

# VISUALISING SOCIAL CHANGE

## A Case Study of the Traditional I-Kiribati Canoe

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This paper focuses upon the role of the photographic image in sociological research. The discussion centres on the extent to which objectifications of lived experience can provide tangible forms for photography to visualise intangible dimensions of human activity. It argues that concrete objectifications can be considered a symbolic system through which the interplay of experience, social structure and sources of expression is mediated and made manifest.

My initial photographic images made during a recent research project exploring the role, significance and sustainability of the traditional canoe (te wa) in contemporary Kiribati society, alerted me to potential sites of social tension or change. Questions provoked by these photographs led me to considerations of broad social issues. The images from my on-going research project are used here as a case study for discussion of the potential to document and communicate intangible aspects of social change photographically.

Context is clearly critical to the understanding of any socially constructed symbolic system and is, therefore, no less important in the interpretation of objectifications of lived experience and their interrelationships. Objects have specific meanings for those with eyes to see them and the background to understand their implications. Before any interpretation of individual images is undertaken, it is vital that the context in which the traditional I-Kiribati canoe exists is understood.

Standing a mere two to three metres above the sea, the sixteen atolls in the main island group of Kiribati straddle the equator due north of New Zealand. The reefs are the defence against relentless waves upon these precarious landfalls. The sound of the sea is inescapable in Kiribati, and at no place, not even in the centre of the lagoon, can the incessant roar of the breakers not be heard.

The sea, therefore, dominates life on Kiribati. The ocean and the lagoon can nearly always be seen from anywhere on the island, and with the landmass threatened by ecologically offensive nations, the tiny, low ribbons of coral are the home of the I-Kiribati. Here, the peaceful and the gentle, the deep and the strong, the inner and the outer, stand in constant contrast.

For the people of Kiribati, then, resources are meagre, and the 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. Therefore, the making of a canoe expresses this complex interaction, and is deeply rooted in social concerns, traditional values and practices. The making of a canoe also mirrors 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 construction of a canoe remains a male domain, yet 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. By 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 role literally holds the canoe together.

I have owned and sailed my own traditional canoe, which has left me with a passion for its beauty and appropriateness that I will never lose. A traditional sailing canoe is a wonderful sight as it skims over the turquoise waters of the lagoon. Neither nail nor screw hold the canoe together; rather, it is held together by string made by the women in the community. The traditional canoe comes into being through the combined efforts, skills 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—the canoe's 'highway' between people and places.

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 through the construction of compelling symbolic relationships, assert powerful readings of the intangible. Dilthey (1976) suggests that to understand ourselves, we should not try to look inward. Rather, we should 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 include 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 these individual productions are contextualised and juxtaposed, and I propose that photography provides a unique medium through which to explore, document and communicate these contexts.

I suggest that changes occurring in the wider I-Kiribati society are represented in the changes of canoe culture. The tangible manifestations of changing attitudes and practices provide an opportunity to photograph otherwise intangible aspects of social change. Each image poses questions concerning changes of I-Kiribati social existence. Specific aspects of material culture and social practice are framed and juxtaposed in the photographs, and signify shifts of a general social nature. The following images, I will argue, point to changes in technology and the application of skills, a growing emphasis

upon a cash economy in contrast to traditional subsistence patterns, and the rejection or denial of historic modes of spirituality within contemporary I-Kiribati society.

With the exception of those living on Tarawa, on which the seat of government, the central bank, international airport and seaport are to be found, the people of Kiribati predominantly live in a subsistence economy. Materials of survival and social activities are painstakingly won from the natural resources of the coral atolls. The coconut string, 'te kora', is prepared from the fibres of readily available coconut husks. Nylon fishing line must be purchased, the significance of which cannot be over emphasised in a predominantly subsistence economy. The whole edifice of a cash economy starts here—money to purchase the goods, the import of goods and the necessary infrastructure, fishing for sale rather than family, and so forth.

Canoe builders indicate that nylon, although quicker and easier to use, is not as inherently safe as coconut string. A 'tightness' in the lashings that could be attained with 'te kora' could not be achieved and sustained with nylon. Significantly, the intricate traditional lashings of the canoe guarantee that if a break should occur, the whole lashing would not unwind and the outrigger or boom would not be lost. Nylon does not provide this insurance, while the traditional 'te kora' string does (fig 1).

