

TE MWANEABA NI KIRIBATI

The Traditional Meeting House of Kiribati: ‘A Tale of Two Islands’

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Abstract

Te mwaneaba (the traditional meeting-house) is central to social existence on the isolated coral atolls that form Kiribati. It is a place of tradition and ritual, changing only slowly since the establishment of “the original prototype *maneaba* of Tabontebike” around 1650 (Maude, 1977: 10). In *te mwaneaba* the seating positions of the old men of the village (*unimwane*) demonstrate their hierarchy. It is also a place of formal decision-making and significant social events. This paper developed from an initial photographic documentation of *mwaneaba* in 2008. The images revealed recent changes in building materials and construction techniques which, it is argued, have a significant effect upon social practices and the symbolic status of *mwaneaba*. It is further proposed that *te mwaneaba* acts as an agency for either change or inter-generational continuity in relation to the use of imported or local materials in its construction. *Mwaneaba* on the islands of Tarawa and Tabiteuea North form the primary sites for this examination.

Text and image are constructed to form a dialectical relationship, maximising one another’s potential and sharing an equally important role in the dialogue. The photographs provide both specific detail and general contextualisation of the subject, while the written text adds to and builds upon the imagery.

[All quotations from Kiribati residents in this article derive from interviews conducted by the author in 2008 and all photographs are also by the author.]

Keywords

Status, nexus, identity, material culture, inter-generational continuity, agency

Introduction

The traditional *mwaneaba* is the social nexus of village life in Kiribati. It is in this structure that village decisions are made by *unimwane*, the old men, whose seating arrangements declare their authority and status within the community. *Te mwaneaba* is also the site of significant social activities. It is a place of dignity and formality. There exists a dialectical relationship in which the activities in *te mwaneaba* are imbued with stature and significance and in turn, define *te mwaneaba* as a place of power and authority. An example is traditional dance, *mwaie*, which has historically been imbued with considerable authority by being performed in *te mwaneaba*. The special quality of the site enhances the feelings of the dancers and audience, heightening the tension and emotions of the performance. The dance brings together the village, historical

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procedures, spirituality and strong emotions that, in turn, construct the social significance of *te mwaneaba* through its presence. Although the meanings of *te mwaneaba* are made by actions in it, *te mwaneaba* itself also affects the things done, and thus the experiences people have, and inevitably, their view of the world. In this paper the islands of Tabiteuea North and Tarawa are used as case studies to examine the significance of building materials in defining the agency of *mwaneaba* in contemporary Kiribati. (NB while I recognise that it is somewhat unconventional to ascribe agency to a building, I argue in this article that the collective experience and ascription of agency in a building and building form/practice creates agency-like qualities in the *te mwaneaba*. From this perspective, I propose that the *mwaneaba* can contribute to stability and inter-generational continuity or social change.)



Figure 1 - The newly built *mwaneaba* at the village of Eita on Tabiteuea North

A Sense of Place

Viewed from the air, a Kiribati atoll appears to be an uninterrupted carpet of coconut palms except for the occasional cleared area on the lagoon shore where a large thatched roof can be seen. This is the roof of the I-Kiribati *te mwaneaba*. Even from the air, the size is impressive. The traditional *mwaneaba* is the largest single cultural artefact of Kiribati and its size signals its importance within the community. *Mwane* means to collect or bring together and *aba*, the land or the people of the land. The *mwaneaba* is central to the I-Kiribati way of life, defining, maintaining and reflecting attitudes to spirituality, age, hierarchy, communality, patterns of expression and hospitality. Functionally *te mwaneaba* was a place of sanctuary; it is still a place to stay while visiting a village. Symbolically, *te mwaneaba* provides a means for self-expression and self-definition through its building, maintenance and operation.

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Figure 2 - Eita village *mwaneaba* (top, centre) on Tabiteuea North

The Republic of Kiribati is a chain of coral atolls straddling the equator approximately halfway between Hawai'i and Australia. The country consists of 33 islands in three primary locations - Banaba (Ocean Island) to the west and Kiritimati (Christmas Island) and the Line Islands to the east, with Kiribati (the Gilbert Islands) and Rawaki (the Phoenix Islands) between them. Ocean-rich and land-poor, the atolls, with a land area of only 800 square kilometres, are scattered over three million square kilometres of the central Pacific Ocean. Kiritimati accounts for about half of this land area. Temperature and rainfall vary little throughout the year in the Gilbert chain of islands. The south-east trade winds moderate a hot, humid, tropical marine climate, helping to keep the land cool and maintaining a temperature averaging approximately 28°C. August and September are the driest months, the wettest December and January. The northern islands are wetter and therefore less prone to drought than the south.



