this religious attitude, but he understands it and knows that his compatriots will gladly sing the song when God is addressed as the highest power. Betarim Rimon expressed here in religious words what he meant in political terms. As he had previously stated, "It's more like a plea to the world rather than to God, because otherwise God won't do anything" (Interview Sept. 30, 2012).

7. Dissemination of the Song

In 2010, Betarim Rimon had commissioned a male and a female singer to each sing the song in a studio belonging to Kiribati Broadcasting, so that two recordings were produced. The recording by the male singer, Brian Taki, became a great favorite on the local radio. Later, Brian Taki decided on his own initiative to make a video clip, in which he is shown performing the song on Tarawa atoll's threatened shores.⁶ This video clip also was widely circulated within Kiribati at the time, and I-Kiribati repeatedly pointed us to both the audio and video versions of the *Climate Change Song*. Betarim Rimon has taken to playing his songs with a band called "PIPA Serenaders," who have been performing at public events. They sang the *Climate Change Song*, for instance, at an event put on by the Banaban Association in August 2016 on Tarawa, where we were able to hear it.

⁶ After this video clip was shown to us in 2014, we mentioned it to Betarim Rimon. He was very surprised, saying he had never heard before of any video clip. He was aware that his intellectual property had not been recognized here, and he would have liked to be named as the composer of the song. He said that this was not about the money for him, but simply that "showing the author is showing that the Kiribati person is behind that song. It's not someone else from outside. It's someone who is in the middle of the problem" (Betarim Rimon Sept. 1, 2017).

The local reception of the song was echoed in various contexts. For example, Betarim Rimon reported that a Catholic priest working on Tarawa had asked him for permission to translate the song into the Kiribati language so that he could sing it with his youth group in church service. While Betarim Rimon did not know if the priest had carried out this plan, he recalled that he had once heard someone singing a Kiribati version of his song. Betarim Rimon was also surprised to hear a young man singing the *Climate Change Song* in the original English version one evening as part of a fundraising at a kava bar on Tarawa. He recounted, "And he sang it beautifully! In English. And by the way I look at him when he sang it, I could see he felt something" (Interview Oct. 5, 2013). When we asked what he meant by "felt," he explained:

When he sang the song that's the time when they were all drawn into the reality: "Oh yeah, that's really true." And after the song, a few seconds after, they were back to normal again. It's not a thing that we all dwell on. You know? I mean that the reality of climate change is not something that we dwell on on a daily basis. Otherwise we be depressed [He laughed softly]. It's something we understand. Sometimes it is in the unconscious. We just live normally. We just don't gather and discuss: "Eh, what we are going to do now?" But it is there. And we are fully aware of it. We understand. But the whole idea of having it in English is to have it for the outside world. So composing it in Kiribati will make a small impact. But in English is to have a wider audience to understand. (Interview Oct. 5, 2013)

The *Climate Change Song* was also used in its original English version in a drama piece about *Sea Level Rise and Migration* performed by form five commerce students from William Goward Memorial College as part of a talent show at their school on Tarawa in early May 2013. To introduce their piece, they played the first verse beginning with "Searching for myself, searching for my refuge," including the first two lines of the chorus, from an audio file.⁷ When we showed Betarim Rimon the video clip of this drama piece with the controversial dialogues about the option of migration presented here, he commented: "It's about the adaptation" (Interview Oct. 5, 2013). He was not surprised that the students had a recording of his song because he knew: "It's readily available. Many shops sell it." He did not mind that they had used the song and said: "When a song is composed with that very purpose of having the message widely disseminated, the more it is played, sung, heard anywhere, the better" (Interview Oct. 5, 2013).

Nor did the song stay within Kiribati itself – soon it was known throughout the region. In 2011 it went on a tour to Fiji with Betarim Rimon and the Kiribati band Te Aintoa ("The physical strength/giant") and was sung by a male and a female singer the song writer had commissioned. The band staged a show with various songs and a comedian in the Civic Centre of Fiji's capital, Suva, and in the towns Lautoka and Savusavu. Since Banabans were also active within the band, the group visited the Banaban Community on Rabi Island, performing in the villages Tabiang, Tabwewa, and in the administrative center Nuku. Three years later, some Banabans could still remember hearing the *Climate Change Song* for the first time, they told us there. As the performance of this song was a central component of the show, Betarim Rimon described the tour as "part of the climate change regional awareness raising" (Interview Sept. 30, 2012). Radio Fiji, FM96, the newspapers and TV in Fiji had helped them to promote the tour and so they had a good turnout. Asked what the reactions of the audience were when his song was performed, he said he had the impression that they liked it. He also remembered one reaction he heard when sitting in the audience:

We were in the Civic Centre in Suva. And when they sang that song, one guy behind me was crying. It's because of the quality of the PA system we used. So loud and rich! Good system. And the high-level performance from our singers. They sang full of emotion. (Interview Sept. 30, 2012)

⁷ We thank the teachers of William Goward Memorial College, especially Nei Taiman, Nei Mone, and Ten Neteri, for bringing the Talent Show to our attention, generously providing us with video clips of the performance, and explaining this drama piece to us.

