

# Banaba arts of the land and the People

Katerina Teaiwa and Yuki Kihara with  
Maggie Corrie-Kaipati



*Illustration by Cecelia Faumuina*

## Authors



Photo: Katerina Teaiwa, ANU.  
Courtesy Australian National  
University

### Katerina Teaiwa

Katerina Teaiwa is of Banaban (Tabiang, Tabwewa - Rabi), I-Kiribati (Tabiteuea), and African American heritage born and raised in Fiji.

She is Professor in Pacific Studies in the School of Culture, History and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University. She is also author of *Consuming Ocean Island: stories of people and phosphate from Banaba*, and a dancer and visual artist touring Project Banaba curated by Yuki Kihara.

Katerina is currently Vice-President of the Australian Association for Pacific Studies, Chair of the Oceania Working Party of the Australian Dictionary of Biography, and Art Editor of The Contemporary Pacific journal. A passionate teacher, she has won several education and outreach awards including the 2021 Australian University Teacher of the Year.

<https://researchprofiles.anu.edu.au/en/persons/katerina-teaiwa>

<https://www.projectbanaba.com>



Photo: Sarah Hunter

### Yuki Kihara

Yuki Kihara is an interdisciplinary artist of Japanese and Sāmoan descent. Through a research-based approach, her work seeks to challenge dominant and singular historical narratives through a wide range of mediums, including performance, sculpture, video, photography and curatorial practice.

Kihara is a research fellow at the National Museum of World Cultures in The Netherlands; and represents New Zealand at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022.

Kihara has been a curator of Project Banaba by Katerina Teaiwa since its inception in 2017 when it was commissioned by and presented at Carriageworks, Sydney. <https://yukikihara.ws>



Photo: Render Creative. Courtesy  
Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary  
Gallery

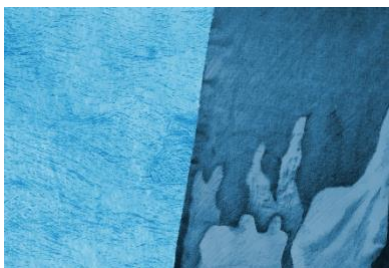
## Maggie Corrie-Kaipati

Maggie Corrie-Kaipati is of Banaban, I-Kiribati and Rotuman heritage with ancestral connections to several European countries. She is the Secretary for the Auckland Banaban Christian Fellowship Group and has been an active member for the past 17 years.

Maggie's greatest passion and interest is in Banaban art works, as a connection to her homeland, her ancestors, and her identity. She believes that through Banaban art forms she has been able to draw on the connection to her past (of growing up in the islands) and her present (as diaspora living in Aotearoa) to strengthen the future in passing on knowledge to younger generations.

Maggie has been working closely with Yuki Kihara and Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery for the exhibition *Te Kaneati* (5 March – 29 May 2022). Her works are featured in the exhibition together with Aroiti Kabiriera and other Banaban members showcasing a range of works such as weaving, crochet, embroidery / painted pillowcases and beaded costumes. Maggie also dedicated her time to *Te Kaneati* workshops and presented a talk with Aroiti and Erietera Fiti Kelese about their exhibition.

## Front image caption & credit



**Name:** Body of the land, body of the people

**Maker:** Katerina Teaiwa and Canberra-based team

**Description:** Hessian "phosphate sack" with applique of cotton and calico pinnacles representing the mining and shipment of phosphate lands from Banaba to Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand from 1900-1980.

**Credit:** Commissioned by Carriageworks, Sydney, 2017.



# Banaban arts of the land and the people

Katerina Teaiwa and Yuki Kihara with Maggie Kaipati.



Fig 1. Banaba/ Ocean Island, the ancestral home of the Banabans, incorporated into Kiribati 1979, aerial image at Google Earth.