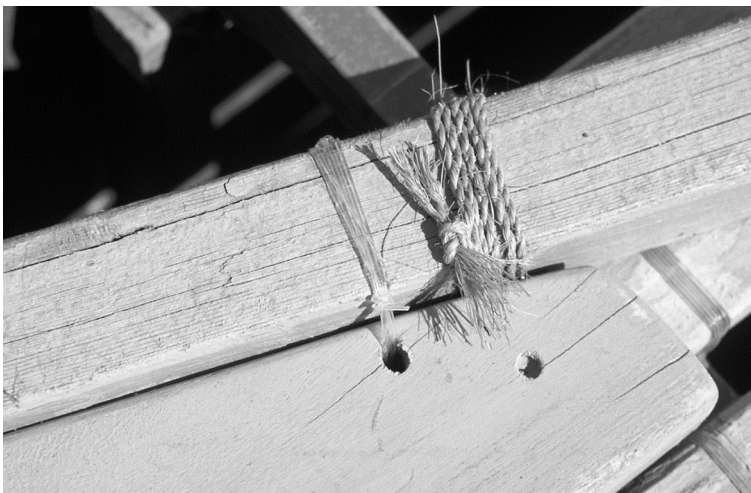


Figure 1. String and nylon. Canoe lashings present both 'te kora' (coconut string) and nylon fishing line side by side, lashing the same piece of wood.

The traditional techniques of producing the coconut string are a long and arduous process for the women of the family. The purchase of nylon requires no such commitment, and its use inevitably provides significant 'free' time for women. The loss of this social practice impacts upon the shared time of women and children, the intergenerational continuity of discourse, and the dissemination of traditional material skills of an actively oral society.

In the juxtaposition of coconut and nylon, this visually rather mundane image represents both subsistence and cash economies. The framing of the image simultaneously unites and isolates two elements generating a visual discourse. As a result, the questions posed

lead to reflections on the nature of this transition in the cultural practices of Kiribati. (A further example of the tangible representation of social change is demonstrated in figure 2.)

It must be remembered that canoes are traditionally a predominantly male domain, and access for women is restricted. In figure 2, a woman has the significant responsibility of being at the helm of the canoe—or having control of ‘*te bwe*’, the steering oar. On closer examination, it can be seen that an outboard engine has been centrally located on the canoe’s outrigger supports; the only place the engine clamps would find purchase. Although the outboard propels the canoe, it cannot be steered efficiently from this position. In the choice between controlling the engine and steering the canoe, the man is seen to relinquish the helm in favour of maintaining control of the engine. When a sail is used to propel the canoe, both the main sheet and the steering oar are in the control of the helmsman, while the woman passenger sits passively towards the bow, and balances the canoe. Due to the adoption of a new technology, a shift of gender roles has occurred in relation to the woman’s position in the canoe, and her responsibility and practice in the canoe.



Figure 2. Woman at helm of a canoe.

The next image (fig 3) also shows an outboard motor clamped to a canoe’s outrigger. In addition, it demonstrates significant fouling by weed on the underside of the canoe and outrigger because the canoe had been left in the water for extended periods of time. Because the lashings on traditional outriggers are vulnerable to chaffing, and in order to prevent damage through contact with the sand, the lashings were always traditionally supported by coconuts. The fouling of the canoe in the image, due to the absence of coconuts as supports, clearly visualises changes at the root of previous canoe practice.

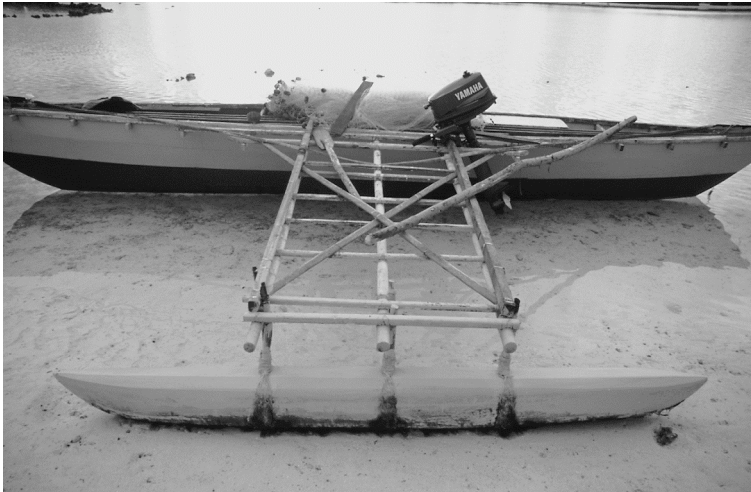


Figure 3. Canoe on sand.

As has been noted in the general contextualisation of I-Kiribati, canoes were traditionally considered to be a part of the family. When referring to canoes in the I-Kiribati language, the same grammatical possessive noun is used as for family and to indicate objects of closeness and indispensability. The many months of hard work and skill of the builder were treated with great respect, and originate from a sense of pride of ownership, the pure practicality of safety, and the spiritual significance of the canoe. The shifts indicated in the image point to significant social changes of traditional orientation of spirituality and historical patterns of production. In recent years, particularly on the main island of Tarawa, there has been a decline in the utilisation of the canoe in favour of the outboard-powered aluminium boat for the utilitarian practices of travel and fishing. It can be argued that the canoe is losing its singular hold as essential to survival, and in consequence its status and respect is diminishing. Such changes of relationship to this once central I-Kiribati icon of survival, spirituality and masculine pride demand further investigation.