Crying as a response was a sign of how much that person was touched by the song.

And the song spread even further afield – it could also be heard, for instance, in Vanuatu on the radio (personal communication with Arno Pascht, who recorded it on his mobile phone and played it for us). In addition, the video clip of the singer Brian Taki was posted on YouTube and was viewed thousands of times.⁸ Betarim Rimon was not asked for permission. However, he said: “In a way it’s good but I hope the watchers know that the song is about Kiribati. That’s important. The aim of the piece of music is to send a message. We will definitely get diminished somewhere but let the message grow and spread” (Interview Sept. 1, 2017).

8. Potential Efficacy of Songs and Emotions

The composer was aware of the potential impact of songs. Composing this climate change song was his way of sending political messages to the world. Betarim Rimon explained:

When you don’t have the opportunity to stand in front of the people, you know, I think music is very powerful, it’s a powerful media that everyone can easily access. With careful drafting of the words and the tune and some planning and recording, then you can be heard. You’ll be heard, certainly. (Interview Oct. 5, 2013)

To be heard implies the capacity of the song to reach listeners, touch them emotionally, and deliver the political message. How the song can touch outsiders was illustrated by Betarim Rimon in an anecdote about an encounter with a European journalist who wanted to talk with him about climate change. The composer remembered the dialogue he had with the journalist:

So we arranged a night to play music and he listened to it [i.e. the *Climate Change Song*] and said: “I liked it.” [He continued quoting the journalist saying:] “I’m getting worried of the message.” [Betarim Rimon answered:] “Why is that?” [He continued quoting the journalist:] “Because you sound very pessimistic.” [Betarim Rimon laughed.] And I said: “You are very right. We sound very pessimistic. But otherwise we sound defenseless.” [Betarim Rimon laughed:] And he [the journalist] said: “Ah?” [So Betarim Rimon responded:] “What else can we do?” [Addressing us he repeated:] You know?! What else can we do? We can’t just confront the issue with some kind of might – except with tears and emotions, and you know. And I echo the same point: We are not really crying to God. You know?! We are crying to those that will serve that purpose of the creator. (Interview Sept. 1, 2017)

This anecdote is telling because it makes clear the cultural logics inherent in Kiribati songs. The song obviously was able to make the listener understand how vulnerable Kiribati’s land and people – and indeed humans and non-humans worldwide – are to consequences of climate change. By conveying this insight to the listener, the song simultaneously evoked an emotional response in the latter: he got worried. But emphasizing vulnerability only represents one side of the song’s efficacy; the other side consists in demonstrating the capacity to act with the intention of defending one’s country and nation. The song’s agency is expressed in both its capacity to make momentous processes comprehensible and its potential to exhibit the strong human will to defence. Moreover, the song also draws attention to people’s potential to act effectfully against threatening developments and to make their voices heard worldwide. By repeating that “those that will serve that purpose

⁸ The Climate Change Song, composed by Betarim Rimon and sung by Brian Taki can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3Ff3k8Txlc>. The composer told us that he was first told about the video of his song on YouTube in 2017. When we asked him if he would not have liked to be credited for composing the song, he said that he would indeed have liked his name to be mentioned.

of the creator" are addressed, Betarim Rimon made it clear that the song is appealing to the global community. His and his compatriots' voices are intended to affect people, particularly in industrial countries, and lead them to heightened efforts to protect the climate.

The efficacy Betarim Rimon expected his song to unfold is founded not only on the lyrics but also on the emotions expressed in and evoked by the song. Sadness is invoked to set various audiences thinking – and feeling. With respect to his fellow-I-Kiribati, it is aimed to raise their awareness of the threats to be expected, which in turn should move them to act now and plan for the future. With respect to citizens of industrial countries, it has the potential to move them to understand and share the feeling of being confronted with existential threats to one's home country. The anger that he and some other citizens of Kiribati feel and that sounds through the second verse is also meant to release its power and convey the song's message to industrial countries. How his frustration with international climate change policies led him to respond with the composition of the song became clear when he elaborated:

We have been involved in the international negotiations and you hear the voice of the US: "No, no, no, no." ... There I had that exposure to the real issues and the position of the world on that matter. You know, that kind of stirred and cooked something in my mind. Sometimes you can't do much, you just write a song. We sing it and you listen to it, and we get a sense of being, a sense of comfort. Otherwise we can't do more. They might build missiles, we'll keep on building songs. [He laughed.] "We don't believe in war. We don't build a wall." That's our father's song. (Interview Oct. 5, 2013)