Figure 3 -The island of Onotoa

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This paper draws its ethnographic information from the sixteen atolls of the Gilbert Islands. These low-lying coral atolls, built on a submerged volcanic chain and encircled by reefs, rise a mere two metres above the sea. Although generally thought to lie outside the severe weather associated with the tropical cyclone belt, Kiribati has recently been affected by strong winds and increased rainfall. There are fears that these changes in weather patterns and the rising sea associated with global warming, may threaten their very existence. The reefs are the defence against relentless waves upon these precarious landfalls. There is nowhere, not even in the centre of the lagoon, that the incessant roar of the breakers is not heard. The sound of the sea is inescapable in Kiribati. Sea dominates life - this is a world of water. The nearest island is over the horizon, and the nearest major land mass a thousand miles away. Only a narrow strip of land divides the ocean from the lagoon. These tiny ribbons of coral with no fresh surface water and thin, infertile soil are the home of the I-Kiribati.



Figure 4 - Ocean coast, Bikati, Butaritari

Material Culture

In Kiribati most of the objects used in day-to-day life are made from local materials that are found in the immediate vicinity of the villages and prepared by the communal skills and effort of the family. Coconut palms, pandanus and breadfruit trees have adapted to the sandy soil of the atolls. Other plants such as the large root crop, *te babai* or giant swamp taro, (*Cyrtosperma chamissonis*), pumpkin and banana (in the northern islands), need careful tending, using decaying vegetable matter as compost, to grow. The coconut tree has been a vital factor in the development of Kiribati as we know it today. This is the 'tree of life', providing a range of coconut flesh at different stages of development, drink, copra for export, wood for many uses, fronds for weaving, fibre for making string and even the basis of an alcoholic drink. Old trees are regularly replaced by germinating coconuts as part of the sustaining the pattern of life in Kiribati.

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The atolls have no metallic ores or hard rocks from which to produce tools. Instead shells and the hard wood, *te uri* (*Ochrosia paviflores*), were traditionally used to make fish hooks and the multi-purpose adze, while shark skin served as sandpaper for finishing constructions. Inevitably, with the limited resources available and the imperatives of survival, an emphasis on functionality and simplicity of form has resulted. Objects receive virtually no additional decoration that is not inherent in their structure. There is no carving on houses or the prows of canoes, nor significant examples of two-dimensional decoration or representation.



Figure 5 - Traditional house, Bikati, Butaritari

Much of the success of the I-Kiribati communities arises from their ability to exploit the potential of available materials for a wide range of purposes. Baskets, house walls, hats, mats of all kinds - including floor mats, sleeping mats, and those for dancing - are skilfully produced from the pandanus and coconut frond. The objects in daily use in Kiribati have been perfected over thousands of years and are agents of stability and continuity. Such things reach deeply into cultural beliefs, social and individual needs, history, resources and self-recognition and definition.

Te Mwaneaba, the meeting house

The traditional *mwaneaba* is built primarily from pandanus and coconut trees. In the whole of the construction there are no nails, screws or glue. The strength of the massive structure depends upon wooden pins, well fitting joints and string, *te kora*, made from the coconut husk, using sophisticated knots and lashing patterns. As Hockings has identified, "lashings used throughout *te maneaba* were not random but carefully specified for each joint... Many of the knots were highly complex and difficult to tie, and a large part of the builder's skill lay in his knowledge of this aspect of the construction

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process” (1989: 210). The completion of such a building relies upon the contribution of the whole village for string, thatch, tree- cutting, weaving and general work. It draws upon many of the skills associated with the material culture of Kiribati. The combined effort and experience of *te mwaneaba* binds people together as a social group.



Figure 6 – Sophisticated knots and lashings made from local string are joint-specific

The production of string from the coconut husk is a painstaking process involving months of preparation. Once gathered, the husks are buried in the lagoon sand below the tide line and covered with coral boulders. After about three months of soaking, the husks are removed and the fibrous inside teased out and dried. These strands are then rolled together by hand on the thigh to produce metre after metre of *te kora*. Skeins of *te kora* are always on hand to tie or re-tie new thatch to the roof, repair a ball for a game of *te oreano*, lash an outrigger to a canoe or tie together the huge pandanus logs of the massive meeting house. Although it is a male role to build and repair, it is women’s work to produce the string that binds everything together, assuring them of a socially valued role. In this manner, men, women and children have distinct responsibilities. Each responsibility has its associated objects and skills; each skill is socially recognised; and each skill comes with a sense of worth and a valued place within the community. It is not surprising that for many I-Kiribati their skill with a particular object will remain a closely guarded secret to all but the most trusted family members. Objects have value for what they represent symbolically in relation to individuality and identity as for their utility.