The only area in which my photographs reveal a sharp increase of canoe practice is in the traditional art of racing. The following image (fig 4) shows a selection of canoes, from a field of approximately twenty, racing at a weekly Sunday event on Tarawa. Over the last few years, the number of competitors has grown steadily. Similar to the European practice of horseracing with jockeys and owners, the owners and the builders of the canoes are attributed more prestige than the helmsman and crew. The growing interest in racing traditional canoes ensures the continuation of building skills and procedures, as well as sailing techniques.



Figure 4. Racing.

It would appear that removing the canoe from a fundamentally utilitarian role to one of sport and culture presents an opportunity for its preservation. This same process can be seen to contribute, in part, to the preservation of dance on the islands. Traditional dance practices have been revived for social definition and self-recognition in national and international competitions and arts festivals. Therefore, for traditional patterns to be sustained, they must be valued either for their original purpose or re-invented as a significant part of developing social systems.

The visual significance of figures 4 and 5 (racing canoes and shrine) lies more in establishing the veracity of their existence, whereas the content of the previous images emphasised the juxtaposing of symbols within a frame. Clearly visible on the shrine, '*te bangota*', are both new and old 'offerings'—simple headdresses and part of a tinsel Christmas decoration. (Interestingly, this '*bangota*' was less than 100 metres from the canoe left to lie on the sand in fig 3.)

Offerings made at such shrines are intended to provide success in dancing, canoe racing, and relationships and so on. They also maintain an ancient and traditional sense of spirituality. I was told many times that '*te bangota*' no longer existed, yet this image clearly demonstrates their continuing usage. The wish to disclaim any on-going involvement with ancient practices may arise from the fact that Kiribati's Christian population is statistically designated as 50 percent Protestant and 50 percent Catholic. One old canoe builder whom we interviewed in this research stated that he no longer made canoes. When questioned as to why, he replied that he was a Christian. He further revealed that he believed a canoe could not be built without 'magic', and that as a Christian he could no longer practise that magical aspect of canoe construction. Secrecy, therefore, surrounds not just the shrine, but also associated practices; it also raises further questions of social change and the tension between the publicly declared commitment to Christianity and the maintenance of traditional values of spirituality.



Figure 5. Te Bangota (shrine).

However, the relationship with objects is not just a one-way relationship. Although the meanings of objects are constituted by our actions to them, objects also constitute the types of actions and experiences with which we become involved. Every aspect of our inevitable involvement in symbolic systems shapes the shaper. “Each new object changes the way people organise and experience their lives” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981:46). Also, Bruner comments that:

*The relationship is clearly dialogical and dialectical, for experiences structure expressions, in that we understand other people and their expressions on the basis of our own experience and self-understanding. But expression also structures experience.* (1986:6).

In contemporary societies, where objective conditions are in a continual and rapid state of change, objects can be seen to be powerfully implicated in either the maintenance of continuity, or the promotion of change. “In the first sense they (objects) reflect what is; in the second, they foreshadow what could be; and thus they become a vital force in determining cultural evolution” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981:27).

It has been argued that it is tangible objects that comprise a photograph, and it is in the relationship of these tangible ‘things’ that intangible aspects of social change can be visualised. The skill for those who use photographs is to isolate and unite objects within the photographic frame to realise the rich connotational, as well as denotational, potential of the image.

Photographic images are often treated as a form of contributory data within the overall fieldwork, and are recognised to play a valuable role in recording the proxemics and kinesics of cultural texts. In the face of apparent interpretive problems in the utilisation of images, researchers have leaned heavily upon the use of written text for image contextualisation. Berger and Mohr argue that although photographs do not have a language of their own, they quote from reality. “A photograph quotes from appearances but, in quoting, simplifies them. This simplification can increase their legibility.

Everything depends upon the quality of the quotation chosen” (Berger and Mohr, 1982:119). I have emphasised that if the contents of photographic images are treated as signs, they must be understood from socially accepted conventions. Photographic meaning, then, is to do with the contextualisation and relationship of signs within the image. It is the interrelationship of symbols that is vital to construction and interpretation. “Just as one word from a poem used in another context has no poetry, so one physical object has no meaning by itself, and the question of why it is valid has no meaning either” (Douglas and Isherwood, 1978:72).

I suggest that, although there are essential differences between symbolic systems, there are fundamental underpinning principles at work throughout, and that visual symbolism is no more or no less problematic than others; “all cultural codes must be learnt, including those that are visual. . . . To read an artwork, then, is to embark on a process as difficult and demanding as reading a written work” (Morgan, 2002).

The images presented in this paper not only record denotational information of the canoe culture of Kiribati, but also point to visually intangible shifts in gender roles, traditional skills and values, changes in economy and spirituality in the general society. The particularity of photographic images reveals the specific context of a cultural activity, whilst also providing a vehicle for symbolic readings. Photographic images of ‘things’ become texts of symbolic significance, and the frame becomes its visual syntax. The engagement with, and of, photography, provides the potential for a rich visual discourse in which to explore, document and communicate intangible aspects of social change. As Berger and Mohr suggest, “by its nature, revelation does not easily lend itself to verbalisation” (1982:118).

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