

BOOK REVIEW

An island world vanishes into the ocean (Piciocchi, A./ Angeli, A., 2017)

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This book is a jewel! Anyone who appreciates books with a bibliophilic design and who also appreciates an artistically sophisticated layout and creative design will be delighted with this book. Already the hardcover contains beautiful colored pen and ink drawings of central elements that have their special meaning in the culture of the I-Kiribati – as the inhabitants of the East Micronesian island nation of Kiribati (pronounced Kiribas) call themselves. Practically every page of this book is lavishly graphically designed; for each page of this book, the two authors have carefully considered what and how to depict each culturally significant element, which should replace many explanatory words and at the same time be so meaningful to provide a comprehensive overview and insight into the (traditional) culture of this island people.

The two authors from Brescia and Milan – Alice Piciocchi, who is responsible for the texts, and her life partner, the architect Andrea Angeli, who implemented the graphic design – have obviously thought about how best to present this book, previously published in Italian in 2016. The question was how to present to a readership the things that are important to the lives of an island population in a way that clarifies their importance, but also connections that are anchored in a larger ecological, even cosmological context, far beyond their practical use? They found the answer in graphic representations inspired by the popular infographic

diagrams and graphs that are increasingly used today to explain complex relationships in an image-fixated world. They are a mixture of illustration and table, with cartoon-like and even comic-strip elements, and these are found together with pictograms and elements from statistical representation (e.g. pie charts), which amalgamate with painterly, atmospheric settings. The delicate lines of Andrea Angeli's pen-and-ink drawings do not rival the sparing use of coloration. Rather, they form a unity that runs through the book like a common thread, taking the viewer on a journey in which each individual page represents a "cliffhanger" and one is already eager to see what the next page might show and explain.

The two authors describe the chapters devoted to the respective topics as "illustrated chronicles" with which they attempt to present the lifeworld of the I-Kiribati and "...a summary of the ingredients that make up the binder we call belonging" in order to ultimately generate an image: "To transform those dots on the map into something more" (cf p.11). The two Italian authors succeed in this in an extraordinary way. Readers are encouraged to read this book in a circular manner, so that the things mentioned at the end of the book in turn lead to the beginning, thus completing a contextual coherent circle. Each of these illustrated chronicles has portions of text and directly corresponding portions of images, which are panels that visualize the essential elements of practices, rituals, crafts,

everyday activities, symbols, and much more. Each of these panels would be worth describing here separately in detail, and only some of the topics can be listed here: traditional healing methods and the plants used for them, the role of religion and the church(es) on Kiribati, the structure and social arrangement of a traditional meeting house called a mameaba, the buildings of a homestead and the location of the houses of a village in relation to each other, fishing methods, traditional seafaring and navigation methods, the food and its cultivation and processing methods, the role of traditional pre-Christian beliefs, rules of conduct for dealing with guests as well as challenges of everyday life, traditional customs and cultural practices such as dances, as well as traditional expectations and the influences of modernity, which lead to disruptions and reorientations. Each of these panels provides additional insights and unanticipated information. For example, not only are the fish that are important for the islanders' diet listed, but also the depth of the sea at which each is found and therefore must be captured using different fishing methods. How can you represent a traditional dance in a pictorial representation? By drawing in longitudinal and transverse axes as position and pivot points, by means of arrows outlining the individual movement sequences, and by cartouche-like inserts at the edges, even head and eye movements are comprehensibly illustrated. Playing with inclusive and