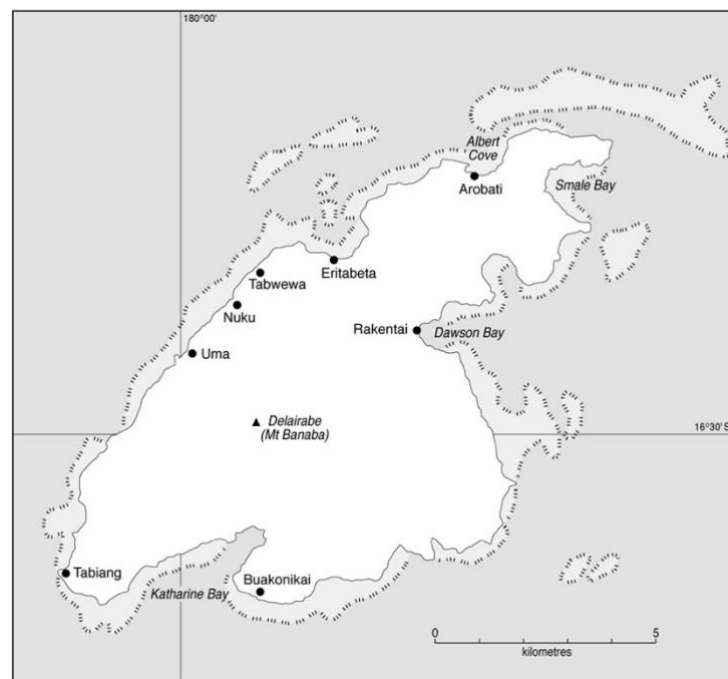


Fig. 2 Map of Rabi Island, Fiji, home of the Banabans since Dec 15, 1945, CAP cartography, ANU.

## Katerina Teaiwa

Kam na mauri and ni sa bula vinaka. In this essay we explore what it means to make Banaban arts in the past and present. While Banaban performing arts have been explored by several scholars including Beth Dean, Jennifer Shennan, Wolfgang and Elfriede Herman, and myself, and aspects of traditional knowledge have been published by Janice Cantieri, Ken Sigrath, and HC and HE Maude, very little has been written about Banaban material culture or visual arts.

Banaba, also known as Ocean Island, is in the central Pacific, in the south eastern corner of the region designated as Micronesia, approximately 200 kilometres from Nauru. It was annexed by Britain in 1901 and incorporated into the protectorate and eventual colony of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands (now Kiribati and Tuvalu) as a result of the Australian and New Zealand discovery of lucrative phosphate deposits across the whole 6 square kilometre island. Banaba was a separate and unique culture that was influenced by waves of migrants from the south, west and east to create a people and culture that saw themselves as belonging to te aba, the rock of their island.



Fig 3. Map of Katerina's research and the flows of Banaban land (through phosphate mining for superphosphate fertiliser) and people from 1900 to the present between Banaba, the Gilbert Islands, Fiji, Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand.

From 1900 to 1980 a multi-national phosphate company that became the British Phosphate Commissioners (BPC) in 1919 – owned collectively by Australia, New Zealand and Britain – mined Banaba and Nauru (and Christmas Island in the Indian ocean). The phosphate was manufactured into superphosphate fertiliser and applied to farms across Australia and New Zealand fuelling vast agricultural commodity chains and profits. As a result of the extensive mining operations and Japanese targeting and occupation during World War II, the island became uninhabitable and the

Banabans relocated to the island of Rabi in Fiji, purchased for them out of their own trust funds in 1945.

Banabans protested the removal of their lands and the conditions of the leases that were forced upon them by British companies and subjects but the land was deemed too valuable for agricultural development in settler-colonies. Banaban land tenure was unique in that each person, of all ages and genders, owned and had access to specific lands that were part of an exchange system that ensured Banaban identities were always grounded in the material landscape that fluidly circulated within and between communities. Under the phosphate and colonial administration and through the influence of male dominated Christian missions and colonial administrations, more political power and status became consolidated in the hands of male decision makers and women's agency was eroded. Historically, all genders had political agency and representation and participated in complex social, economic, environmental and artistic activities that sustained and nourished Banaban families in spite of the limits of their physical resources. Banaba regularly suffered from droughts and people relied on fresh water that collected in underground caves called bangabanga that were filled with stalactites or te kaneati.

