

TE WA

The Social Significance of the Traditional Canoes of Kiribati

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Abstract

Through the vehicle of the photographic essay, a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973: 3-30) incorporating participant quotations, reflexive writing and photographic images, this article examines the roles of magic, gender, sport, skill, ownership and the pragmatics of survival in relation to *te wa*, the traditional canoe of Kiribati. It is stressed that something that is made reaches deeply into cultural beliefs and strategies for self-recognition and self-definition. In Kiribati, knowledge is closely guarded. Skills associated with the canoe, such as construction, navigation, magic and sailing, will be passed on only to close and trusted family members. A sense of self is recognised not from material possessions but rather as the guardian of unique cultural practice. The canoe is an expression of these complex and fundamental human social concerns. This visual work explores the deeply rooted traditional values and practices which mirror those enduring qualities that remain at the heart of what it is to be I-Kiribati.

Keywords

Micronesia, canoe, Kiribati, cultural artefact, self-definition

The Republic of Kiribati comprises thirty-three coral atolls lying along the equator about halfway between Hawai’i and Australia, due north of New Zealand - Banaba (Ocean Island) to the west and Christmas Island and the Line Islands to the east, with Kiribati (the Gilbert Islands) and Rawaki (the Phoenix Islands) between them. Trade winds moderate a hot, humid, tropical marine climate. The inhabitants of Kiribati are Micronesian, with the population estimated at 100,000 and with as many as 40,000 inhabiting the capital island of Tarawa. The Gilbert Islands were granted self-rule by the UK in 1971 and complete independence in 1979 under the new name of Kiribati (pronounced ‘Kiribaas’). The US relinquished all claims to the sparsely inhabited Phoenix and Line Island groups in a 1979 treaty of friendship with Kiribati.

The sixteen atolls that comprise the main island group of Kiribati stand a mere two to three metres above the sea and are tiny peaks of vast undersea mountains that rise through the depths of the Pacific Ocean. Their reefs are the defence against the relentless waves falling upon these precarious landfalls. There is nowhere, not even in the centre of the islands’ lagoons, that the incessant roar of the breakers is not heard. The sound of the sea is inescapable in Kiribati. Sea dominates life. The nearest island is over the horizon, and a major land mass a thousand miles of ocean away. The land, heartbreakingly threatened by ecologically offensive nations and their affects upon the world’s climate, is so narrow that both ocean and lagoon can nearly always be seen. The peaceful and gentle, the deep and strong, and the inner and outer are in constant contrast.