The first *mwaneaba* in the styles recognised today is thought to have been built on Beru. Local belief is that an individual named Tematawarebwe landed on the south end of Beru from Samoa. When his grandson Teweia came of age, Tematawarebwe sent him to Samoa to collect timbers from the *mwaneaba* they had left behind in Samoa. Having accomplished his mission he chose the site of Tabontebike and, according to Maude, “here Teweia erected the prototype of all Gilbertese *maneaba* incorporating timber actually brought from the former edifice on Samoa” (1963: 11) From that time a *mwaneaba* stood at the village of Nukantewa until it was recently burnt down as a result

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of intense local disputes. Hockings suggests that the ‘bringing of the timber’ symbolises a link with Samoa as the ancestral homeland and a reconstruction of the social system as it existed on Samoa. (1989: 40). From the outset *te mwaneaba* has been as much symbolic as functional. There are three basic types of traditional *mwaneaba*: *Tabontebike*, *Tabiang* and *Maungatabu*. The principal difference between each style is in the proportions of length to width and details in relation to the number and positioning of the supporting beams. Generally, the gables of these *mwaneaba* face north and south with the west side facing the lagoon. The building of *te mwaneaba* commences with an *unimwane*, a senior man in the village, deciding upon its length. Atanikarawa *mwaneaba* on Tabiteuea North is approximately forty metres in length by twenty metres wide. In contrast, the Catholic *mwaneaba* at Koinawa on Abaiang is approximately sixty metres in length and seventeen metres wide.



Figure 7 – Atanikarawa *mwaneaba* on Tabiteuea North is approximately forty metres in length by twenty metres wide



Figure 8 – In contrast, the Catholic *mwaneaba* at Koinawa on Abaiang is approximately sixty metres in length and seventeen metres wide

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The size of each *mwaneaba* is established in relation to a number of criteria including the likely number of people who will use it, the land available for its site and the construction style with which the builder is familiar. A length marking *te mwaneaba's* eastern side is staked out and divided into half, half again and half again. Most of the key elements in *te mwaneaba* will be positioned by divisions or multiplications of these units. The builder is also guided by his experience and the style of *te mwaneaba* to be built. After the size and proportions have been established, the coral supports, *boua*, are placed in position and beams, *tatanga*, placed horizontally upon them, forming low eaves. Then larger *boutabu* and smaller *boua ni kua* posts are positioned vertically and temporarily held in place. The complex of horizontal and diagonal beams, *te bao ni moto*, *te bao*, *te kautoko* and *te taubuki* are then positioned and lashed into place. Positioning the ridge pole, *te taubuki*, requires great skill, strength and courage. Working at heights of 12 -13 metres, a small team of men balance on the beams of the west and east sides of *te mwaneaba* as they haul the ridgepole into place at top dead- centre. Diagonal roof beams, *oka*, are positioned and thinner slats of wood, *kaukau* and *bwai ni kakori*, are lashed across the *oka* to form a framework on which to attach the pandanus thatch, *te rau*. The floor of the traditional *mwaneaba* is covered with fine smooth coral stones and overlaid with long lengths of coarsely woven palm fronds, *inaai*.

Te mwaneaba comprises three significant areas: 1) the *marae*, which surrounds the building and is covered with coral; 2) the *atama*; and 3) edged with a border of small stones; the inner space of the building (of which the outer area is reserved for the village people. *Unimwane* sit in their allotted *boti* and the central space is reserved for performances. The parts of the *mwaneaba* and the building process itself are spiritually, physically and symbolically of great social significance for both individuals and the village. The building process, as well as the final structure, provides a sense of individuality within a supportive and communal framework. The carefully staged building procedure, with its celebrations and regard for *te tabunea* of the master builder, are designed to provide 'safety' in the debate and decision making practices of *te mwaneaba*.



Figure 9 – Working with skill and courage in the roof of *te mwaneaba*



Figure 10 - Burenneita Mwaneaba at Eita village on Tabiteuea North

I was fortunate to sit inside and gaze in awe at the newly constructed Burenneita Mwaneaba at Eita village on Tabiteuea North in 2008. After the initial impression of the complexity and apparent randomness of posts and beams, a simple symmetry of construction emerged. The symmetry of right angle triangles is repeated everywhere - in the triangulations of the huge pandanus logs, the positioning of the coral supports, the all important *boua ni kaua* and the intricate knotted patterns formed in the lashings of *te kora*. A duality exists, that echoes the function of the *mwaneaba* itself, of elegant simplicity within a complex and enduring strength. The awe I felt is closely associated with a reverence that reflects the investment of care and attention by the village in the *mwaneaba* construction and use.