For thousands of years Banabans made the most of the few coconut, pandanus, almond and other trees on the island and were expert fishermen in the very deep waters that surround the reef-less island. The arrival of phosphate miners and the British flag rapidly changed Banaban values, livelihoods, resources, social relations and daily activities. This included the immediate and swift removal of rocks and soil from around and underneath villages, to the replacement of food with company store items, and restrictions on heritage art forms, music, dance, healing and spiritual activities.



Fig 4. "Native dance of Ocean Island" circa 1900 from the BPC archives, National Archives of Australia.

Today, after many decades of cultural revitalization that included the incorporation of styles and methods from other Pacific communities, there are many creative, material and performing arts forms practised on Banaba, Rabi and across the Banaban diaspora in Fiji, Kiribati, Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, the USA and beyond. They range from dance costumes to woven mats, cultural clothing and costumes, pillow cases, baskets, fans, garlands, jewellery, musical composition, dance and theatre.

The lands commissioner and eventual Resident Commissioner, Harry Maude, and his wife, Honour Maude, recorded the following aspects of culture for Banabans before they were displaced to Rabi: land tenure, te kauti (magic), performances (ruoia), mortuary rituals, oral traditions, tattooing (taitai), sports, and games, including frigate bird taming (te kabaneiti). Much of their archive has been digitised by the Barr-Smith library at the University of Adelaide. In the 1960s, Dr Martin Silverman, an anthropologist recorded aspects of culture, history, kinship and related practises including adoption and political protocols. In the 1970s Beth Dean, and 1980-90s, Allan Thomas and Jennifer Shennan, recorded Banaban dances including what is deemed the most “authentic” Banaban dance, te karanga, using sticks/ spears topped with frigate bird feathers, and lines of dancers and chanters. They also covered new choreographies that had emerged from life on Rabi where iTaukei Fijian and Tuvaluan influences were being woven into a Banaban cultural base that had already incorporated Gilbertese (I-Kiribati) cultural materials, methods, patterns, musical and choreographic styles. The frigate bird feather and visual motif shapes much of Banaban visual and performing arts culture.

In the 1990s Dutch ethnomusicologists Ad and Lucia Linkels recorded Banaban music including te karanga, the boti kuru – a body percussion dance that emerged out of the labour lines during phosphate mining – Banaban dance theatre and karebwerebwe (percussion made by tapping the cheeks). From the 1990s to 2000s Elfriede Hermann and Wolfgang Kempf recorded many interviews and details on Banaban dance, especially the December 15<sup>th</sup> Banaban dance theatre explicitly created to illustrate their history to younger generations and broader audiences. In the 2000s Ken Sigrah and Stacey King published aspects of cultural protocols, spiritual practises, oral traditions and dances. After Sigrah’s passing in 2021, King continues to hold numerous Banaban records in her personal collection in Australia. In the 2000s I recorded features of the December 15 cultural dances and celebrations, the boti kuru, karebwerebwe and activities such as children’s hand-clapping games that combined with songs composed from post mining life on Rabi. In the 2010s Jennifer Shennan and Makin Corrie Tekenimatang published a book of diverse Banaban life stories, and American journalist and visual storyteller Janice Cantieri recorded the dance theatre, oral traditions, impacts of mining and Banaban life stories and biographies.

For most of the 20th century, phosphate was a matter of national and food security globally. During my research for the exhibition, I identified approximately 518 metres of government files associated with the BPC in the National Archives of Australia, some of which have only recently



been declassified. Along with ethnographic research and film work, this became the basis for my visual and performing arts work that drew upon my background in contemporary dance and other art forms studied in Fiji, California and Hawai‘i.

After sharing my research with various artists and institutions that created installations based on Banaban history, including Māori sculptor Brett Graham and Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Yuki Kihara and I began an artistic and curatorial partnership that resulted in *Project Banaba* commissioned by Carriageworks, Sydney in 2017. It then toured to MTG Hawke’s Bay Tai Ahuriri in Napier 2019, and Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery, West Auckland 2022 with the film element also featured at Para Site gallery Hong Kong 2019 and the Kathmandu Triennale, 2022.



