

Corselets of Fiber

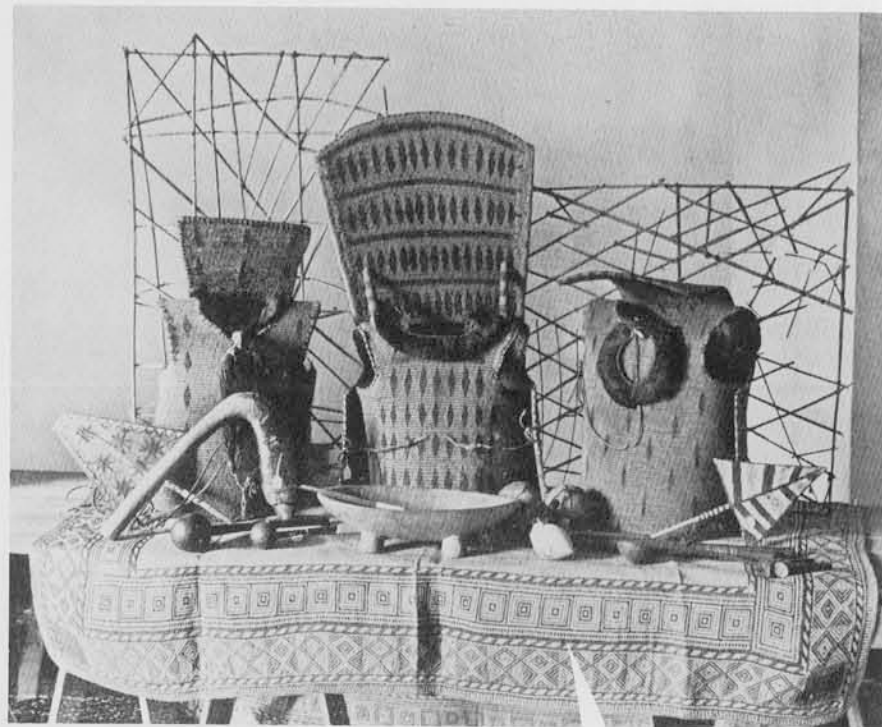
Robert Louis Stevenson's Gilbertese Armor

ADRIA HOLMES KATZ

In November 1914 and January 1915 the Anderson Auction Company of New York offered for sale a collection of letters, manuscripts, books, portraits, and curios which had been the personal property of Robert Louis Stevenson (Fig. 1). The list of curios included more than two hundred objects collected by Stevenson during the six and one-half years he traveled and lived in the South Seas. The University Museum bought some twenty of them, with money contributed by John Wanamaker. Of the Museum's purchases, perhaps the most spectacular were three coconut fiber corselets from the Gilbert Islands. As the Anderson catalogue observed, the three corselets "are all of extreme interest, being the Royal presents given by King Tembinoka, the Tyrant of the Island of Apemama ... to R.L. Stevenson on the occasion of his departure from the island in 1889" (Anderson catalogue, Part I [1914] p. 87). The following is the story of these three corselets.

Fiber Armor

European visitors to the Gilberts during the 19th century described the inhabitants of these atolls as the most warlike people in Micronesia, if not in the world. Fighting was, they reported, a constant preoccupation, and almost everywhere they went they saw islanders with numerous scars on their arms and legs (Wilkes 1849: 47, 93). The weapons that inflicted most of these wounds were spears, swords, and small hand weapons made of coconut wood and lined with rows of sharks' teeth, the common use of sharks' teeth on weapons being especially charac-



1 South Sea curios from the collection of Robert Louis Stevenson, on display at the Anderson Auction Galleries in New York. Besides the three Gilbert Island corselets (P3294 A,B,C), The University Museum purchased the Marshall Island navigational chart at left rear (P3297), the Hawaiian neck ornament draped over the corselet at the left (P3288), and the Gilbert Island human hair necklace hung on the corselet at the right (P3287). (Reproduced from the Anderson Catalogue, Part I [November 1914], by permission of the Princeton University Library)

the islanders appeared to believe that in their armor they were invulnerable.

teristic of the Gilberts. Even more ingenious, and unique to the Gilberts and neighboring Nauru and Ocean Island, was the protective clothing devised as a defense against these weapons. This included overalls, jackets, and corselets made of coco-

nut fiber (Figs. 3, 4), helmets of coconut fiber or the dried, inflated skin of the porcupine fish (*Diodon*), and wide belts of coconut fiber or ray skin.