Figure 11 – No nails or screws are used in construction, only lashings and wooden pegs

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H.E. Maude, the respected anthropologist, writing in the early 1960s, reflected that the *mwaneaba* was:

The focus of the whole of social life of the community, in it were held all the discussions concerning peace or war or any of the other innumerable concerns affecting the common-weal... All behaviour under its roof had to be seemly, decorous and in strict conformity with custom, lest the maneaba be matauninga (offended) and the culprit maraia (accursed). (1963:11)

Maude also suggests that much of the social significance of the *mwaneaba* centres on *te boti* - the 'sitting place' of a clan "and by extension the name given to the clan itself [since] the *boti* had functions related to many aspects of Gilbertese life, social, economic, political and judicial" (ibid: 54).



Figure 12 – The posts against which the old men sit define their hierarchy in *te mwaneaba*

The hereditary *boti* defines the pattern of sitting and being in the *mwaneaba*, and is established by long custom and complex sociological process. The importance of the status evidenced by *te boti* must not be underestimated. Conflicts over these symbolic positions can lead to bitter disputes resulting in a potential for individual violence or destruction of the *mwaneaba* by fire. Much of what Maude described in 1977 was true

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of *mwaneaba* I visited in 2008 in the villages of Eita and Buota on the island of Tabiteuea North. Both Grimble and Maude feared the traditional *mwaneaba* and its social practice were in serious decline but the *unimwane* of Abaiang and Tabiteuea North in 2008 expressed their view to me that little of the social significance of the *mwaneaba* had changed in their lifetime.

Imported Materials

On South Tarawa, the most urbanised island of Kiribati, all meeting houses are built with imported materials (with the exception of the village of Eita) and, consequently, different processes of construction and definition have evolved.



Figures 13, 14 and 15 - South Tarawa *mwaneaba* constructed of imported materials



Figure 14 - A temporary place to stay when away from the home island

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Figure 15 - Barbed wire defines this *mwaneaba* boundary

Tarawa is the seat of government, the site of the national bank, the international airport, the port, large stores and the central hospital, and most of the opportunities for cash employment. There has been an influx of people - particularly young people - from the outer islands. Approximately 45,000 people now live on the 16 square kilometres of the southern arm of the atoll of Tarawa, in contrast to 3600 people who live on the 26 square kilometres of Tabiteuea North.



Figure 16 – South Tarawa

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Figure 17 - An outer island, Abaiang

As houses and *mwaneaba* were built, they not only consumed the local materials of pandanus and coconut trees but also occupied land that would previously have been used for re-planting. As local resources became harder to obtain, so imported materials were substituted. They are attractive to the many people on South Tarawa in paid employment who have little time for the painstaking preparation required for local materials. The imported materials are also seen to require less ongoing maintenance than traditional materials. For some, their use is also a sign of status.



Figure 18 – The devastation of coconut trees on a failed land reclamation attempt

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Other social pressures on the growing population include the need to accommodate often large but transitory groups visiting for various celebrations, sports events or families of patients at the central hospital. The village *mwaneaba*, except for those of Betio and Eita, is a thing of the past on South Tarawa, having been supplanted by different church *mwaneaba*. With the help of the Government and various aid agencies, separate 'island *mwaneaba*' have been constructed from imported materials to cater for visitors from each particular island. As with all material culture there is a two-way interaction between the maker and the 'made', and in changing both the materials and the procedures for building *te mwaneaba*, inevitable changes to its social role occur.



Figure 19 - An iron roof torn by strong winds awaits 'aid' funding for replacement

The knowledge systems for building the traditional *mwaneaba* have been developed over centuries and reveal a profound understanding of sustainable construction techniques within the context and the resources of a coral atoll. Imported building materials have been less well-adapted to the I-Kiribati context. The thatched roof of the traditional *mwaneaba* provides cool shade even on the hottest of days; the floor comprises gravel and coarse hand-woven palm mats which are comfortable and dry to sit on. In contrast, the tin roofs of the urban *mwaneaba* heat up rapidly and produce uncomfortable temperatures within. The same roofs make speeches inaudible when it is raining. Concrete floors are uncomfortable to sit on for the often-lengthy proceedings within *te mwaneaba*.