Fig. 5 *Project Banaba* installation view, Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery, April 2022.  
Photo by Sam Hartnett.

*Project Banaba* is a conceptually layered installation that interweaves rare textual, film and photographic records alongside personal narratives including the political injustice endured by generations of Banaban communities. It reflects on how the rock of Banaba, te aba, was viewed and transformed by powerful imperial interests from land to commodity. The exhibition is divided into three sections. The first is “Body of the land, body of the people” combining archival text, representations of the mined landscape – especially the pinnacle landscape – and sacks of fertiliser through textiles, information from the mining archives, and large scale photographs of



Banaban ancestors. The second section is “Mine Lands: for Teresia” which is a three-screen projection featuring early 20th century footage of phosphate mining and life on Banaba juxtaposed with the aftermath, 100 years later. It was created in honour of my late elder sister, Teresia Teaiwa, a scholar, teacher, poet and activist. The final section is “Teaiwa’s kainga” which combines colourful family snaps of everyday life on Rabi Island in Fiji with black and white images of mining, fertiliser production and distribution on antipodean farmlands.

Throughout the journey of my research and Project Banaba, Banaban, Gilbertese, Tuvaluan, New Zealand and Australian families who have some connection to the island through heritage, the mining industry, the colonial authorities or World War II, have shared their stories, archives and material collections with me, and some, like Cook Islands leader and Chair of the Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa, Caren Rangi’s, skirt made of New Zealand phosphate sacks from Hawke’s Bay, have been incorporated into the show. I view my work as research based contemporary art of Banaban lands and stories. The land, te aba, as island, pinnacles, rock phosphate, fertiliser, and agricultural commodity is the dominating visual and conceptual motif alongside images of Banabans covering a 120- year period.



Fig. 5 *Project Banaba* installation view, MTG Hawke’s Bay Tai Ahuriri, 2019, with Caren Rangi’s dance skirt made of phosphate sacks in foreground. Photo by MTG Hawke’s Bay Tai Ahuriri.

## Yuki Kihara with Maggie Kaipati

First of its kind, *Project Banaba* by Katerina Teaiwa is a contemporary art exhibition by a Banaban artist co-curated by myself together with the curator of the host institution in consultation with Katerina. I prefer to work this way because the host institution has more intimate knowledge of how their institution operates, the budget constraints and logistical issues. Host galleries such as Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery (Te Uru), MTG Hawke's Bay Tai Ahuriri and Carriageworks, greatly benefit from presenting *Project Banaba* not just through the art but also the audiences *Project Banaba* engages that helps to expand the audience of the host institution. We are careful in selecting the venue and location that would be the right fit to present *Project Banaba* because not all venues are best suited to present installations. However, we are currently looking at ways to mould *Project Banaba* based on the resources available to the host venue, especially where we feel *Project Banaba* can be impactful for their audiences.

The socially-engaged nature of *Project Banaba* involved closely working alongside: local Banaban diaspora, Indigenous local authority, Pacific communities, artists, and scholars helps to build solidarity and community around *Project Banaba* which becomes an allegory for repatriating the land that was taken away from Banaba. *Project Banaba* also re-presents works made or featured for previous iterations to highlight the exhibition's journey.



Fig. 6 Dance presented by the Banaban Christian Fellowship Support Hub on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August 2020 in Waitākere, Aotearoa New Zealand. Photo by Yuki Kihara.



The development of *Te Kaneati* first began with the help and guidance of Katerina and Banaban community leader Itinterunga Rae Bainteiti, where I made a short power point presentation about *Project Banaba* on Saturday 8th August 2020 during a church service hosted by the Banaban Christian Fellowship Support Hub at Rānui community hall in Waitākere. The presentation allowed me to introduce *Project Banaba* to the Banaban community where after the church service I was surprised to see people wanting to know more about *Project Banaba*. I also met Banaban elder Maggie Corrie-Kaipati after the church service for the first time. It was helpful that Maggie already knew members of the Teaiwa family so we already had something in common.



Fig. 7 Banaban elder Maggie Corrie-Kaipati lead garland weaving workshop at the Auckland Central Library held on 19th June 2021 in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. Photo by Yuki Kihara.