Coarse fibers from the husks of mature coconuts provided the raw material for construction of the armor. These were combed and hand-"spun" by rolling on the thigh, producing smooth fiber with a long staple which could then be twisted into cord. The overalls and jackets were made of cord netting, coarse and flexible but very strong. The corselets, fiber helmets, and some

The Gilbert Islands

The Gilbert Islands are sixteen coral atolls in that part of the Pacific known as Micronesia (the region of "small islands"). Lying across the equator, they form the middle of a long chain which includes the Marshall Islands to the northwest and the Ellice Islands to the southeast. They are typical atolls, with few notable features: "the low horizon, the expanse of the lagoon, the sedge-like rim of palm-tops, the sameness and smallness of the land, the hugely superior size and interest of sea and sky" (Stevenson 1891:222). Natural resources are extremely limited, and before European contact materials for the manufacture of objects for daily living came largely from the pandanus and the

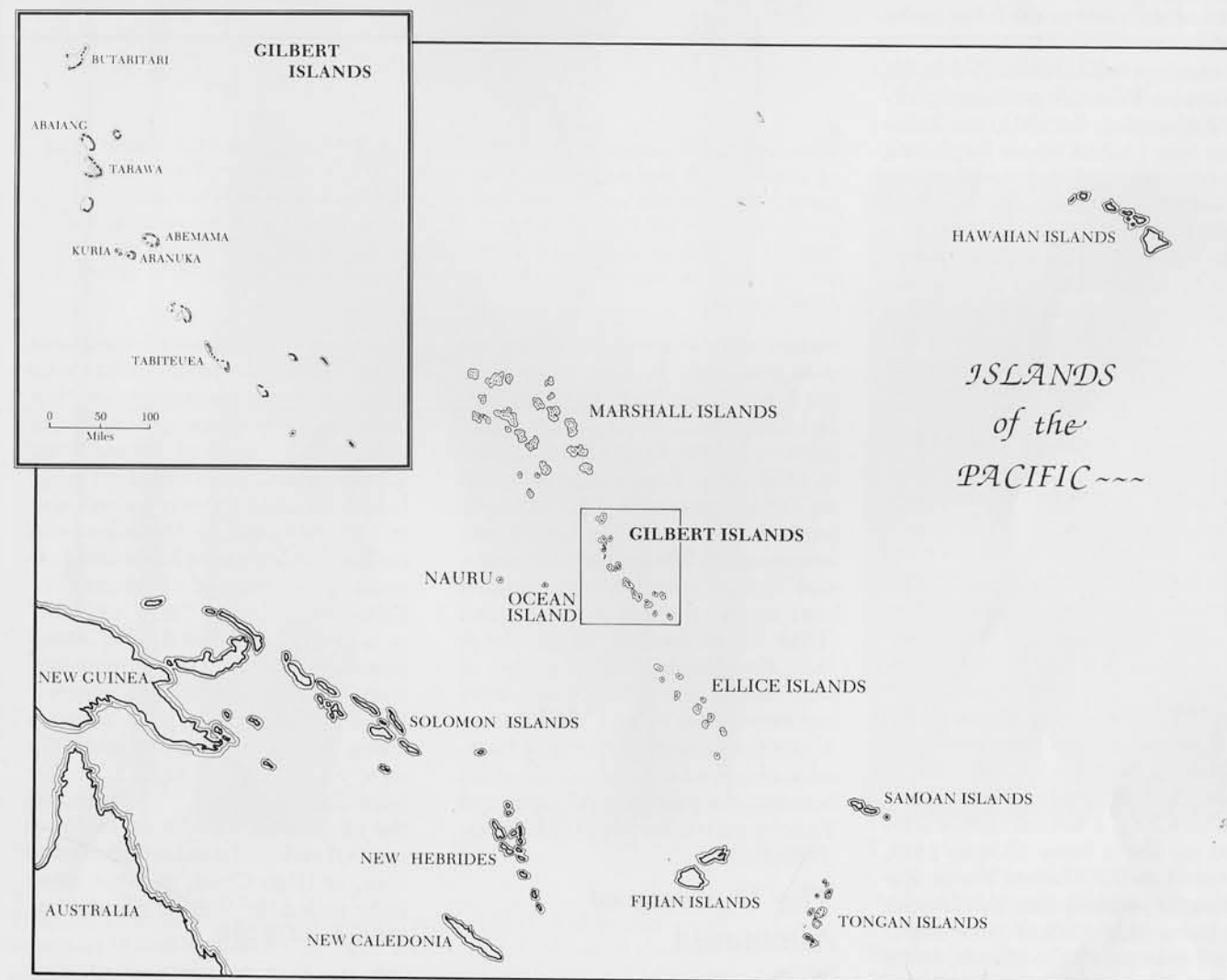
coconut palm, and from the sea.