As noted, the traditional *mwaneaba* enshrines and perpetuates *te boti* of the clans - the jealously-guarded hierarchy that is publicly exemplified through the seating positions within *te mwaneaba*. The presence of the old men, *unimwane*, from a number of different villages of the same island makes strict adherence to *te boti* protocols problematic on urban Tarawa. *Te boti* is a village rather than an island system. *Mwaneaba* on South Tarawa are now often run by committees, comprising men and women, young and old. These *mwaneaba* also have permanent caretakers who provide for a continuity of management in a transitory population. Perhaps most important is the decline in the significance of the clan hierarchy, *te boti*. Police and law courts are replacing much of

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the traditional decision-making and law enforcement, once the domain of the *unimwane* within *te mwaneaba*. There is a resistance to change, as voiced by the *unimwane* of Tabiteua North. As one informant expressed it to me: “if we do use them (imported materials) then we will lose our customs, values, identity and our way of life, particularly our upbringing as I-Kiribati... this will all be wiped away by these new materials”. Indeed, there is good cause for this concern. The decorum and formality considered sacrosanct in traditional *mwaneaba* are not thought to be important in the new constructions on urban Tarawa, which are open to games of bingo, disco dances and film shows.



Figure 20 – Children playing with an old tyre and a dog encroach upon an urban *mwaneaba*

Another *unimwane* commented:

Other rowdy activities can also be seen. Therefore it would not be the same when you are in a traditional mwaneaba and te mwaneaba made of new materials. The honour and reverence you have for the traditional mwaneaba would all vanish when new materials are used.

South Tarawa can be seen as a site of tension, as the future social role of *te mwaneaba* is redefined in relation to material changes of construction, growing contemporary aspirations of youth, and demands for gender equality. *Te mwaneaba* has traditionally been an agency for continuity across the generations but on South Tarawa the building has become a catalyst for change. This change is not confined to Tarawa, as a steady flow of people between the islands disseminate these new attitudes to *mwaneaba* further afield. In addition, the churches are also playing a part in the changing social role of *mwaneaba*. It is not surprising that a building so symbolically important to a culture has been adopted by both the Catholic and Protestant faiths. On many islands the larger villages will have, in addition to the village *mwaneaba*, both Catholic and Protestant meeting houses.



Figure 21 - A Catholic *mwaneaba*, Tabiteuea North

Tensions can develop from the demands of time and commitments made by both the church and village *mwaneaba*. The very presence of alternative meeting houses complicates the role of the traditional village *mwaneaba* from unifying diversity within the village, to clearly delineating difference by religious denomination. The majority of church *mwaneaba* are made of imported materials that do not rely upon, and therefore do not encourage, the maintenance of traditional material skills and social practices.

Summary

In summary, *te mwaneaba* arises from, and influences, an integrated and holistic knowledge system developed within a fine balance of skill, material and place, and contributes to the maintenance of cultural practices and beliefs through its dominant presence in the community. Not only does the traditional *mwaneaba* serve a practical function as the site for important social matters, it is also a symbolic system for self-definition of both community and individual. In the indigenous knowledge systems of Kiribati which are grounded in the 'here and now' of subsistence living, the introduction of imported materials in the construction of the culture's single most significant and important cultural artefact has a significant impact upon cultural knowledge and practice and, ultimately, what it is to be I-Kiribati. Many of the urban Tarawa youth have little or no experience of traditional *mwaneaba* protocol or authority and their sense of self-definition is by association with the contemporary materials. The sense of common ownership through *te mwaneaba* construction is replaced by the more abstracted notions of cash donations or fund-raising for the church *mwaneaba* built of imported materials. The youth of Tarawa, though, enjoy the freedom within the urban *mwaneaba*.



Figure 22 - A traditional *mwaneaba*, part of the functional and symbolic I-Kiribati existence

The gap between the traditional *mwaneaba*, as found on Tabiteuea North, and the contemporary constructions of South Tarawa continues to widen. The unimaginable has been imagined and Tarawa youth interviewed by the author expressed the opinions that the traditional *mwaneaba* is “boring”, of little consequence to social existence and not “modern enough” to warrant association. Yet the *unimwane* on outer islands claim that “nothing has changed since their childhood” and that without *te mwaneaba* “they would not know themselves as I-Kiribati”. The closed traditional practices of the past are broken forever and the traditional meeting-house that loomed so large in their maintenance now figures with equal significance in their change. The future is not certain but it is likely that within the flux of continuity and change in Kiribati, *te mwaneaba* will continue to play a vital role.

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