During our consultation with Maggie about *Project Banaba* at Te Uru, Maggie identified a need for more resources for the Auckland Banaban community to help strengthen their language and heritage arts which inspired the creation of *Te Kaneati* – a Banaban-led Cultural Revitalization Workshops presented alongside *Project Banaba*. This was a perfect fit given that the Banaban Christian Fellowship Support Hub and Te Uru were both based in Waitākere. After numerous



zooms and face-to-face meetings, I'm happy to have been part of the group effort alongside the Banabans ie., Katerina, Rae Bainteiti, Lillian Corrie and Chloe Geoghegan, formerly of Te Uru, in assisting Maggie to secure the Creative New Zealand funding to stage *Te Kaneati* workshops and exhibition.



Fig. 8 Exhibition opening of *Te Kaneati* presented at Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery held on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2022 in Waitākere, Aotearoa New Zealand. Photo by Gui Taccetti.

Maggie's engagement with *Project Banaba* also led to the inclusion of the Banaban Christian Fellowship Support Hub to perform at the Fijian stage at the 2021 Pasifika Festival for the first time, with the support of Pacific Dance New Zealand (PDNZ). Sefa Enari MNZM, Director of PDNZ also gave us advice on how to structure our *Te Kaneati* workshops which were divided into several parts including costume making (weaving, knitting, sewing); music (Banaban language and meaning, singing and musical instruments); dance (choreography with song); storytelling (ancestral, social and political histories). The outcomes of the workshops were presented as an exhibition held at Te Uru's Learning Centre alongside *Project Banaba* in a separate gallery space. The exhibition opening of *Project Banaba* and *Te Kaneati* was attended by the Hon. Carmel Sepuloni, Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage. The workshop activities were documented in a series of short video documentaries as educational resource material for the Banaban community

which will be shared through various online platforms. Other participants included Aroiti Tane Kabiriera and Temaea Nanton who constructed te kamari neck pieces and Taeam Tokamaen Tetaake who made the dance costumes.



Fig. 9 Maggie Kaipati, Erietera Fiti Kelese Riyaz and Aroiti Tane Kabiriera discussing Te Kaneati at Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery, May 2022 in Waitākere, Aotearoa New Zealand. Screenshot from Lagi Maama Tok Stori Tuesdays Zoom presentation.



Fig 10. A piece of stalactite from the sacred bangabanga, underground water caves on Banaba.  
Before colonialism, only women were permitted to enter and gather the freshwater.  
Banabans fashioned unique fish hooks, wakani ba, from the stalactites.

Erietera Fiti Kelese Riyaz kindly provided pieces of te kaneati – stalactites – from the Banaban underground water caves, collected by her father in the 1970s that were approximately 40 cm by 10 cm.

Maggie with members of the Banaban Christian Fellowship Hub formally closed *Project Banaba* and *Te Kaneati* with lively performances and speeches on Saturday May 28, 2022 and Sunday May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2022 was the final day for both exhibitions. *Project Banaba* will be touring Hawai'i co-curated by Kanaka Maoli scholar, artist and curator Joy Enomoto around 2024/25.



## NOTES

1. Some sections of this paper have been previously published in the Pacific Arts Association Journal, Vol 22. No. 1. (2022).
2. For more on Banaban History see Katerina Teaiwa (2015). *Consuming Ocean Island: stories of people and phosphate from Banaba*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Jennifer Shennan and Makin Corrie Tekenimatang, eds. (2005) *One and a half Pacific Islands: stories the Banaban people tell of themselves*, Wellington: Victoria University Press; Raobeia Ken Sigrah and Stacey King (2001) *Te Rii ni Banaba* Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, USP; HC and HE Maude (1994) *The Book of Banaba*, Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, USP.
3. For Banaban media stories see:  
Janice Cantieri <https://janicecantieri.com/stories>  
The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/09/the-island-with-no-water-how-foreign-mining-destroyed-banaba>  
ABC <https://www.abc.net.au/radio-australia/programs/pacificbeat/banaba-food-water-shortage/13747012>