After Spanish sightings in 1537 and 1606, most of the islands in the group were discovered by Europeans between 1765 and 1824, the last two being reported by whalers in 1826 (Maude 1968:35-133). Exploitation of "on-the-line" (i.e., equatorial) whaling grounds began in the 1820s, and at that point "the isolation of the Central Pacific Islands was effectively ended: from being the least known region of the ocean, with a sail in sight scarce once in a decade, it became almost overnight the most frequented of all, visited each year by several hundred vessels" (Maude 1968:121-122).

Traders sought *bêche-de-mer* (an edible sea-slug, used as a luxury food in China) and turtle-shell in the

Gilberts in the 1830s, and a profitable trade in coconut oil got under way by the mid-1840s. There were beachcombers and castaways living on various islands of the group by 1835, and Protestant missionaries arrived from Hawaii in 1852. The recruiting of labor from the Gilberts began in earnest in the 1860s. In the early 1870s, the major export changed from coconut oil to copra (dried coconut meat from which oil is extracted).

The Gilberts became part of the British Gilbert and Ellice Islands Protectorate in 1892, and of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony in 1915 (see Fig. 2). They were occupied by the Japanese during World War II, and since 1979 they have been part of the independent nation of Kiribati.



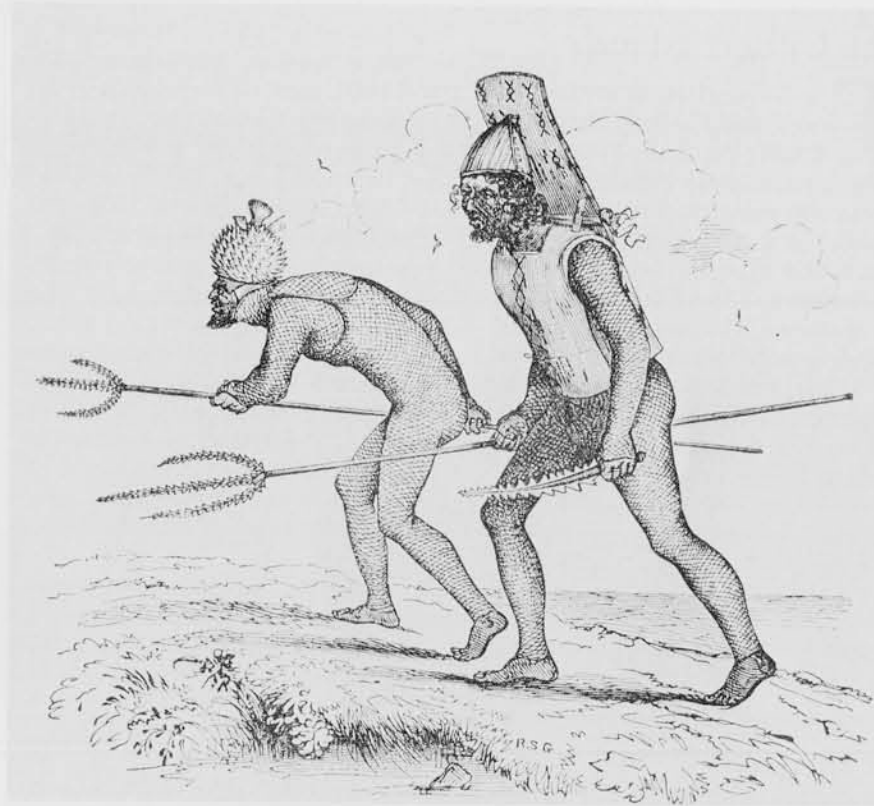
2 Map showing the Gilbert Islands and adjacent Pacific island groups. Inset: the Gilbert Islands.

of the fiber belts were made of long bundles of fiber (three-ply braids, actually), bound together by twisted fiber cord (Fig. 5). For a helmet, these bundles were bound in a spiral, and in the corselets and belts they were laid horizontal and parallel. This method of construction produced an armor of great weight and rigidity.