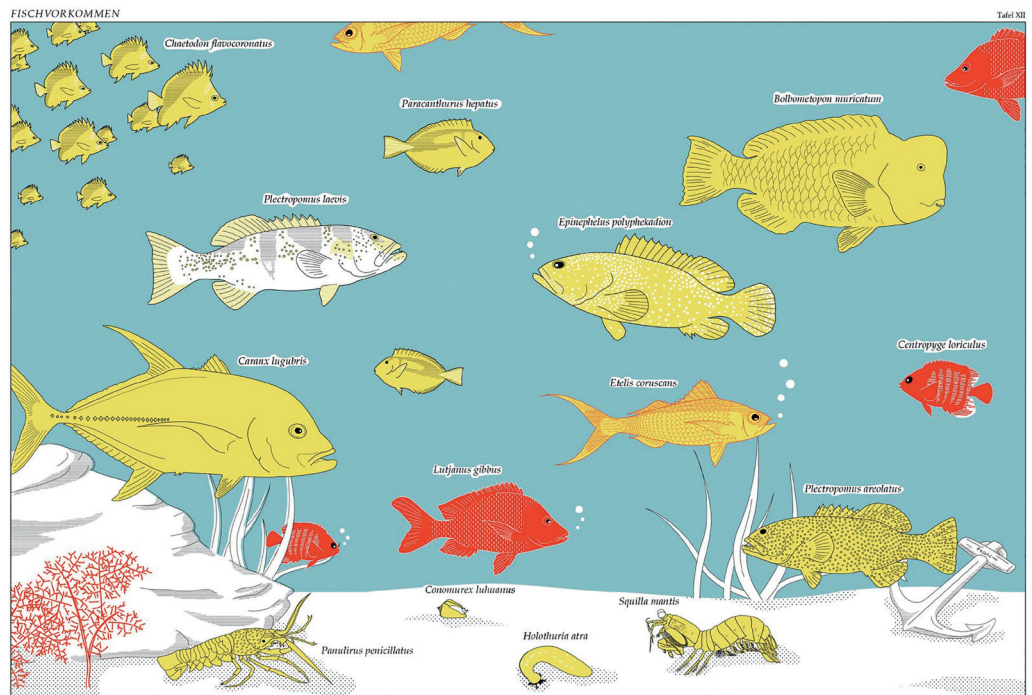


Figure 1: Illustration from the publication

exclusive listings makes it possible to illustrate what does and does not exist in Kiribati: for example, there is a single escalator in a half-finished shopping mall in Bairiki, but there is no elevator on any of the 33 islands.

The importance of distances between islands is thematized, as is the popularity of the game of bingo. Practices and behaviors when it comes to averting misfortune are graphically transposed, as are the formative, structuring events in people's lives: birth, reaching adulthood, interpersonal matters, marriage and death. In the texts, personal incidents and encounters that happened to the two traveling Italians on the spot are recounted. Each of them is the occasion for taking up a specific aspect of the life of the I-Kiribati. Many of the illustrations also focus on the changes that the islanders have undergone and are undergoing in the past and present. An extensive glossary, also illustrated, as well as a chronological table and a select bibliography complete the chronicle chapters.

This book is one of the finest books on Oceania that has found publication in recent years. It is surprising that, in addition to the German-language edition, the same Munich publisher is responsible for the English-language

edition reviewed here. The Sieveking publishing house is to be congratulated emphatically for the extremely affectionate realization of this book project. The ambitious publishing team has succeeded in creating something special with this book. As a reader and reviewer of this book, I found myself wishing I could be on site to experience, inquire about, and try things out for myself. Although not primarily conceived as a scholarly book, it offers so much detail about the lives of the I-Kiribati that it generates added value for anyone interested in Oceania and brings together many different and complex topics in a clear and easily accessible way.

This book by the two Italian authors describes the culture of the people of Kiribati with great interest, respect and, yes, affection. As the title suggests, the two authors are concerned with taking stock of a world that may not be with us before long. Whether due to a climate-induced or a work-induced forced exodus, this snapshot is both a balance sheet and a warning of what could be lost if a culture is subjected to dramatic change. Picicocchi and Angeli leave open the question of whether this will happen.

In any case, this book deserves to be widely read.

Bibliographic information:

Picicocchi, Alice/ Angeli, Andrea: *Kiribati. An island world vanishes into the ocean* (dt. *Eine Inselwelt versinkt im Pazifik*). Munich 2017: Sieveking, 144 pp., over 120 illustrations, hardcover, 31,50 US\$ (29,10 Euro), English edition: ISBN 978-3-944874-77-7; German edition: ISBN 978-3-944874-74-6

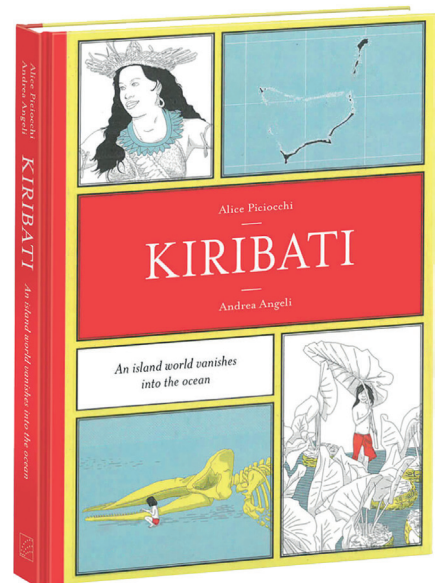


Figure 2: Cover sheet of the book publication

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