ABSTRACT
This thesis will provide an ethnographic analysis of the impacts of climate change and sea level rise in the Republic of Kiribati, a small island nation in the Central Pacific. Kiribati is a series of thirty-three low-lying coral atolls and one phosphate island, that average between two and three meters above sea level. There have already been significant damages caused by the rising sea, including the loss of property, water contamination, and the loss of food resources. The villages practice a primarily subsistence-based lifestyle that revolves around cultural, social, and economic relationships to the maneaba. The maneaba refers to the physical community buildings in each village, but also to the village’s social network, extended family structure, and traditional leadership system in place in each village. In recent years, villages have been forced to adapt to the changes caused by the rising sea level, while simultaneously transitioning rapidly to a more cash-centered economic structure as the sea continues to rise. Efforts to address the impact of rising seas have accelerated this emphasis on the cash economy, which paradoxically, has intensified a feeling of impending loss, detachment, and inevitable displacement. This thesis analyzes these changes on the maneaba cultural system in Kiribati, and argues that rather than simply “adapting,” the Kiribati maneaba culture has allowed villages to remain remarkably resilient in the face of drastic environmental change. However, it is this very network that will be threatened as the sea continues to rise.