The sharks' teeth swords and hand weapons were "calculated rather to make severe gashes than dangerous wounds" (Wilkes 1849:47), and the netted armor must have provided good protection against them (Fig. 6). More dangerous were throwing spears: in 1835, a seaman from the brigantine *Hound* died soon after a throwing spear "passed right through his chest" (Coulter 1973:219). The corselets were proof against these, as well as the sharks' teeth, and their high backs protected the heads and necks of warriors in the front ranks from stones thrown by the women and children behind them (Schmeltz and Krause 1881:226, probably quoting Parkinson). In 1841, on Tabiteuea, the United States Exploring Expedition noted that the islanders appeared to believe that in their armor they were invulnerable. As a demonstration of the power of firearms, "one of the coats of mail was hoisted up at the yard-arm, and fired at: the holes were then exhibited, but did not seem to produce much effect upon them" (Wilkes 1849:55).

European firearms and knives were available from the early days of contact, and became important items of trade. Guns were not always used to advantage, but knives were more widespread and effective, and bayonets attached to long poles were especially popular, corresponding as they did to the long island spears. The islanders continued to use their indigenous weapons, and the fiber armor still provided protection against them, as well as against knives and bayonets.

John Kirby, a beachcomber who lived on Kuria from 1838 to 1841, reported to the United States Exploring Expedition that "this armour has been only a short time introduced or in use on the islands, and is not yet common in all of them" (Wilkes 1849:93), but this observation is uncorroborated and in fact



3 Warriors of Tabiteuea, in the Gilbert Islands, with weapons edged with rows of sharks' teeth and protective armor made of coconut fiber. The netted jackets and overalls were actually loose and baggy, and the overalls continued over the tops of the feet. (Engraving based on a drawing by A.T. Agate for the United States Exploring Expedition [1841]. Reproduced from Charles Wilkes, Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition, Vol. 5 [1849], p. 48)

no one really knows when the armor was invented. It may have been used nearly as long as there was fighting, which was up to the establishment of the British Protectorate in 1892. Otto Finsch reported that on Tabiteuea in 1879, after a bloody battle between the converted and unconverted, 300 spears, 79 muskets, and "many" corselets were handed over to the mission to be burned (1893:36). At the time of his visit in 1880, the islands were in a state of war, and he saw armed bands here and there, some in "very droll attire." About the same time, Richard Parkinson observed armor worn in battles between the people of Abaiang and Tarawa, and on the island of Nonouti (1889:45-47).

The Dynasty of Abemama

During seventy years of intensive European contact, from the 1820s through the 1880s,

there was on the island of Abemama a succession of strong leaders who controlled developments within their territory to an extraordinary degree. The first of these, Teng Karotu, was born around 1791 into a family that had already gained control of the island of Abemama and reduced neighboring Kuria and Aranuka to the status of tributaries. (In Gilbertese, "Teng," "ten," or "tem" is a prefix often used with men's names. It conveys a bit of formality, somewhat like the English "Mister." Ward Goodenough, pers. comm.) Teng Karotu "consolidated the newly-founded dynasty's power over the main atoll, . . . [brought] the other islands under more direct control and . . . [was] recognised as Uea, or High Chief, of what came to be called the State of Abemama" (Maude 1970:204).

