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# Education In Kiribati

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## Introduction

Education is the bedrock of societal progress, a powerful engine driving individual empowerment and national development. In the remote and culturally rich island nation of Kiribati, understanding the educational landscape is not merely an academic exercise but a critical endeavor for appreciating the nation's past, navigating its present, and shaping its future. This book, "Education In Kiribati: A Comprehensive Overview from Early Childhood to Higher Education," embarks on an extensive journey to illuminate the multifaceted world of learning across this unique Pacific archipelago. From the foundational experiences of early childhood to the advanced pursuits of higher education, we delve into the systems, challenges, and triumphs that define education for the I-Kiribati people.

Kiribati's educational journey is a compelling narrative, deeply interwoven with its historical trajectory, cultural values, and the distinctive challenges posed by its geography and climate. This book aims to provide a holistic perspective, moving beyond mere statistics to explore the lived experiences within classrooms, the dedication of educators, and the aspirations of students. We will examine how traditional learning systems have shaped contemporary approaches, analyze the enduring legacy of colonialism, and trace the evolution of educational reforms since Kiribati gained independence. By offering such a comprehensive view, this book seeks to serve as an invaluable resource for policymakers, educators, researchers, and anyone with a vested interest in the educational development of small island developing states.

The scope of this book is intentionally broad, reflecting the interconnected nature of education itself. We begin at the very genesis of formal learning with early childhood education, understanding its critical role in cognitive and social development. Subsequently, we navigate through the primary and secondary schooling years, exploring curriculum design, pedagogical practices, and the outcomes for students as they progress through these crucial stages. Beyond the conventional classroom, we dedicate significant attention to technical and vocational education and training (TVET), recognizing its vital contribution to skills development and economic participation, as well as the expanding opportunities within higher education institutions both within Kiribati and abroad.

However, a true understanding of education in Kiribati necessitates an exploration of the underlying factors that influence its delivery and reception. This includes a close examination of teacher training and professional development, curriculum standards, and the complex role of language in a multilingual society. We also confront critical issues of access and equity, particularly for children with special needs and those

residing in remote outer islands, where unique challenges persist. Furthermore, the profound influence of community and culture, the intricacies of funding and financing, and the pressing implications of climate change on educational infrastructure are all meticulously explored, offering a nuanced perspective on the operational realities.

Ultimately, this book strives to be more than just a descriptive account; it endeavors to foster a deeper appreciation for the resilience and ingenuity within Kiribati's educational landscape. By presenting a detailed analysis of the current state of affairs, highlighting both successes and persistent challenges, and examining the impact of international partnerships and technological advancements, we aim to inform future policy imperatives. We invite readers to engage with this comprehensive overview, to gain insights into the unique educational journey of Kiribati, and to recognize the universal aspirations for knowledge and progress that resonate across all communities, regardless of their size or location.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Historical Roots of Education in Kiribati

The history of education in Kiribati is a captivating journey, stretching back long before the arrival of any formal schooling systems. For millennia, the indigenous I-Kiribati people, primarily Micronesians with some Polynesian and Melanesian influences, developed intricate learning systems deeply embedded in their unique island environment and rich cultural heritage. These traditional methods, passed down through generations, were the bedrock of survival and societal cohesion in an archipelago spread across vast expanses of the Pacific.

Prior to the 19th century, education was an informal, yet highly effective, process. Knowledge was primarily oral, transmitted through storytelling, song, dance, and practical apprenticeships. Elders held immense respect and were the primary custodians of wisdom, responsible for imparting crucial skills and understanding to the younger generations. This system ensured the continuity of cultural identity and practical expertise vital for life on coral atolls.

Children learned by observing, participating, and imitating adults in their daily routines. Skills such as navigation, fishing techniques, horticulture (especially the cultivation of pandanus, breadfruit, and babai), and crafting tools and canoes from local materials were not merely hobbies; they were essential for sustenance and survival. Knowledge of the tides, stars, weather patterns, and the intricate marine ecosystem was meticulously taught, allowing for successful voyages and efficient resource management.