This explanation not only elucidates how his anger mobilized him to act, it also shows that the song with its inherent component of anger is meant to have a powerful effect that is comparable to, but less violent than, the weapons industrial countries have at their disposal. However, the composer wants to articulate his anger while remaining "humble." Even as he accuses industrial countries of not doing enough to reduce greenhouse gases, he takes great pains to enter into a dialogue with people from other nations. These he addresses in the second verse of his song as "my brothers and sisters," i.e., close relations from whom one can expect to be listened to. He calls upon these fellow human beings to put themselves in the position of their brothers and sisters in Kiribati, and to imagine what it is like to face the prospect of being overwhelmed by the consequences of climate change in the form of sea-level rise and extreme weather events like storms and inundations. He demands that they feel empathy with the atoll inhabitants. Calling for empathy in Kiribati and Banaban cultural logics refers to agency in two ways. On the one hand, the calling person is capable of formulating the appeal following his/her analysis to the effect that this emotional stance is what is needed. On the other hand, if the one demanding empathy may indeed move the counterpart to exercise just this kind of compassion, this demonstrates the agency of the social actor – and, here, the agency of the song-cum-emotions.

9. Conclusion: Climate Change Songs and Emotions as Political Practice and Forms of Agency

Climate change songs composed and sung in Kiribati crystallize statements of respective emotional discourses in specific political contexts. The songs that we were able to collect were either reinterpreted to cope with the unsettling climate issue or composed in an atmosphere characterized by a raised public consciousness of national policies of climate change adaptation and intensified emotional discourses regarding the projected stress to land, people, and ocean. Whether written in the Kiribati language or in English, and whether addressed to the local population or the world community, the songs represent a political practice: they deal with a political topic of high relevance to the public, are goal-oriented, and exercise some kind of power over their audiences. Whether they are aimed

at calming down concerned I-Kiribati or appealing to global citizens to empathize with their atoll country and take measures for climate protection, these songs demonstrate the agency of composers and singers to articulate problems, or even protest, and influence national and possibly also global citizens. The composers' capacities to act are, however, interlinked with the agency that the songs and the accompanying emotions unfold.

Betarim Rimon's *Climate Change Song* represents a special case because it was to our knowledge the first climate change song written in English and purposefully addressed to the global community from the perspective of Kiribati. In addition, the songwriter was acquainted with national and international climate change policies more than any other composer. At the same time, this climate change song exemplifies aspects which to some extent also inhere in other climate change songs: these include the agency of the composer situated in a network of agencies including but not limited to those of assistants, singers, relatives, other human atoll inhabitants and culturally perceived non-human powers in the environment, plus the agentive potential of a song itself, the technical means to amplify its distribution, and the thoughts and emotions that accompany the artistic creation.

From Betarim Rimon's comments, we can see that both the sadness and the anger he personally felt made him turn to composing the song. He thus aligned his emotions with his knowledge, his experiences, and his political concerns. Composing together with singing are, in his view, possible ways of being active that offer themselves to I-Kiribati. For him, the "crying" he poetically formulated in his song is a "defence" against the threat of the consequences of climate change and the inadequate protective measures being undertaken by the global community. The song and the emotions associated with it attest to the composer's project and his agency. He became active, authored a song, and in this way intervened in the political discourses on climate change locally, regionally, and globally. At the same time, the emotions sadness and anger, which he shares with many I-Kiribati and which he voiced, also point to the agency of his compatriots and their projects. Many I-Kiribati associate their love of the land, their worries, fear, and sadness in the face of scenarios of inundation with a will to do everything in their power for the continued survival of land and nation – and those who talk of anger articulate this will likewise. And when the composer appeals to people from other countries to share the emotions of the I-Kiribati, his assumption is that emotions also move these people to act. Agency, it becomes clear in this case, is invested not only in the capacity of a composer to create a song, but also in the power of the song, the agency of assistants, relatives, singers, technical amplifiers, possible other actants, and the efficacy of emotions.

The *Climate Change Song* by Betarim Rimon is a creative effort to facilitate the association of global citizens with the outlook of atoll inhabitants to a future threatened by the effects of climate change. It is, as he said, "a plea to the world" to prioritize effective measures to mitigate greenhouse gases, so that the worst effects of climate change on atoll countries like Kiribati can be avoided. While the song voices multiple facets of atoll agency, it also articulates demands that have otherwise been made in the name of climate justice. Given that Betarim Rimon moved in circles close to Kiribati's Tong government, he was inspired to send a political message. Still, it is remarkable and in line with the cultural logic of the I-Kiribati to find official activities being associated with a song. And so Betarim Rimon sent his song into the world to practice climate policy by other means.

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