In the 1840s Teng Karotu abdicated in favor of his son, Ten Tawaia, who was followed in turn by his

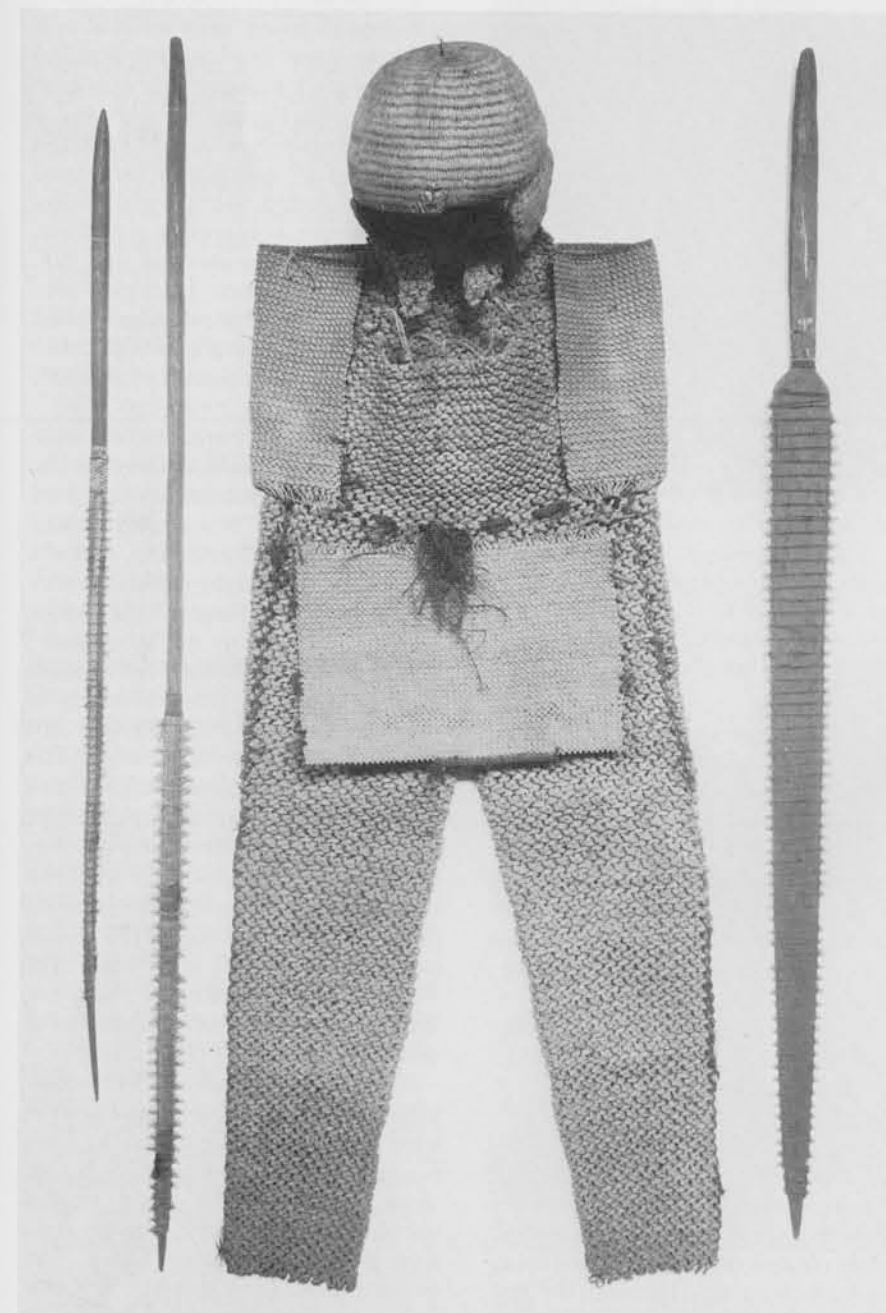
son, or half-brother, Tem Baiteke in 1850. It was Tem Baiteke who faced the full impact of the European presence, and in 1851 he made his first move. By "a deliberate act of policy" he had all resident foreigners, nine on Abemama and twenty-five on Kuria and Aranuka, killed. In the following decades he controlled all trading transactions,

including the import and distribution of firearms, prohibited the importation of alcohol and the manufacture of sour toddy from coconut sap, forbade any permanent missionary presence on Abemama, and absolutely banned labor recruiters from all three islands (Maude 1970:206-212).