Beyond practical skills, traditional education also encompassed a deep understanding of social structures, communal responsibilities, and spiritual beliefs. The *mwaneaba*, or traditional meeting house, served as a central hub for community life, where important discussions, ceremonies, and the transmission of cultural knowledge took place. Here, children would absorb lessons in etiquette, oral history, genealogy, and the complex web of relationships that bound their society together. These lessons were crucial for maintaining social order and fostering a strong sense of community.

The arrival of European explorers in the 17th century marked the beginning of a gradual shift in the educational landscape. Captain James Cook's visit to Kiritimati (Christmas Island) in 1777 opened the door for subsequent encounters with whalers, traders, and, crucially, missionaries in the 19th century. These initial interactions, while not immediately introducing formal schooling, began to expose the I-Kiribati to new ideas and forms of knowledge.

The true catalyst for formal education in Kiribati came with the advent of Christian missionaries. These dedicated individuals, often driven by a fervent desire to spread their faith, recognized that literacy was a powerful tool for evangelization. The mid-19th century saw the establishment of the first mission schools, fundamentally altering the existing oral traditions and introducing a structured approach to learning.

One of the earliest and most influential figures in this transformation was Hiram Bingham II, an American Protestant missionary. Born in Honolulu, Hawaii, in 1831, Bingham arrived in the Gilbert Islands (as Kiribati was then known) in 1857 with his wife, Minerva Clarissa. Despite suffering from various health ailments, Bingham dedicated himself to learning the Gilbertese language, a formidable task that involved starting from scratch by pointing at objects and recording their names.

Bingham's linguistic talents were truly remarkable. He not only gave the Gilbertese language a written form using Roman letters but also embarked on the monumental task of translating the Bible. By 1865, he had translated the books of Matthew and John, and by 1873, the entire New Testament was available in Gilbertese. His perseverance culminated in the completion of the full Gilbertese Bible translation by 1890, a version that remarkably remains in use in Kiribati today.

These translation efforts were not merely about religious texts; they laid the foundation for literacy in Kiribati. The schools established by Bingham and other missionaries from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in the northern Gilbert Islands focused on basic literacy, religious instruction, and moral education. For instance, Bingham organized a school and a church on Abemama Island. These early institutions were pivotal in introducing the I-Kiribati to reading and writing, skills that were entirely new to their traditional oral learning.

In the southern Gilbert Islands, the London Missionary Society (LMS) also played a significant role. Samoan pastors, sent by the LMS, arrived in 1870 and further solidified Protestant influence. By 1900, the LMS had established a boarding school, a training institution for pastors, and a printing press, further expanding the reach of formal education and the production of printed materials. The ABCFM eventually entrusted all their schools and churches in Northern and Central Kiribati to the London Missionary Society in 1917, consolidating Protestant educational efforts under one umbrella.

The Roman Catholic missionaries, specifically the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, arrived later, in 1888, establishing their schools on Nonouti Island and extending their influence primarily in the northern Gilbert Islands. Like their Protestant counterparts, Catholic mission schools also emphasized a curriculum integrated with religious instruction, alongside basic literacy and numeracy. This dual presence of Protestant and Catholic missions meant that by the late 19th and early 20th centuries, formal

education in Kiribati was largely dominated by church-run institutions.

These mission schools were the primary, and often only, avenues for formal learning for many I-Kiribati children during this period. They introduced a structured classroom environment, regular attendance, and a curriculum that, while heavily religious, also included foundational academic subjects. This marked a profound shift from the traditional, informal learning systems, laying the groundwork for the more formalized education system that would develop in the subsequent colonial era. The impact of these early missionary endeavors was far-reaching, fundamentally altering the way knowledge was acquired and transmitted across the islands.

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