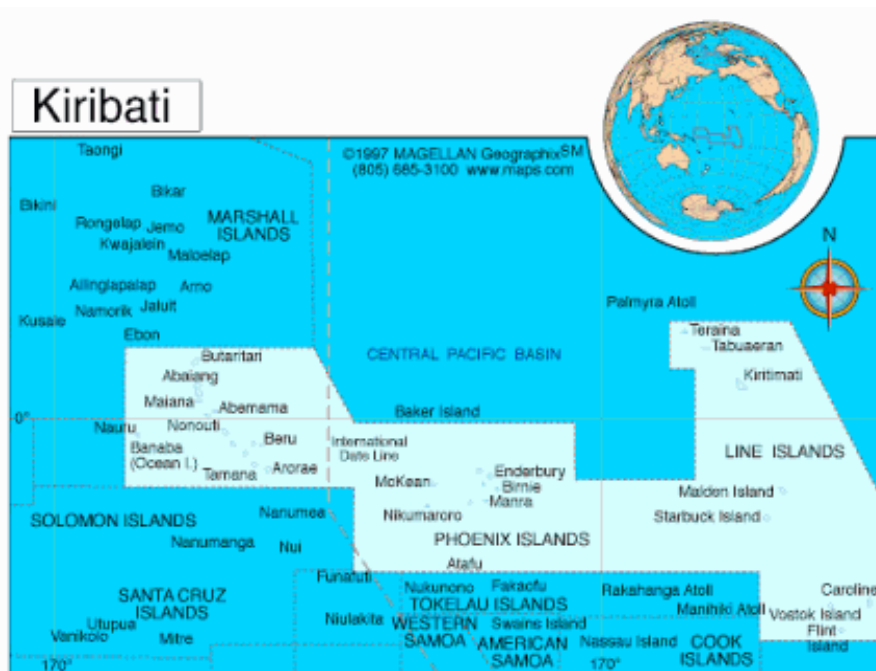


Figure 1 – Map of Kiribati

You have only to stand on that beach, with the other beach a few yards behind you, think where you are – is it the end of the world, or the beginning? – and look at the empty enormity in which your existence as an individual is placed... (Coates, 1970: 36)

These tiny ribbons of coral are the home of the I-Kiribati.

Change comes slowly to these isolated atolls, and canoe building is still a strongly maintained traditional practice throughout all the islands of the central chain of Kiribati. Fewer canoes are built now than in the past yet on the 'outer islands' they are still of considerable significance for the utilitarian purposes of fishing and transport, as well as an expression of pride and self-definition through ownership and associated skills. Aluminum boats powered by outboard motors have grown in popularity over recent years but are found mainly on the capital of Tarawa, where the seat of government, international banks, the port, secondary schools and numerous stores emphasise a cash economy.

In terms of local production, there is only one alternative to the traditional canoe and that is *te wa wa*, or double hull. These are built of imported marine ply and are very heavy, stable, have a large carrying capacity and are nearly always powered by an outboard engine. The elegant, lightweight and efficient traditional sailing canoe continues to maintain a unique cultural role. Grimble suggests that

[the] canoe-emotion was, psychologically speaking, a complex whose components were not all utilitarian. The Gilbertese bosom fostered, and still fosters, a genuine love of the canoe for their own sake ... and the superb sport they afford a man. (1972: 152)

For many, the sentiments expressed in the early writing of Arthur Grimble still have significance.

The resources of Kiribati are limited. People maintain a knife-edge existence. Even today,

virtually everything for the construction of houses and canoes comes from the land and is prepared by the communal effort of the family. The imperative of survival demands the integration of people and place. Something that is made reaches deeply into cultural beliefs, needs, history, resources and self-recognition. The canoe is an expression of this complex interaction and is deeply rooted in social concerns, traditional values and practices, mirroring those enduring qualities of the traditional skills, ancient spirituality and survival that remain at the heart of what it is to be I-Kiribati.

The canoe is a male domain, yet in its construction, women play a vital role by making coconut string. After several months of soaking the coconut husk in the lagoon, women tease the fibres from it. Rolling the fine strands on their thighs, skein after skein of string is made. This string is used in every aspect of the canoe's construction. With it, the planks of the hull are stitched together, the outrigger is lashed on and all spars are held firmly in place. The women's work literally holds the canoe together. The canoe grows almost organically from the resources that are naturally and readily available on the atoll and uses nothing but the wind for power. It is given its existence by the combined effort, skill and traditional values of a family. Were the canoe discarded and not cared for, it would disintegrate rapidly. It is in this context that we try to appreciate the significance a canoe must hold for those who from birth, stare out at the immensity of the Pacific Ocean.

Dilthey (1976) suggests that in order to understand ourselves, we should not try to look inward but rather take the more circuitous route and reflect upon the objectifications of our activities, which include not only our self-conscious productions of art and fashion but also expressions arising from the fundamental hegemony of the time and group. Concrete objectifications of lived experience reveal complex and intangible aspects of a group or individual. I am interested in the way that photographs of these productions can be contextualised and juxtaposed. The challenge for those who wish to use photography in research is to transcend the readily available surface descriptions provided by the photographic image, and, in the construction of visual symbolic relationships, assert readings of the intangible. This photo essay explores the social significance of the traditional canoes of Kiribati and in doing so requires viewers to explore beyond the (important) denotational function of the photographs and search for connotational interpretations in response to their relationships.

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