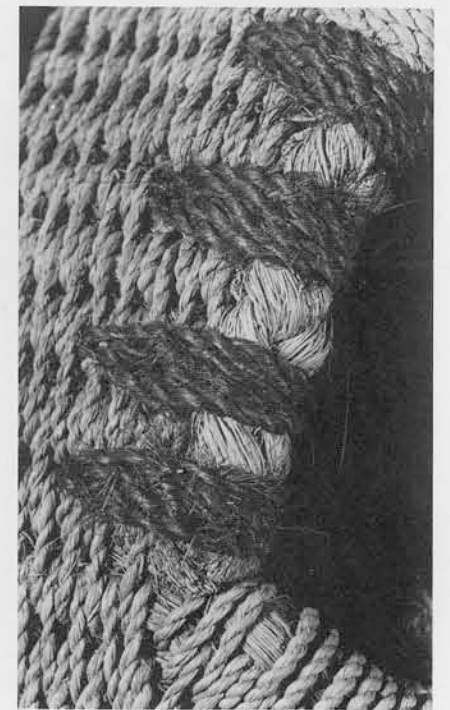
In 1878 Tem Baiteke retired in

favor of his eldest son, Tem Binoka. Tem Binoka was "self-centered and arrogant, . . . but . . . he possessed all his father's intelligence, and an intellectual curiosity, particularly concerning the ways of the outside world, which never left him" (Maude 1970:212). In 1873 he persuaded his father to allow a mission teacher to visit Abemama, and from this person he learned written Gilbertese, some arithmetic, and some geography. He strictly enforced his father's policies in regard to alcohol, firearms, and labor recruiters, and reserved the copra trade as a royal monopoly. He put down at least three major revolts, the most serious of which occurred as late as 1885. Tem Binoka's uncle, Tem Binatake, was involved in the first and third of these revolts, and after the first his nephew banished him from Abemama. In the 1880s Tem Binoka attempted, unsuccessfully, to conquer the entire Gilberts group (Maude 1970:212-222).

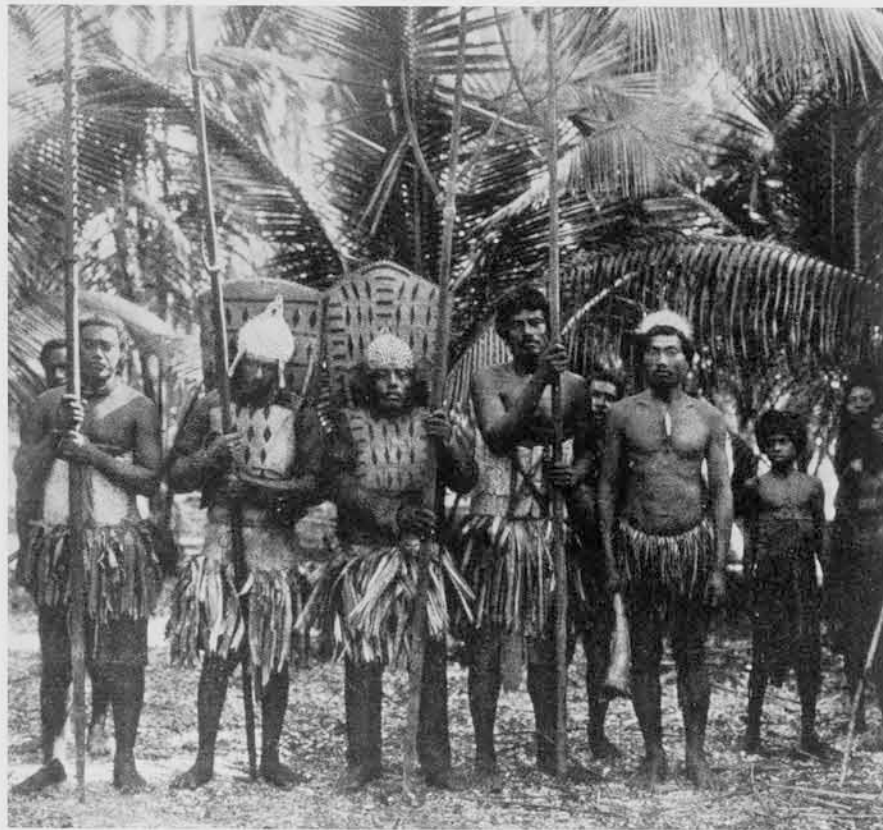
All things considered, the accomplishments of Tem Baiteke and Tem



4 Coconut fiber overalls (P3295) and helmet (P2161), with sharks' teeth weapons (P4949 and 17768, left, and P4938, right). Although they do not appear in the Anderson catalogue, the overalls are listed in The University Museum accession files as having come from R.L. Stevenson (P4949, L. 117 cm; 17768, L. 147.5 cm; P4938, L. 141 cm. Overalls, bib to ankle: 108 cm)



5 Close-up of corselet P3294A, showing the braided bundle of coconut fiber bound along the edge of an arm hole. Similar bundles of fiber are lashed together to form the body of the corselet and the high, stiff back. (Photo by Adria Katz)



6 When Augustin Krämer went to the Gilberts in 1898 to collect ethnographic specimens for the Stuttgart Museum, he acquired many weapons and pieces of armor on the island of Tabiteuea. Wanting to find out how people fought, he induced the men who brought them to throw on the armor and pose with the long spears. (Reproduced from Augustin Krämer, *Hawaii, Ostmikronesien und Samoa* [1906], following p. 272)

Binoka were extraordinary. Together they

achieved a feat unique in the history of the Pacific Islands: in the face of European cultural pressures that had overrun the whole of Polynesia and Micronesia they had maintained the political, economic, and social integrity of their territory from the beginnings of European contact to virtually the end of the nineteenth century, selecting and accepting from the European only such ideas and material goods as appeared to them of value, and these strictly on their own terms and not those dictated by the dominant race. (Maude 1970:223-224)

Stevenson and Tem Binoka

Robert Louis Stevenson first visited the Gilbert Islands in 1889, on the second of his

der was brought out and lashed to the side of the schooner and, after some delay, Tem Binoka himself came out, mounted the ladder, and descended heavily to the deck. He was a dramatic figure:

... a beaked profile like Dante's in the mask, a mane of long black hair, the eye brilliant, imperious, and inquiring. . . . Now he wears a woman's frock, now a naval uniform; now (and more usually) figures in a masquerade costume of his own design: trousers and a singular jacket with shirt tails, the cut and fit wonderful for island workmanship, the material always handsome, sometimes green velvet, sometimes cardinal red silk. This masquerade becomes him admirably. In the woman's frock he looks ominous and weird beyond belief. (Stevenson 1891:303)

The arrival of Tem Binoka occasioned considerable anxiety on the part of the Stevensons, for they had a favor to seek. "It was our wish to land and live in Apemama, and see more near at hand the odd character of the man and the odd (or rather ancient) condition of his island" (Stevenson 1891:309). The captain of the *Equator* presented their request, but Tem Binoka did not respond. To their discomfort, for the rest of that day and half of the next, when he returned to the ship, he subjected the party, one by one, to an intense, silent scrutiny. At the end of that time, wrote Stevenson, "I was informed abruptly that I had stood the ordeal. 'I look your eye. You good man. You no lie,' said the king: a doubtful compliment to a writer of romance" (1891:312).

The party was allowed to come ashore, and Tem Binoka had assembled for them a little town, the four houses, which stood on stilts, being simply walked into place on the shoulders of islanders. The Stevensons lived in "Equator Town" for two months. They got to know the "commons" of the island hardly at all, but Tem Binoka very well. They called on him in his house, and he came to call on them.

He would come strolling over, always alone, a little before a

meal-time, take a chair, and talk and eat with us like an old family friend. . . . [His manners were] plain, decent, sensible, and dignified. He never stayed long nor drank much, and copied our behaviour where he perceived it to differ from his own. . . . It was plain he was determined in all things to wring profit from our visit, and chiefly upon etiquette. (Stevenson 1891:334-335)

As time went on, Tem Binoka told Stevenson the story of his family. He described his grandfather, Tenkoruti (Teng Karotu), a village chief "when Kuria and Arunuka were yet independent [and] Apemama itself the arena of devastating feuds":

Through this perturbed period of history the figure of Tenkoruti stalks memorable. In war he was swift and bloody. . . . In civil life his arrogance was unheard of. . . . He was feared and hated, and this was his pleasure. He was no poet; he cared not for arts and knowledge. "My gran'patha one thing savvy, savvy pight," observed the king. (Stevenson 1891:364)

His grandson remembered Teng Karotu as an old man: he was tall and lean and "walked all the same young man." According to Tem Binoka, the body of Teng Karotu was unscarred (Stevenson 1891:365).

Tem Binoka described his father, Tem Baiteke, as "short, middling stout, a poet, a good genealogist, and something of a fighter" (Stevenson 1891:365).

It was his father's brother, Tem Binatake, however, who increasingly emerged in Tem Binoka's recollections as the truly great man:

Like Tenkoruti, he was tall and lean and a swift walker. . . . He possessed every accomplishment. He knew sorcery, he was the best genealogist of his day, he was a poet, he could dance and make canoes and armour. . . . But these were avocations, and the man's trade was war. "When my uncle go make wa', he laugh," said Tembinok'. . . . (Stevenson 1891:365)

As the time of the Stevensons'

departure approached, Tem Binoka became increasingly melancholy. One night he sat with Lloyd Osbourne after the others had retired:

"I very sorry you go . . . Miss Stevens he good man, woman he

good man, boy he good man; all good man . . . I very sorry. My patha he go, Miss Stevens he go: all go. You no see king cry before. King all the same man: feel bad, he cry. I very sorry." (Stevenson 1891:367-368)



7 Robert Louis and Fanny Stevenson and their friends Nan Tok and Natakanti on Butaritari in the Gilbert Islands. (Reproduced from Fanny Stevenson, *The Cruise of the "Janet Nichol,"* following p. 6)



8 Robert Louis Stevenson's three Gilbert Island corselets (P3294 A,B,C). Heavy and rigid, these provided effective protection against sharks' teeth weapons, throwing spears, and European knives and bayonets. They are made of horizontal bundles of coconut fiber, firmly bound together with twisted fiber cord. The high back of P3294B (center) is braced by two short sticks rising from the shoulders, and reinforced by two long sticks bound along the outside edges. The black diamonds and stripes on all three corselets are human hair. (P3294A, H. 76 cm; P3294B, H. 102 cm; P3294C, H. 82.5 cm)

The next day Tem Binoka sent to Stevenson

a present of two corselets, made in the island fashion of plaited fibre, heavy and strong. One had been worn by Tenkoruti, one by Tembaitake; and the gift being gratefully received, he sent me, on the return of his messengers, a third—that of Tembinatake [Fig. 8]. My curiosity was roused; I begged for information as to the three wearers; and the king entered with gusto into the details already given. (Stevenson 1891:368)

Like his father and uncle before him, Tem Binoka was a poet, and on the occasion of Stevenson's departure from Abemama the two men agreed to "celebrate [their] separation in verse":

Let us, who part like brothers,
part like bards; / And you in your
tongue and measure, I in mine, /
Our now division duly solemnise.
(Stevenson 1911:180)

Stevenson's poem "The House of Tembinoka," written at sea on the schooner *Equator*, repeats in verse the history of Tem Binoka's family.

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Robert Louis Stevenson's three Gilbertese corselets lie, dusty and mute, in the storerooms of The University Museum. As it happens, we know quite a lot about them. We understand something about the friendship between Stevenson and Tem Binoka, and how the gift was made. We can picture the jagged wounds inflicted by rows of sharks' teeth, the long complexity of binding scores of bundles of fiber into a substantial defensive garment, and the incredible discomfort of wearing a full suit of fiber armor into battle in the blinding heat of an equatorial atoll. The names of the three men who made and wore these corselets are known to us, and we can even ask ourselves, which belonged to whom? Is P3294C, with its fine texture and many small torn spots, older than the other two, and was it,

therefore, worn by the arrogant old warrior Teng Karotu? No matter how far we push, however, some frustration remains, and perhaps this is part of what draws us to an ethnographic and archaeological

museum. Firmly in the here and now, we can never really know what it was to make and use the exotic objects that surround us, but we come, nevertheless, to look and learn and speculate. **2**



Adria Katz is Keeper of the Oceanian collections in The University Museum Her interest in the weaponry of the Pacific dates from 1975, when she undertook a catalogue of Solomon Island war clubs, spear clubs, and axes in the collections of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago.

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